

Report to the JA-SIG Board

uPortal 2.0

In their recent communications, Project Manager Ken Weiner and Chief Architect Peter Kharchenko have established a new February 22d cut-off date for uPortal 2.0 changes. They will package and make available that version about March 1st.

Interactive Business Systems has scheduled a uPortal 2.0 training session March 5-7 at Loyola University of Chicago. IBS is offering a discount to those who attended previously and are "refreshing" their knowledge on the new version. Ken Weiner commented that none of the participants in the last IBS training session at Reno knew Java—which makes course presentation difficult. (Several months ago Ken had identified the shift in the classes from Java developers to non-Java Web authoring staff. His classification of colleges and universities has been used by the Department of Education to identify the capabilities to use current Web-based architectures).

Project Manager Ken Weiner has established the next uPortal developers meeting March 11-13 at the University of New Mexico.

uPortal was an important topic at the recent Sun Microsystems Inc. sponsored European Education and Research Conference (2002 EERC). The Swedish universities are meeting to discuss adoption of uPortal by all of them. The decision is expected mid-April. The Egyptian regional computing center would like to adopt uPortal for their on-line learning site, but need to support Arabic. The need for Arabic view was also expressed by representatives from Tunisia and Morocco. (Nagoya University has also asked for assistance in a Japanese version of uPortal).

Three universities in the United Kingdom—Nottingham, Bristol, and Hull—will be implementing uPortal. The University of Nottingham will be hosting a portal conference later this spring. Justin Tilton is giving a presentation to staff of the three universities February 18th on the use of XSL transformations for presentation. (This request came as a result of his presentation at the December 2001 JA-SIG Conference in Destin). The University of Nottingham is an Interactive Business Solutions, Inc. client; Last year Ken Weiner has provided some consulting assistance to the University.

At Sun's 2002 European Education and Research Conference, a representative from Academie Toulouse identified performance issues with uPortal 2.0 and a presentation to be made to the Minister of Education on February 22nd concerning uPortal 2.0. Their current installation would only support 15 to 30 simultaneous users. From direct communication between the Academie staff and Peter Kharchenko, he identified the problem being a

version that released before performance improvements were added. The change to the most current version is being made now. Peter is continuing to guide the implementation and testing. The Academie representatives were pleased with Peter's prompt assistance.

About 375 people attended Sun's 2002 EERC—about 75 more than planned and 25 more than could be accommodated. Joakium Bjorkland, Sun's John Fowler, and I gave presentations twice on Web Services and Portals. 182 of the 375 attended one of the two repeated breakout sessions we gave. (E-learning was most attended). Incidentally Joakium has used Web services—XML messages and SOAP—to integrate the current portal and the student information systems (plural intended). This suggests building Web services into uPortal as a channel service.

Columbia University has announced the availability of the Groups and Permissions channel—the key to authorization and collaboration applications—and the forthcoming availability of the announcements channel (that uses groups). These applications have the functionality needed, but Columbia staff have suggested changes will be made to the presentation. I believe this is one of the most significant contributions to uPortal. All of the collaboration channels and many applications can benefit from "groups."

JA-SIG Architecture

uPortal Chief Architect Peter Kharchenko (subject to class schedule) and designer Justin Tilton (as a substitute?) will be giving a training class on "Practical XML" February 26th for the XML Forum at the University of Miami. This request also came as a result of the presentations at the December 2001 JA-SIG Conference in Destin. They were recommended by U.S. Department of Education SFA CIO and XML Steering Committee Member Steve Hawald. Examples from uPortal and the Meteor channel will be used in the training session. The training assumes some knowledge of XML and focuses on its use in systems development and integration. This presentation puts uPortal in front of a new audience.

uPortal Relationships

Campus Pipeline, Inc. will be releasing their version of uPortal. They will be using the February 22nd code base and adding distributed layout functionality. This version will differ from the model suggested by Peter Kharchenko. However, CampusPipeline did not have the time or resources to develop the more extensive model. Also Campus Pipeline could not delay its own packaging of uPortal to get the latest release, now expected in early March. Although these two actions create two different versions of uPortal code, Campus Pipeline intends to return to the main uPortal code base in the future.

Priorities

The uPortal 2.0 release raises three priorities issues. (1) There is little documentation of uPortal at a time a large number of colleges and universities will be implementing uPortal without Java expertise. (2) Although performance improvements were made during the testing at the Sun Microsystems iForce Center in October and November, the current release has not been benchmarked and no configuration guidance is available for the current version. This is important since some colleges and universities will implement uPortal without sufficient computing capacity. Also, the performance of uPortal is very dependent upon proper configuration of the servers and server software, upon the channels themselves, particularly channels that access student information systems, and upon the presentation itself. uPortal could get criticism for performance when the user is unaware of the real causes of slow response. (3) Requests have been made for internationalization, which raises the question of how JA-SIG should respond to the larger community.