



# **Business Portals: Unlock the door to greater profitability**

White Paper

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## **Introduction**

This paper will give you an overview of how business portals can help you make more profitable decisions. It presents:

- The basic facts about business portals
- Real-life examples of how other companies are using them for profit
- Some of the measurable benefits business portals offer
- An overview of Microsoft Business Solutions business portal offering

## **New doors are opening**

No company operates in a vacuum. Most businesses are part of a dynamic community of customers, partners, suppliers and employees. And increasingly the boundary between "us" and "them" is dissolving. The information they need to improve their business is sitting on your system.

And vice versa.

Business portals provide quick access to the data, applications and services that people need to do their work – via an ordinary Web browser. This means that for a fraction of the price of other technologies, you can extend the business benefits of your ERP solution to anyone on the planet.

This paper looks at the problems business portals were built to solve. It shows how this simple technology can add real value to your existing ERP investments. And it provides examples of companies who are already using business portals to improve the way they connect to the world.

## **The ABCs of business portals**

### **What exactly is a business portal?**

A "portal" is simply a Web page that provides quick access to different data and services. In this paper, we're focusing on business or "enterprise" portals: Web pages that display business-related content, based on data from your enterprise resource planning (ERP) solution, and presented in a secure and controlled environment.

Once the software has been configured and tailored to meet your specific needs, you define who should have access to which resources. In addition to the features and functions of the ERP system itself, these resources can include your other enterprise applications, as well as content and applications from third parties. A typical example might be specialized software applications, or Web services such as stock quotes, an online travel agency or credit information.

Users experience personalized Web pages created on-the-fly, based on the latest information from an ERP database. This customized interface to your company allows authorized employees, partners, suppliers and customers – wherever they are around the world – to initiate and complete a vast range of work processes themselves, simply by opening their Web browser.

### **Everyone has a role – each of them different**

How can one application satisfy the individual needs of so many different users? Simple. Business portals let you create "roles" that you assign to each employee. Roles define which data a person is allowed to access, and which services they are allowed to use. Roles are designed to match different job profiles. They can be tailored to match each individual's specific needs, and can be quickly modified when changes occur.

For example, an employee in accounting will need permission to print reports, as well as rights to access and modify data in the financial section of your ERP database. A human resources specialist would need access to payroll and benefits information, which would be inappropriate to share with the rest of the organization.



The diagram above shows how a business portal enables an employee to complete different tasks (for example, monitor stock levels of different factories, schedule meetings with key contacts, and make travel arrangements) by accessing different data and applications (database, ERP and Web services), all through a common Web.

They may both need e-mail, and perhaps the option of filling in timesheets and expense claims.

The system administrators define the roles, and can quickly modify them as authorized by the appropriate manager. Typically, each role will include a wide range of options that can be turned off and on. This helps avoid having desktops cluttered with rarely used functions. Say, for example, an employee is standing in for a supervisor who's on vacation. During this period, they're able to authorize office expenditure up to a certain amount – a responsibility they wouldn't normally have. Once the supervisor returns to work, the function is disabled, and no longer appears on the employee's desktop.

### **Business portals are on their way**

"Portals are now an essential part of the technology landscape for any business that wants to provide its workgroups with an enterprise-wide knowledge-sharing environment. Microsoft Business Solutions portals are designed to make it as easy as possible to aggregate and integrate information, and to collaborate with external business partner applications or the emerging world of Web services."

Stewart McKie, Independent Industry Analyst, February 2003

(more at [www.cfoinfo.com](http://www.cfoinfo.com)).

**Case in point**

Microsoft Business Solutions has helped Milcom, a Danish telecommunications distributor to better organize their business interchanges and help forge stronger partnerships using a business portal solution.

With 500 vendors and Denmark's largest telephone company as their primary customer, Milcom knows efficient customer service and communication are essential for business expansion. Choosing a business portal from Microsoft Business Solutions has given them a platform that cost-effectively meets the diverse needs of their customers. In addition to providing real-time data in whichever format is needed, it allows them to introduce new services quickly, and securely extend access to remote and local users, via a personalized Web browser interface.

**Why a business portal?**

The sheer cost of alternative solutions make business portals worthy of attention. Purchasing and installing dedicated software on every PC, for example, is potentially a lot more expensive and time-consuming than using the Web browsers that users probably already have. Especially when you add the operating costs of maintaining additional applications.

