

Communication Problems Resolved Through Portal Implementation

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Problem

Loras College is a technology rich campus with a ubiquitous learning environment and about 1800 laptops in the hands of students, faculty, and staff. With a focus on the incorporation of technology into the curriculum the laptop program has been embraced by the campus since its inception in the fall of 2000. In 2003 a new campus strategic plan identified the need to improve communication, develop a spirit of cooperation, create an easier way to solve problems, and instill respect and innovation between faculty, staff, and students. We desire the institution to be perceived as transparent, helpful, and supportive and we concluded that technology could assist us in reaching this goal.

With this in mind we began to look at solutions that would combine, link, and create interactions with various functional areas on campus utilizing our existing technological infrastructure. The solution we felt would best serve these needs was to revamp our intranet and develop a portal that would facilitate collaboration and improve communication.

Project

Historical background

Loras College is a laptop campus with 80% of our classrooms technologically enhanced (with projectors, VCR, DVD, and sound systems). In addition, we utilize BlackBoard as our course management tool, give each student, faculty, and staff email accounts, and we offer network and web or e-portfolio storage space. In the spring of 2004 we were in the process of implementing online registration and also wanted to give students access to their schedules, grades and account information. With all this technology on campus we felt we needed one central location from which to garner this information. Coupled with this we needed to find a better communication tool for our community and allow for a way that everyone could share this information as needed.

Who was involved?

The overall communication challenge was identified by the strategic planning committee consisting of general campus representation. The president and cabinet endorsed the strategic plan and goals for the institution. The Vice President of Information Technology asked the Web Developer and the Director of Technology Support Services to develop a vision and investigate solutions for a portal. As the investigation advanced the cabinet was privy to all information and the portal was presented as an organizational tool to improve communication, provide better support and service, consolidate applications and information into one central location, ease use and reduce costs. We also included the marketing department early in our implementation because they bring an important perspective on communication and continue to be key players in the ongoing management of the portal.

Goals and objectives

We ultimately had two main objectives: to find a better communication tool and to develop a “doorway” to everything a user needs (wants) at their fingertips. We felt that in order to accomplish these objectives we needed to streamline information and services, reduce costs through consolidation and simplification, eliminate traditional methods of delivery and provide access in one central location.

The project: researching, analyzing, testing, and developing governance

With these goals and objectives freshly in our minds we began our research. We evaluated articles on portal applications and reviewed and assessed vendors who could assist us with the various applications and implementation. The vendors provided references for their products so we visited some reference sites and at the same time defined more of our goals and objectives from what we learned.

The next step was to identify details to meet our goals and objectives for implementation. The detailed tasks were given priority levels and timelines for implementation.

Priority goals implemented first were as follows:

- Centralize a location for announcements that needed to be pushed to the desktop (eliminate mass emailing)
- Links to applications and priority resources (Blackboard, email, Citrix, library resources, IQ [student records], Human Resources information, campus calendar, etc.)
- Provide a discussion board (threaded discussion) and bulletin board [for sale, ride sharing, lost & found, etc.] (also eliminate mass emailing)
- A customizable area for the user to define their own links, shared files and portlets (MySite)
- Constituent (audience) content – different look for students, faculty, and staff.

Second tier goals include the following to be implemented as appropriate:

- Single sign on
- A place to initiate surveys and results

- Form and document sharing
- Chat (instant messaging)
- Training and other information via streaming video and audio

We then listed items that would become our third tier goals. We wanted to make sure we purchased the right product, so we needed to know what we envisioned for the future. This next set of goals included the following:

- Access to portal for users outside Loras community
 - Define outside user constituents (parents, board of regents, alumni, perspective students)
- Course management – replace Blackboard
- Terminal services – replace Citrix
- Allow “my site” customization – change colors and schemes

Our final decision was based on which product best fit our needs, was most manageable, easy to use, allowed us to do more of the implementation and administration ourselves, and obviously total costs.

