Portals for the Public Sector

Jörn von Lucke
German Research Institute for Public Administration Speyer, Germany

INTRODUCTION

The term "portal" is traditionally associated with doors and gates. Room and front doors are used as simple entrances into a building or a room. Larger gates are constructed for the passage of vehicles. In ancient times the word "portal" was used mostly for monumentally designed entrances of buildings, castles, palaces, or cities, and triumphal arches. With the success of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the middle of the 1990s the term "portal" has a new meaning in a completely different context. Commercial providers of online services, search engines, and directories of Web-based links renamed their services as portals or starting points for the Internet. The providers of these portals were able to list their shares on stock exchanges with great success. Yahoo!, a commercial provider of directory services for the WWW, increased its share price steadily over 4 years since the initial stock exchange listing in 1996, which resulted in a true portal euphoria among investors until 2000. Merrill Lynch published a study in November 1998 about the internal use of portals and corresponding technologies in the enterprise, predicting unusually high growth rates and return on investment rates for such projects (Shilakes & Tylman, 1998). Many stock companies were able to increase their share price significantly just with the announcement of a portal strategy. Companies also began to rename their existing Web pages, online shops, and electronic markets as "portals," entirely in the sense of superb entrances, although most of these services had no real portal functionality. Everyone just wanted to participate in the portal success. But only a few participants had an exact idea of the meaning behind the term "portal."

BACKGROUND: PORTALS AND PORTAL TECHNOLOGIES

Portals are easy-to-use, secure, and personalizable access systems with which users receive access to information, applications, processes, and persons which are available on the systems covered by the portal with consideration to their respective access authorization. Access to a portal can take place according to the multichannel principle, via different media and access channels. Portals are therefore not restricted to Internet technologies. Access would also be possible with other communication technologies and channels. The direct electronic channel, the speech-telephonic channel, the personal channel and the written channel are the most important ones (von Lucke, 2005).

The direct electronic channel has a special role for all channels, because it offers all users direct access to the systems covered by the portal. Therefore, it is the foundation for any portal access via other channels. Users of the electronic channel utilize modern information and communication technologies for receiving services electronically via internal data networks, the Internet, an extranet, and an intranet, via interactive digital television, or mobile phone data networks. Using the speech-telephonic channel, there is a telephone conversation between the user and an agent of a call center, for example, who has desktop access to the electronic channel and who can read the results on the telephone. Using the personal channel, there is a personal conversation with an agent in his or her office or at his or her counter, who also has direct access to the electronic channel. Even written inquiries can be answered by any agent, who has access to the electronic channel. The integration and coordination of the different channels are tasks of the multichannel management. This includes all required measures for the involvement of the four distribution channels into the demand and production processes.

Portal systems have integrating components so that the Internet Web site, the call center and the offices could make use of the same knowledge databases and profit from the experiences of the other distribution channels. This multichannel portal concept reduces the menace of the digital divide because the whole population will be reached via the portal, independent of the communication channel (von Lucke, 2004, pp. 80-81).

Different functions are associated with portals. A row of portal functions corresponds to a conventional entrance area which opens rooms behind it. References are given, what or who is where. Personal information is given, security examinations are undertaken, access authorization is controlled, inquiries and orders are taken, purchases are delivered, and payment processes are completed (Reinermann, 2002, p. 129). Other functions have to do with the access to systems in the background, their integration, and the uniform presentation corresponding

to the expectations of the user. So-called *portal technologies* secure these functionalities. Behind these are software technologies, which have already been available for a longer time, but whose combination in a portal offers users real additional value for the first time. Portal technologies need to be differentiated into which are essential and which are optional technologies. Portal management, access services, presentation, navigation, and integration are essential portal technologies. They are core components of each portal, independent from which access channel is used or how the systems are integrated. Personalization, publishing services, document management, process management, security services, search and research services, analytical services, and collaboration services are optional. Therefore portals are not only genuine access points. They can offer additional services through the portal technologies. Sometimes portal technologies are sold separately. Sometimes they are bundled with other portal technologies in software packages in order to be marketed as autonomous portal systems. Various applications and technologies can be included in these systems. Therefore portal technologies can be allocated in completely different systems. At the moment there are providers of original portal systems whose software includes the basic functionality for the operation of a portal, and there are providers of classic software applications which enhance their products with portal functionality (Correia, Biscotti, Wurster, & Dharmasthira, 2005; von Lucke, 2004, pp. 81-82; Phifer, Valdes, Gootzit, Underwood, & Wurster, 2005).

PORTALS FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The connection of the portal concept with the public sector leads to the development of portals for the public sector. These are portals which are designed for use in the public sector. Such a concept corresponds to the basic consideration of one-stop government services. It lends itself to the concept of one-stop government which tries to integrate different public services independently from their ownership by a local, subnational, national, or international agency in one point of contact and in one process. In this sense, portals for the public sector are easy-to-use, secure, and personalizable access systems, with which users receive access to information, applications, processes, and persons from parliament, government, administration, justice, and public corporations. These are available on systems of the public sector which are covered by the portal, with consideration to their respective access authorization. Access to the portal can take place according to the multichannel principle via different media and access channels. The concept is therefore not restricted to the Internet and can be transferred to the complex reality of the public sector.

Portals for the public sector can be subdivided into self-service portals and mediator portals. While self-service portals allow users (employees or citizens) direct access, mediator portals are self-service portals for mediators of the public sector, which offer them additional background information and mediator-specific working directions. They support administrative mediators in call centers, citizen agencies, and citizen shops, but also mediators like social workers, physicians, or other mentors for citizens. Like any other portal they can be used as a central front-end system for users and as a central communication and integration platform for the background computer systems (von Lucke, 2004, pp. 83-84).

CHARACTERISTIC STAGES OF PORTALS FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR

From the current point of view, four consequential development stages for portals can be observed. They are similar to the development stages for one-stop government (Hagen & Kubicek, 2000).

In the first stage, *simple entry point* portals simplify the access to information and public services through specially prepared orientation and signpost information. They refer to the corresponding services and lead the users to the responsible agencies and employees. They have the function of a gateway.

Portals of the second stage serve purely for information collection and diffusion. They are used for the provision of information, which is collected from different sources, bundled, prepared in simple terms and presented. Citizens use these so-called *information collection points* portals in order to get an orientation and to inform themselves about a special subject.

Portals of the third stage, the so-called *service center*, offer a seamless access to public sector information and selected public services. They allow the completion of transactions with all those agencies, which are integrated in this public sector portal. Public databases and registers are already integrated in these portals to a point that deposited data can be inserted into forms automatically and appropriately.

With an increasing networking of these single service centers there will be a *service cluster* of portals, which can communicate and cooperate collectively. Users get access to all available information and transaction services via these service clusters, independent of the provider. In the ideal scenario, all relevant participants would be