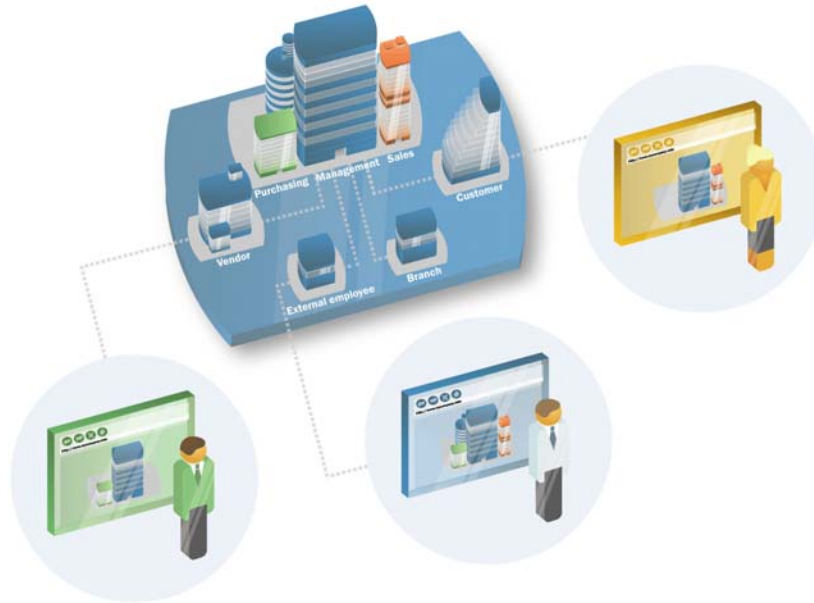
Business portals, on the other hand, offer a cost-efficient way to connect remote offices to back-office systems, via a single access point. Temporary users like partners, consultants and project teams can also be quickly plugged in for as long as necessary.

In the past, integrating third-party applications and Web services into a specific desktop was an expensive jigsaw puzzle. The cost of the solution, training, and extra work involved in setting up, configuring and trouble-shooting the application – multiplied by the number of users – frequently made innovation difficult to justify.

With business portals, it's different. Simply install and configure the application at one central location, let the relevant users know it's available, and you're on your way. The new features are available when they open their Web browser, and are presented in a way that is intuitively understandable.

Browser-based delivery means less administration for your IT department – both by reducing the number of dedicated applications they have to install on users' PCs, and by giving them central control over who has access to which data.

In the next section, we will look more closely at the benefits a business portal offers.



**Business portals provide users around the world with quick access to real-time data and applications. You decide which resources they are allowed to access and how they are allowed to interact with them. This eliminates the expense and complexity of duplicating existing resources. It also streamlines business processes by allowing people to service themselves.**

## **Drive TCO down, bring ROI up**

### **Benefits you can measure**

Compared to other new technologies, business portals can provide more quantifiable business benefits. Simple business metrics may quickly reveal a decrease in the number of information requests to accounting personnel, fewer requests for reports from the IT department, and a reduction in the number of “just checking” calls from customers.

Why? Different people in different locations inevitably end up asking the same questions. Having to respond each time drains precious resources. Business portals can provide a low-cost self-service alternative. Forrester Research has calculated that the average cost for phone-based service is as much as 30 times greater than the average cost of Web self-service. (More information at [www.rightnow.com/news/doculabs.html](http://www.rightnow.com/news/doculabs.html)).

Extending this level of cost reduction to every corner of your organization could generate substantial savings.

Business portals can also reduce the training required for managers and employees to learn administrative tasks. All of these benefits are made possible by the “self-service” approach that business portals provide. The newly-freed resources could then be used to take on new assignments.

### **United we prosper**

Today, the old saying “united we stand, divided we fall” holds true as much internally as it does among the people we do business with. Increasingly the old boundaries are being erased. Instead of being a remote island, your company is an information hub for a dynamic community of employees, customers, partners and suppliers. Their ability to operate efficiently can impact on your bottom line – and vice versa.

By helping you to share information securely and cost-efficiently, business portals create a positive impact up and down the supply chain. If you thrive, chances are the people you do business with will also benefit. This could enhance your standing as a business partner, and open new doors to prosperity.

### **Do it yourself. Do it now. Do it right.**

Today a lot of employees spend time tangled up in technology. They struggle with applications they don't understand, and fumble with hardware they can't control. With business portals, all the tools they need are presented on a Web page they can open anywhere, anytime. This reduces the need for training, and helps new employees hit the ground running.

Many businesses find themselves drowning in data. Business portals are able to help by limiting access to the latest data relevant to each person's job. Employees can locate information quickly via their Web browser, make a decision and then see the results of that decision more quickly.

Generally, people also like to finish what they start. Business portals allow people to complete tasks on their own. This could potentially increase job satisfaction and strengthen business relationships.

### **No-hassle security**

Maintaining data security is always a critical issue. The challenges and the stakes get bigger with each new user – especially if they are employed by other companies. Having to create and maintain separate security measures for different systems could be an expensive way of multiplying existing problems. Password problems, for example, are one of the most frequent reasons for calls to help desks around the world.

Business portals, on the other hand, use another approach. Once users have provided the password that authenticates their identity, they are free to use all the applications and resources that have been assigned to them. The rest of your network however, is invisible to them. The result is quick access to just what they need – and no access to anything else.

