

Through the Portal



by Ms. Katherine H. Crawford, Staff Writer

Approximately one year ago, the Information Technology Customer Service Organization (ITCSO) at the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) rolled out the Enterprise/Workspace Portal. Since its debut, the portal has offered a customized workspace for employees and increased opportunities for collaboration. Despite these benefits, many employees remain unclear about the portal's capabilities and technicalities. To learn more about the portal, I spoke with Mr. Gary Moorman, DCMA portal program manager, Mr. Matt Cowan, DCMA portal developer, and Mr. Jacob Haynes, DCMA information technology (IT) software acquisition director.

Q: What is the Workspace Portal, and where can it be found?

Gary Moorman: People have many different ideas of what the portal is. Some think it's a Web site or a Web page, some a collaborative tool, others a way of bringing together systems for common access. The reality is that it's all of these things — there are tools, Web access and infrastructure items. It's one-stop shopping.

There used to be two versions of the portal: one that you could access through the Intranet and one that you could access by clicking on the eTools icon on your desktop that existed side-by-side with the Internet. In early October, both were unified to integrate fully with the Internet, and entering through either will get you to the same place.

Q: What is the objective and what are the capabilities of the Workspace Portal?

GM: Several years ago, requirements came from DCMA's senior leadership team for a workspace that would facilitate collaboration and be powerful enough for the 10,000 Agency employees plus double that number of outside users [without] high maintenance costs.

Matt Cowan: The portal allows users to:

- Manage documents (file check-in/check-out) with version control;
- Access message threads and discussion threads;
- View Agency announcements;
- View and create task lists;
- View and create calendars for group projects;
- Access Microsoft Publisher and subsequently create documents and mechanisms for their approval and limit viewable content to specific users/groups as needed;

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- Access Macromedia Studio to create dynamic data tables;
- Access My Page, where users can build personal pages with customized content;
- Access Adobe Breeze to set up Internet; meetings and post meeting material documents
- Access Content Canvas in which community administrators can design Web pages using [the computer programming Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML)].

Jacob Haynes: All of these features and programs cause the portal to become a work multiplier.

Q: What are some concrete examples of the ways in which the portal helps employees?

MC: The portal allows community administrators to create a collaborative environment for their teams to engage in knowledge sharing, share documents, work in an integrated environment and view tasks for the day.

GM: Users can open the portal and customize it, which is easy to do after going through the basic training all employees received. The vision for the portal is that of

a self-manageable system where community administrators can do most of the basic maintenance for their pages.

Q: What are some of the best attributes of the portal?

MC: I really like the document check-in/check-out capability that allows for version control because each iteration of the document is saved — IT uses this feature a lot. Because the portal is accessible everywhere [via the Intranet], people can save documents to their portal space instead of thumb drives. Saving documents to the portal allows them to be accessed from anywhere at any time through a secure site.

Q: What are some of the weakest attributes of the portal?

MC: The communities that are set up on the portal are autonomous, and this can become a challenge because individual users may [have access] to particular sites and documents that their coworkers do not due to the security and access rights that have been set up, which creates confusion. Consequently, 90 percent of help desk tickets are security related as people have questions about what they can and can't access and why. And some community administrators are great at setting up pages and others aren't, and this can cause difficulties for users as well.

Q: Recently, there have been changes/modifications to the portal — what are some of these changes, and why are they being made?

GM: The big change that took place recently was the merging of the eTools suite of applications with the Workspace Portal site, which was very smooth and resulted in only two help desk tickets. The portal is logged into

(Above) From left: DCMAIT-Acquisition employees Mr. Gary Moorman, portal program manager, and Mr. Matt Cowan, portal developer (Photo by Ms. Katherine Crawford, BRTRC)

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approximately 10,000 times a day, so two requests for help is an extremely small percentage of daily use.

MC: The portal is a constantly changing environment because we are always modifying it, and there are always new [applications] being rolled out. Right now we’re looking at ways to allow the migration of shared drive files to the portal.

Q: Is IT taking any steps to make the portal more user-friendly?

MC: We’re taking a lot of the user feedback into account and tracking help desk tickets to see what types of issues users are encountering.

GM: We need to have a centralized location to gather requirements to make sure users aren’t duplicating efforts, with different users in different communities setting up the same types of programs. We also need to prioritize requirements and examine all community resources to ensure that they’re being best utilized. These steps are necessary to provide the best support possible to help customers, and we’re working on implementing them.

Q: Prior to its roll out, the Workspace Portal was touted as benefiting customers by making information more readily available to them — what has been the feedback from customers?

GM: We have been concentrating on making the portal as customizable as possible for individual users. The next phase of portal development will give them even more tools for collaboration and access to data from other systems such as eTools.

MC: We have received lots of positive feedback about the portal, and we’re finding that people

are really enjoying having a personalized space in which to work, and the number of requests to add applications to the portal is increasing. For example, we’ve had many requests to add [Microsoft] Access databases to the portal for various groups, but there are a lot of technological challenges with adding databases — you can’t just take a database with all of its data files and stick it on the portal.

Q: Why is there a separate log in for the Workspace Portal?

MC: We are in the initial testing phases for CAC [common access card] recognition for the portal, and this should be in place by the end of the year. Once this feature is operable, when users log into their computers they will be taken to their customized portal space without having to enter a separate username and password.

Q: Is there anything else about the portal that you want to mention?

MC: We would like to see the number of community administrators increase and have them begin to mentor others.

JH: I’d like to thank Matt and Gary for leading the changes to the portal, which have been seamless, and say that we’re looking forward to even higher usage. I’d also like people to know that we’re open to recommendations for continuously upgrading the portal to maximize its abilities to help users do their jobs and, ultimately, support customers.

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