SAP runs SAP

How the business software giant practices what it preaches

SAP is the world's largest business software company, employing over 38,000 people in more than fifty countries. Already a world leader in ERP systems, SAP's Enterprise Portal platform is strategically significant, as it is more than just a portal; it is the integration point for SAP's various ERP software, enabling end-users to access content and systems in a unified, user-centered environment.

When SAP released Enterprise Portal 6 (EP6), CEO Henning Kagermann wanted the company to have a first-class implementation on its own corporate portal. Besides the internal productivity gains, the power of such a strategy was clear: SAP's intranet would be a model case study for the very platform it sells.

Challenge: creating a user-centric portal

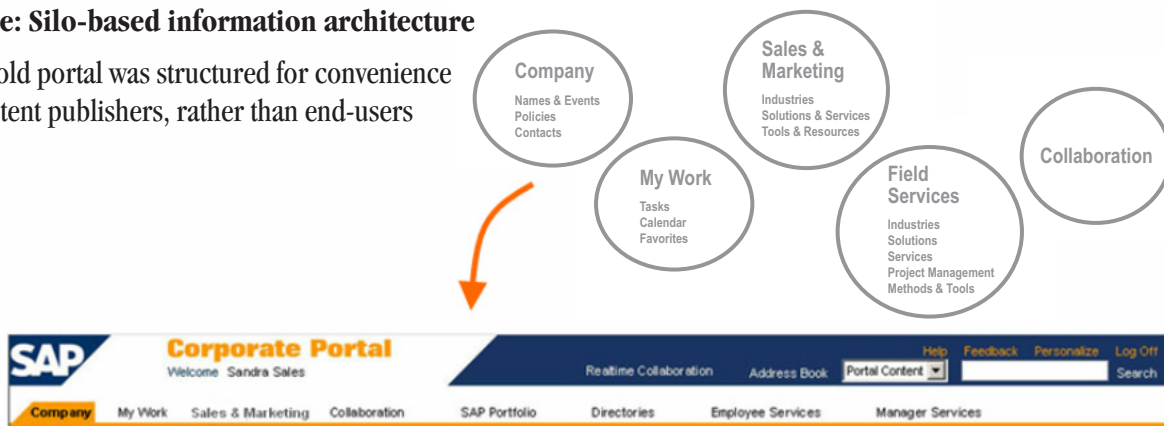Many corporate portals fail to meet their goals of increased productivity and improved access to content. Human Factors International (HFI) has identified **five key attributes** necessary for an effective portal:

- Simple information architecture and consistent interaction model
- Customizable, role-based home page
- Immediate access to frequently used tools and content
- Established process for publishing
- All content and documents tagged for categorization and search
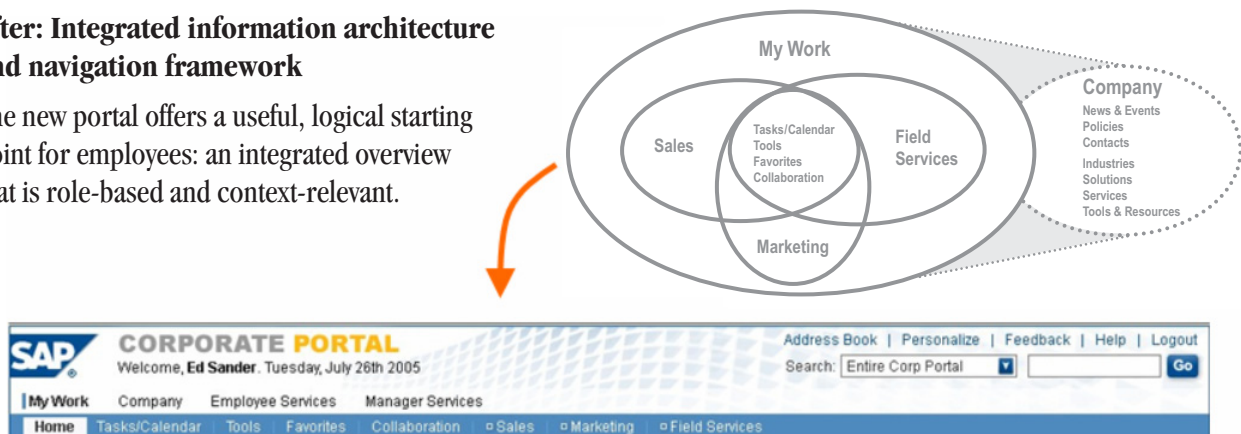
Before: Silo-based information architecture

SAP's old portal was structured for convenience to content publishers, rather than end-users

After: Integrated information architecture and navigation framework

The new portal offers a useful, logical starting point for employees: an integrated overview that is role-based and context-relevant.

The goal of SAP's new portal was to create a central access point where all employees could do their work, thereby consolidating an existing collection of sites and sub-portals. HFI was engaged to perform a benchmarking study and design review to help guide the Enterprise Portal implementation.

Approach: stakeholder interviews & data gathering
HFI conducted stakeholder interviews and data gathering across multiple sales and product groups to understand their needs and prioritize problems. For example, one team felt the "discussion board" tool was most important to their users, while others cited search functionality or a specific balance of global vs. regional content.

However, the fundamental issue with the old portal was that content and functionality were disjoint. The design suited content publishers more than it helped end-users accomplish their tasks efficiently.

HFI recommended a simplified navigational model that would more closely match users' workflow. This followed a role-based design approach to make the portal more employee-centric. A portal is valuable to employees if they can:
- Use it to locate specific information without wasting time (it has to be faster than calling a colleague who knows the answer)
- Complete routine tasks more efficiently and dedicate more energy to solving challenging problems
- Collaborate meaningfully with intelligent document storage and version control management
- Access content and tools that are tailored for their specific job function

To achieve user-centricity, many of HFI's recommendations focused on the portal home page, since even the ability to personalize is not a remedy for poor design. A good home page provides employees with an integrated overview that:
- Offers persistent access to key functions
- Matches navigation to user needs
- Delivers company news in a specific context, rather than one-size-fits-all format
- Supports user tasks through relevant links to alerts, tools, and resources

HFI advocated a phased approach for SAP to roll-out the changes to its portal. Short-term recommendations could be implemented more quickly and then validated through further data gathering and user testing. This would provide an informed basis to incorporate long-term improvements.

Outcomes & benefits: a "self-serve" portal that promotes collaboration
Ultimately, a portal is valuable to a company if:
- Employee productivity and collaboration increases
- Employee satisfaction rises because of easy access to work and life resources
- Individual awareness of company communications grows

In addition, the Internet has mandated a shift towards "self-service." Employees expect to find information and complete transactions on their own, and portals are the glue that hold effective self-serve systems together.

SAP's new portal met all of these criteria. It was readily adopted by employees because it delivered on the promise of user convenience, and the company benefited from improved efficiency and collaboration.

SAP has proven that it stands behind its own platforms, and its successful portal rollout offers a roadmap for all companies to follow.

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