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Intranet/Extranet – windows and monitors on your business

By now, everybody is familiar with Internet technology. Indeed, many people now use it regularly to purchase goods and services as well as an invaluable source of information. However, few people in the fresh produce industry use this technology as a means of communicating internally within the business and externally with their business partners. All of this is about to change with the maturing of cost effective systems designed to pull together various islands of data. The purpose of this article is to highlight their potential as communication and efficiency aids.

Let's start by explaining what we mean by an intranet and an extranet. An intranet is an internal secured business environment that operates like the Internet but runs on a local area network. An intranet usually operates behind a firewall to enable secure access to the Internet. An extranet is where you provide a gateway from the intranet to the outside world and vice versa. Now that that's clear, let's get on and tell you how they can be used.

As a permanent link between your customers and suppliers, an extranet has tremendous potential for improving the way your organisation works. For example, providing your growers with their own input screen where they can immediately post information on product quality and volume could enable your packers to plan resources more effectively. Providing the pack houses with extranet access where they can input product yields as they come off the line could enable you to make up shortfalls where the yield is less than expected. In addition, if you service major retail outlets, you can should you want to, provide them with their own portal access where they can see product and shipment details pertinent to them.

Up to now, setting up an intranet or extranet provided most organisations with quite a challenge both from a technology and cost viewpoint. However, the arrival on the market of powerful "out of the box" packaged systems such as Microsoft's SharePoint Portal has taken much of the pain and cost out of their development and deployment. SharePoint combines an intranet, extranet and document management system in one easy to use and quick to implement solution. SharePoint technology has been around for a while. However, the first two releases of the product were pretty light on functionality. The first release of



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this product lacked some core functionality. SharePoint Portal Server 2003 is a different kettle of fish as the view in the IT industry is that they got it right with this third version.

The business objectives behind SharePoint and other competitive portal products are pretty simple. The technology is designed to provide you with a complete view of your business through a single easy to use application. Using a Web enabled front end, you can access all of the electronically available information throughout your company. Using the combined collaboration features of Windows SharePoint services and Microsoft Office SharePoint Portal, users can quickly create, manage and build their own collaborative Web sites and make them available throughout the organisation.

The real benefits come however, when the portal is used to deliver dynamic information on the business drivers of the organisation. This is called digital dashboard technology. Just as the dashboard in your car constantly monitors the performance of the vehicle, a digital dashboard can do the same for your business.

For example, you may have budgeted for assumed production costs against a consignment. However, product quality and transport difficulties have meant that the costs have soared. The first you know of this is when the consignment is shipped and the true costs emerge. A digital dashboard won't prevent this from happening. However, it will alert you to the problem earlier enabling you to take action on damage limitation.

Using digital dashboard technology, you could set up a series of indicators geared to the key performance indicators (KPI's) of the business. These could be related to product quality, shipments on time or product/consignment profitability. Providing your business management system is capable of producing the information dynamically, the indicators on each KPI graphically reflect what's really happening through the portal. Green means that everything is hunky dory, amber means that the situation needs monitoring, red means that you could be in the brown stuff.

In summary, the arrival of the new breed of business management systems linked to portal technology will radically change working practices in the industry. Exposing and sharing KPI information both internally and where appropriate, externally will enable management to spend less time fire fighting. This will allow more focus on delivering profitable business for the organisation.

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