

Subject: Re: uPortal requirements process
From: Jim Farmer <jxf@immagic.com>
Date: Fri, 19 Aug 2005 16:33:48 -0400
To: Mara Hancock <mara@media.berkeley.edu>
CC: Carl Jacobson <carlj@UDel.Edu>

Let me expand on Carl's comments about the process, and perhaps give credit to his leadership--most of the developers would agree with me.

First, the developers group and those implementing had the opportunity to work with each other as they developed uPortal. There were some exceptional managers and contributors. Project manager Ken Weiner was consistently bringing issues to the "list" and then acting on the response. Rarely, but when necessary, Ken wrote a careful and thoughtful reason for the decision before he took any action implementing a decision made against the "majority" as expressed on the list. Occasionally he reminded the list they could appeal a decision to the JA-SIG Board. To my knowledge, none were every brought to that level.

Chief Architect Peter Kharchenko was always a good listener and carefully outlined why he chose a particular feature, technology, or option. It is a pleasure to watch him lead a discussion at the developers meeting. He always did this before coding. The community NEVER was surprised by the functionality or technology or completed computer code. For this reason the community never felt, or at least never expressed this to me, they had been left out of the discussion. Similarly there never were any meetings that were not described to the community, generally in notes. Michael Oltz took careful notes at developers' meetings and then circulated the notes so everyone could verify accuracy. You could never say something without it being available to the larger community. Again no surprises. People distant from Peter and Ken felt they knew and trusted them both. Listen to this opening remark when I first meet with the ESUP Portail Group in France this summer: "How is Ken Weiner doing in his new job?" Or the recent conference in Lubeck: "How is Peter doing on his thesis? Is he going to be able to continue to work on uPortal 3.0?" The communication was so complete and so frequent that everyone felt they knew Peter and Ken personally.

It is true the scope of the project was smaller and the available time longer, but second, in my opinion, the key people knew each other well, were humble, and constantly communicated. Ken and Peter were to geekdom what Ronald Reagan was to politics; listening and communicating with everyone at every level with respect.

Third, the JA-SIG Board was exceptional. There are two moments that I thought were symbols to everyone: The discussion about JSR 168 where Chair David Koehler meet with the developers on the JSR 168 portlet standard. It was not a discussion of the technical details, but how to consider a strategic decision that would affect all uPortal current and future users. Everyone then wanted to make the JSR 168 project succeed to reward David's trust in their judgment (made in the framework he had outlined and carefully documented in notes and minutes). Even earlier in the project, Carl Jacobson--meeting with the developers at the University of Delaware-- explained how important their work was to the University of Delaware, to the JA-SIG colleges and universities, and to higher education. His subsequent actions supporting the development and his personal sacrifices gave credibility to his words and created a sense of mission.

This may be a long way of saying, it may be the people, not the process, or perhaps it is the style of the people that made uPortal, as Ira Fuchs said, "The most successful open source project in higher education."

There is perhaps another reason--it is better to do some small thing well than attempt to do many things. JA-SIG has not yet started a project that was not completed and when completed was best for its intended purpose.

Sakai is much broader, has many more contributors and potential critiques, creating a software product with many successful learning systems and established market share. I am not sure the JA-SIG process would work as well.

Saying this, I believe a "federation" of small developments into a single framework would be the most productive. Look at the success of the grade book and the quiz tool and then ask the question: "What changes in process would have made these better software tools with less effort?" Then you can build an organization that supports the separate

projects.

Note the importance of the IChannel and subsequently the JSR 168 "channel and portlet portability specification." Build to these specification and we "guarantee" it will work in uPortal (and if it doesn't we will make it work). The work on channels could proceed independent of the framework because there was a fully-defined interface before development began on either channels (or portlets) and the framework. The IChannel interface was developed in anticipation of changing to the JSR 168 standard when it became available; the IChannel interface was developed according to the vision of the JSR 168 specification authors so the changes were minimal to go from a JA-SIG "standard" to an industry standard. And everyone knew that change would be made sometime in the future--hence the value of Yutta's document or JA-SIG's relationship with the WSRP Technical Committee; a forecast of future direction.

As usual, a different perspective.

jim farmer

Mara Hancock wrote:

Carl or Jim -- Does uPortal have an established and/or published requirements gathering and prioritization process that you could share with the Sakai Requirements Process Working Group?

Thanks, Mara

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Mara Hancock
ETS Associate Director of Learning Systems

<http://ets.berkeley.edu>
University of California, Berkeley
Educational Technology Services
117 Dwinelle Hall, #2535
Berkeley, CA 94720

Desk: 510-643-2214
Mobile: 510-407-0543

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Jim Farmer
+1-202-296-2807
cell +1-405-408-9264