

Get to know yourself better and faster

Finding information fast for good business decision-making is becoming increasingly important. Keith Ricketts tells us how to do it well

Where do you find answers to the tough business questions? Nowadays, companies are looking inwards to find clues scattered across their IT – data submerged in ERP, production systems, order processing systems, intranets, email servers, even users' workstations.

As a result, businesses are increasingly understanding that going without efficient information gathering systems, and simply making do with the limited data and search tools conventionally available, is no longer an option. Why? Because without good company-wide search tools, users waste time hunting across multiple systems. Worse, someone else may already have the answer: a recent study found that knowledge workers spend over twice as much time re-creating content as they spend on creating new content.

Further, US and European analysts agree that around 80% of information within businesses is unstructured – not indexed, tagged or archived for formal searching and location. With information ballooning on the back of increasing automation and analysis, more product variants, consolidation initiatives, moves towards greater corporate compliance, RFID and the rest, effective enterprise-wide searching is moving from 'nice to have' to 'need to have'.

Instant snapshots

From the user's point of view, most enterprise searching works in a similar way to using Internet search engines like Google and Yahoo. Using a simple, logical interface and the ability to search on keywords, users get search results organised by rankings that they can refine. But there the similarity ends.

Latest-generation enterprise tools provide results by analysing unstructured, semi-structured and structured information held in unconnected data resources. They automatically categorise information, and provide intelligent links to it, irrespective of data format, location or parent application. Good tools also provide summaries and rankings to help guide users towards the results most relevant to their search.

Interestingly, getting this right can increase the value of existing applications, such as ERP, helping users to make more effective use of resources. Consider the example of an employee wanting to see the current status of a pilot product development programme for a management meeting. Information about the pro-

gramme will be spread across the organisation. The traditional approach is a series of requests for updates with departmental managers, or a round-robin email, or a tour of the systems for direct access. But using an enterprise search solution provides an instant snapshot.

So, down to brass tacks: what would a manufacturer have to invest in terms of hard cash and effort to deploy enterprise search technology on his existing systems? First, because modern search solutions use a thin-client web interface, there are no client hardware and installation costs – just the cost of the search software itself.

It's also the case that organisations can grow their solutions at their own pace, starting with a base level system at around £15–25,000 that can be implemented and available to users in just one week. Those costs are based on 200 users and 1 million indexed documents – and you need to look for data source 'wizards' that allow the search solution to connect to a range of systems and data sources, without any heavy lifting.

System administrators can then choose what information needs to be available for searching, and how often references to it need to be updated. Then the solution should automatically build an index and make content from those sources available for user searching. Security can be built on top of the indexes to restrict access to sensitive information, with permissions variable according to user role and job function. ■

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Let an enterprise-wide content system do the information discovery to-order