### **Extend the value of ERP to everyone you do business with**

Business portals allow employees, customers and partners to initiate and complete business processes. They also may eliminate complex series of activities requiring multiple applications, actions, and players. By enabling people to service their own needs directly, portals help to increase productivity.

These solutions unlock the door to the potential for greater profitability, by helping to streamline an enormous variety of business processes, and contributing to work satisfaction. Business portals are easy to deploy and, once in place, they can allow you to provide fast, secure access to specific corporate ERP data and processes for both employees and people outside your organization – simply by opening a Web browser. And by making it easy for you to deploy a variety of data and applications from any number of sources, business portals reduce the money you spend on IT. The fact that these advantages can be rapidly extended to include anyone in your business community further increases the value of this technology.

**Case in point**

The Eclipsys Corporation provides software and related service solutions for several major healthcare providers in the US. Founded in 1995, the company grew rapidly, a factor that in itself presented significant challenges. Integrating recently-acquired companies, managing new product lines, and working with various software systems made business information increasingly difficult to access and manage.

Eclipsys chose to tackle these issues by investing in a business portal solution from Microsoft Business Solutions. The new solution allows employees, customers and partners to access the information they need from virtually anywhere.

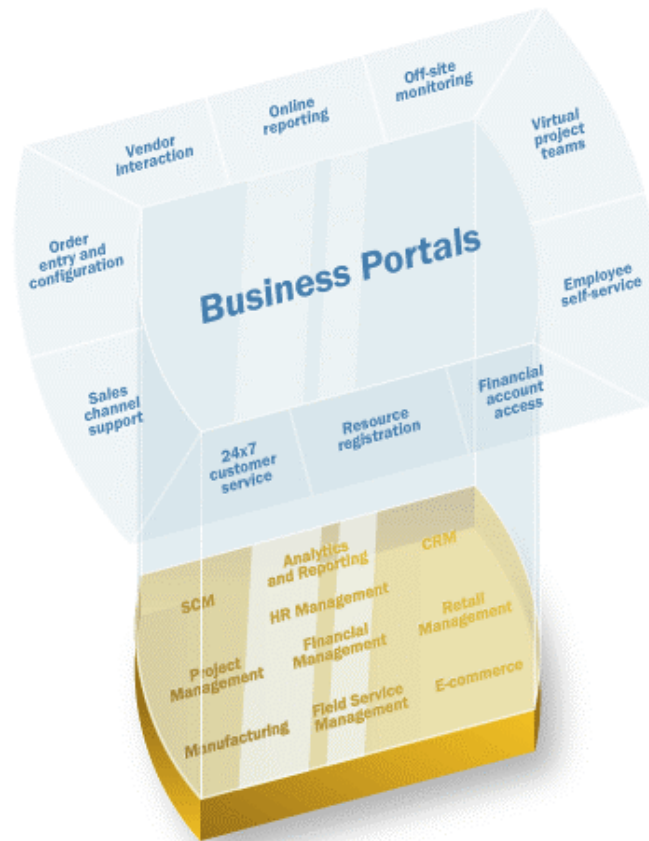
The solution provides information and workflow controls on project management, billing, revenue, customer aging, collections, financial reporting, budgeting, purchasing (customer and internal), accounts payable and SEC reporting. This simple-to-use, customized Web-based solution has enabled Eclipsys to not only boost profits and reduce costs, but also increase customer satisfaction.

**Microsoft Business Solutions helps you make more profitable decisions**

Microsoft Business Solutions gives you the insight to help you make more profitable decisions. Our business management software puts you in touch with information from every corner of your business, and lets you analyze it in any way. Pick the functionality you need, and one of our specially trained partners will help fit it to your business.

You can also choose from an increasing range of business portal solutions, which can be extensively modified to match the precise needs of everyone inside your company, as well as those you do business with.

All of these products are aligned with Microsoft's expanding portfolio of Microsoft.NET solutions. .NET is a broad technology initiative being developed to fully harness the power of the Internet by enabling different applications and services to be seamlessly interconnected and made instantly accessible via any Web-enabled device.



Integrated business portal solutions from Microsoft Business Solutions extend the value of your ERP investments

## For more information

Visit [www.microsoft.com/BusinessSolutions](http://www.microsoft.com/BusinessSolutions) to read more, or enter information about your company and have a solution recommended for you.

## About Microsoft Business Solutions

Microsoft Business Solutions, a division of Microsoft, offers a wide range of integrated, end-to-end business applications and services designed to help small, midmarket and corporate businesses become more connected with customers, employees, partners and suppliers. Microsoft Business Solutions' applications optimize strategic business processes across financial management, analytics, human resources management, project management, customer relationship management, field service management, supply chain management, e-commerce, manufacturing and retail management. The applications are designed to provide insight to help customers achieve business success. More information about Microsoft Business Solutions can be found at <http://www.microsoft.com/BusinessSolutions/>

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