

## Lessons Learned on Corporate and Government Portal Projects

*Nowadays, businesses and information are significantly spread through Internet. This article contains some best practices on portals' projecting as government agencies are required to become the ideal electronic medium connecting citizens and state.*

**Dr. José Claudio Terra & Luciana Barbetta**

People are increasingly using the Internet for about anything: shopping, leisure, entertainment, bank transactions or getting updated about any subject. Most of those services are available during non-traditional business hours anywhere one can manage to get online. Therefore, Citizens expect government services to be provided easily and quicker, each time more responsive to their needs.

Successful corporate portal projects, however, demand equivalent investment in technology development and new processes and often, new behavior. Some of the key lessons learned over the years related to the implementation of corporate portals, include:

### • VISIONING & PLANNING & OPERATIONS

- Corporate portal projects must take into account that portals evolve constantly. Therefore, its first version must already take future changes into account and the information and technical architecture should be as flexible as possible.

- Portal success is also a day by day result. Quality, consistence and updating are vital. A very high-level of availability is also required

- Governance development including an operational routine with roles, responsibilities and development of appropriate decision mechanisms is imperative. Governance model should include organization members from several units.

- Corporate portals are consolidated and adjusted by sharply monitoring its effective use, reactions and expectation generated by real users. As a result, usage reports shall be very detailed and action-driven. At the end of each project phase, it's vital to perform usability tests with final users.

### • INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE & USABILITY

- Corporate portals should allow users to reach the required content and applications through many different navigation paths. As a result, the main navigation vector has to be supported by a taxonomy competently structured and well controlled.

- Starting on planning process and regarding the differences found in the community where it's being implemented, it is a best practice to organize the contents by public, service,

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department (only helpful to those who are familiar with government structure) or all of them.

- Usability is expressed by effective integration of content, design, services and interactivity, aiming to provide to final users the best possible experience. The fact that many users are not totally familiarized with internet and that their equipments can be limited must be considered. Users' demographic aspects must be gathered and carefully analyzed during the development process of portal's interface.

- Adequate navigation tools and cues are also recommended. A practical navigation is afforded by well-structured menus, framed sections, breadcrumbs, search engines and site maps which are similar to a table of contents. A good solution is to provide a combination of them instead of choosing one so users with different needs and skills are able to find the information required. Those who don't find what they seek could get frustrated, hardly returning to the portal.

- Accessibility is becoming a recommended policy for many organizations. In the case of government portals it is mandatory. After all, citizens should be treated equally.

## • CONTENT

- The challenges on operational process and effective viability of the portal are not to be disregarded. Even when well fit and technically consistent, successful portals will only accomplish their objective if a competent team aligned with users' needs and demands on distributed content management governance and skills is rapidly built up.

- Whenever new content is submitted to portal, it should first be analyzed, reviewed and categorized. Thus, Information suppliers from all

areas need to be trained on content classification concepts and tools.

- Well-documented and communicated policies are critical for any portal (and particularly for government portals). They help all departments to manage their electronic services and content and ensure that confidential data are kept confidential. At the same time, they protect local government from liability for inappropriate or incorrect website content. A good planning, management and - most important – adequacy to its prospective users, lead the way to an efficient and each day more necessary public services online.

Other specific considerations for government portals:

- A possible barrier, and an extremely important one to overcome, is the cultural issues. Online services can be convenient, but a web site won't make public administration more efficient and effective if the public is not familiar with it. A best practice in this case is to widely spread the awareness of website's availability and of its benefits, stimulating citizens to go online instead of standing in lines, for example.

- Planning a corporate portal also means determining very precisely who will be the targets of specific information and services. Each audience might expect to find very specific content during navigation. While local residents might look for government agency contacts, social services, educational institutions and voting information, businesses would probably show interest on taxes, contracts, procurements and requests for proposals and in the same space, visitors can search for information on entertaining activities, hotels, restaurants, events etc.

- A best practice when starting a government portal project is to do it by clearly defined steps, so that

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transition from traditional processes to electronic means doesn't run over the cultural barrier.

- The first stage is usually informational, as the website is nothing more than a one-way communication vehicle through which the government agency publishes their main institutional information, and there's no online interaction with the user.

- The second stage usually includes a semi-interactive step consisting of providing access to functionalities and forms that can be printed or sent so the transaction can be completed offline.

- The third stage includes the ability to complete full transactions and purchase services online. When an e-government unit reaches this stage, internal and back-office processes also need to go through reorganization. The back-office becomes strongly connected to the web business.

- The fourth stage includes fusing Internet activities with the intranet.

- The fifth stage is reached when users can have an electronic identity and personal customization by logging in. The personalized access provides all the information each citizen may need to keep a proper relationship with the government, up to date with their rights and duties. A visionary e-government includes elevated levels of interactivity through blogs and forums, and because public comments can be posted, some call it e-democracy.

The lessons above provide a snapshot on some of the key aspects that any team leading a corporate portal (and a government portal) should pay attention to. Corporate portals cannot be seen simply as technology projects. It is just too easy to get so involved with the technology aspects of corporate portals half-way through the project

implementation that the end goals are left into the background. Success results come, certainly from a solid technical implementation. However, it is as important, throughout the project, to keep a permanent commitment with the agreed vision, goals and objectives and, mostly, with the users and citizens.

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**Dr. José Cláudio Terra** é presidente da TerraForum Consultores. Atua como consultor e palestrante no Canadá, nos Estados Unidos, em Portugal, na França e no Brasil. Também é professor de vários programas e pós-graduação e MBA e autor de vários livros sobre o tema. Seu email é [jcterra@terraforum.com.br](mailto:jcterra@terraforum.com.br).

**Luciana Barbeta** é consultora da TerraForum. Seu e-mail é [luciana@terraforum.com.br](mailto:luciana@terraforum.com.br)

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