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PERSONAL VIEW

It doesn't always pay to be too tidy

Graham Oakes looks at the pros and cons of organisations consolidating their web presence

Consolidation is in the air. Across Europe and the US, governments and corporations are rationalising thousands of websites down to a small core of key sites and portals. The disparate portfolio of websites, repositories and content management systems built up over the past decade is being pruned.

It is easy to see why a chief information officer might want to surf this trend. A combination of corporate mergers and devolved web governance has left many organisations with dozens of content management systems and supporting applications. For the sake of sheer tidiness alone, it would be nice to have a shorter list.

Such tidiness can have real benefits, too: less administration, fewer servers, more negotiating leverage with vendors. Finally, increased demands for compliance and control are placing a premium on simplifying information management.

Dig a little deeper, however, and things are not so clear. Consolidation has risks, as the UK's £35m investment on DotP (Delivering on the Promise) shows. That initiative, announced in 2003, faded away in 2006 with few benefits to show. DotP was more public than most corporate projects, but by no means unique.

So when a CIO starts to get excited about the cost-savings that web consolidation will release, what questions should the business be asking? Here are seven suggestions:

1. Who is driving the project? Be wary if IT is driving. IT cost-savings are good but only if people will use the end result. This is one of the things that hurt DotP – it was built and the customers did not come. If marketing staff are not prepared to lead the project, then perhaps it needs reshaping.

2. Who owns the content? Buying and installing a content management system is relatively easy. But many organisations underestimate the amount of content they own by a large factor. This adds significantly to con-

tent cleansing and migration costs.

It also complicates content ownership and governance. Wrangles about content ownership kill many consolidation projects. Such issues need to be addressed, before any commitment to serious spending on technology.

3. Is there a business rationale for consolidation? There may be a valid reason for running distinct sites: different products, different audiences, different branding. It is feasible to run radically different sites from a common technical infrastructure, but the cost-savings may be less than expected. Many of the costs of content management reside in creative and editorial processes. Consolidating the technical platform may do little to reduce these costs.

4. Are the processes compatible? It is a rare business that operates the same processes across all its units. (It is an even rarer government.) Sometimes these processes are different for a reason – different markets and regulatory environments, for example, may demand different approaches.

Trying to make them all co-exist on a single platform can be difficult. It is possible, but the solution may be complex. Complexity equals cost, both to build and to operate the platform, and so this may negate the benefits of consolidating in the first place.

5. Is this really a process rationalisation project? Of course, there is often no real reason for the different processes. They just grew that way. In this case, rationalising processes makes a lot of sense.

However, many organisations try to use technical consolidation to force business process rationalisation. This is a risky strategy. Change management is hard enough at the best of times. When management attention is focused on technology, it is hard to engage the right players and easy to overlook key factors. If process rationalisation is the real issue, it is best to face it head on.

6. Can the business cope with a common pace of change? It is not just different processes that need to be addressed: it is different rates of change to the processes. Some units may have stable, well-defined processes; other units may be operating in much more dynamic markets and evolving their processes at a pace to match.

A common platform may cut costs, but if it reduces the pace of change to that of the slowest business unit, it may kill a lot of opportunities. After a certain point, you might as well stay on different platforms – there is added cost, but also added flexibility.

7. Are the benefits properly understood? The business case for consolidation is typically based on some combination of reduced software licensing costs, higher server utilisation, better management of the technical skills pool and increased ability to see the “big picture” across products, websites and repositories.

None of these things happens automatically. For example, software costs do not go down when a new platform is built. They go up. They only start to go down when people stop using the old platform. If a couple of groups stay on their old systems, then the benefits may not materialise. Similar traps may prevent realisation of the benefits associated with servers, skills and oversight.

There can be a strong business case for consolidation – maybe to a single platform; maybe to two or three platforms for different parts of the business. Either way, capital tied up in servers and licences can be freed; IT operational costs can be cut while service levels improve; and business and editorial processes can be improved.

There might even be benefits for customers, partners, and constituents. They may find it easier to navigate through a more coherent set of websites and hence find what they need.

Indeed, if a rationalisation starts from this perspective – rather than from the technical infrastructure – there may be some benefits that are really worth going after. But no one should be surprised if customers really want consolidation of “softer” things, such as information and processes – rather than harder assets. In any case, it's not a simple, risk-free project.

Businesses need to be realistic about what they are embarking on. Sometimes, it makes sense to live with a little untidiness.

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