In the end we chose Microsoft’s SharePoint Portal Server 2003 for several reasons. Our campus LAN is Microsoft and we have a campus license agreement for their client software solutions. SharePoint integrates seamlessly with the Office suite improving collaboration and organization. Our IT staff’s familiarity with the server products meant we had internal and external expertise already in place for support. The existing client licensing costs included pieces required for SharePoint so we did not have to spend any additional dollars on client licensing. One particular reference contact we met proved to be a huge benefit to us in that they were also a higher education account who had implemented the product and were willing to talk with us and offer suggestions and help when needed. The intuitive ease of use and administration reflected positively on our decision. The cost of SharePoint itself was reasonable because of our current academic licensing contracts with Microsoft. We did have to purchase SQL Enterprise and a couple of servers, but this was already one of our long term goals.

Outcomes

We had a comprehensive list of goals and problems which we believed the portal would be the ultimate solution for. Of course we are the first to admit, we still have a ways to go before all our problems are solved. Let’s look at some of the objectives we feel we are moving in the right direction on and others that are still problematic.

- The announcement section of the portal is working well even though we have not accomplished the task of pushing them to the desktop.
 - We’ve defined guidelines for submission of announcements
 - Set up gatekeepers for approval
 - Currently running in parallel with mass e-mail on some announcements to get users used to looking at announcements page of portal
 - Set this site as the home page on all laptops and desktop

- The portal has provided one location for accessing applications and resources. This has saved considerable time for current employees searching for information and saved training time for new employees.
 - IQ has been heavily used because of on-line registration, access to grades and schedules, and student workers electronically recording their time for payroll
 - Other applications also launched regularly from within the portal since we removed the icons from the desktop and “forced” them to launch from inside the portal
 - A – Z section from intranet was implemented inside the portal and is heavily used by all. This section includes internal departmental information that is shared by the entire community and the various areas are being converted from standard web pages to portal pages
- The discussion boards are in place and operational but not being used by the general population
 - Users don’t want to make the extra effort to look to the boards for discussion
 - Faculty are using this for special classes that they have set up here
 - We are looking for ways to promote this use
- The MySite is up and operational
 - minimal training has been offered and we must find a way to encourage its use
- The content on the portal is managed by audiences which allows us to target announcements to students, faculty or staff
 - This works great and has helped cut down on information clutter
- Shared documents and shared “sites” are slowly being developed and heavily used within the IT department

We have not started to implement any of the second or third tier goals due to time and budget constraints however they will continue to be a part of our short and long term objectives.

Challenges

One of our biggest challenges was to find a third party developer to assist us as we implemented the framework of the portal. The developer we finally used was located in another state and we never had anyone on-site. All communication was done via telephone or computer and we found this to be interesting at times. This developer was actually hired after we worked for a few weeks with a local vendor who was trying to learn the application as we were implementing, needless to say, in our time crunch we agreed to dissolve our arrangement on that particular project and moved on to the other vendor who had a great deal of experience and a team that supported the lead programmer.

Another challenge for us, as mentioned before, has been getting a portion of the portal, specifically the announcements portion, pushed to the desktop. The administration felt that if we are going to move away from mass emailing, we need to push the information out to the users because they aren’t always reliable at going and getting it themselves. We tried several different options for pushing a “widget” to the desktop and have not found it to be reliable with all our

different types of users. We continue to test policies and expect to push the final solution out soon.

Finally, our third major challenge has been in finding someone or some office to keep up with gate keeping of the announcements. The IT department does not feel like we should be responsible for managing content and have tried to push this responsibility out to the marketing department but they are often too busy to make internal communication their priority. We have trained a number of people to do this so as to make it less of a burden in any one area.

Lessons Learned

One of the most important aspects of this project is to garner approval from the top by getting the president and vice presidents on board to promote and encourage its use. This is usually true for any project of this magnitude and the fact that the administrative team has a group site has certainly helped even the less technical people in that group see the benefits.

Another thing to remember is that large projects, especially development of a portal, needs to be implemented in stages. Think big, start small. The key is to make sure you begin with enough content so it is perceived as something useful and valuable. Also make sure it is highly flexible and customizable in order to meet current and future business needs. You want to make sure it is more than simply a glorified electronic newsletter. We feel we have done this and we will provide examples and links to our portal site.

This presentation will be beneficial for “slightly” technical and non-technical people who are curious about how they would use a portal or those who are thinking about developing or are in the process of implementing a portal.

