mgm

HanseMerkur - Support in the choice of technology and conception of portal development

In order to reinforce its internet presence and strengthen links with its sales partner segments, HanseMerkur planned the launch of a portal solution as the central element of a component-based integration environment. As well as replacing the existing website, various applications were to be successively integrated into the portal.

Requirements and key challenges

After an internal analysis had been conducted, there was a preference in terms of application development for a Java-based Open Source portal system. However, it was questionable whether or not the functionality of the Content Management System (CMS) supplied was sufficient to address the given requirements.

The following - not untypical - challenges faced the joint team:

- **A high degree of innovation:**
  Limited experience with the portal and CMS technologies to be selected.

- **Complex requirement management:**
  A high number of applications for potential integration by a range of different departments.

- **Technical uncertainty:**
  Lack of maturity of standard Open Source products available, for example documentation still in preparation.

Proof-of-concept by means of functional prototyping

"After initial consolidation of the requirements, we followed the recommenddation of mgm to try out the interaction of various CMS with the portal system using functional prototypes", Frank Mielke, project manager for HanseMerkur, states.

HanseMerkur
Versicherungsgruppe

"mgm technology partners, within a short amount of time, helped us acquire the necessary insights and knowledge to prepare us for the operation of a portal at HanseMerkur."

Dr. Horst Karaschewski
Manager application development

The HanseMerkur Insurance Group in Hamburg is Germany's second oldest private insurance company and well-known for its powerful standing in the market for supplementary insurance. HanseMerkur mainly markets its products indirectly through partners such as brokers, cooperation partners and agencies who are provided with individual support by the HanseMerkur sales department.

The decision-making process comprised the following main working stages:

- Draw up relevant use cases.
- Derive critical functionality, assess relevance to decision.
- Technical realization of application examples with documentation of results.
- Presentation of decision matrix for portal- and CMS-selection.

Within two months it was possible to arrive at a binding decision on the technology to be used. The chosen decision-making process also allowed outstanding weak points to be identified and taken into account in further project planning.

Chosen development approach

HanseMerkur is planning to implement various applications in the portal, so jointly a development approach was selected which provides for intensive communication with departments close to sales operations.
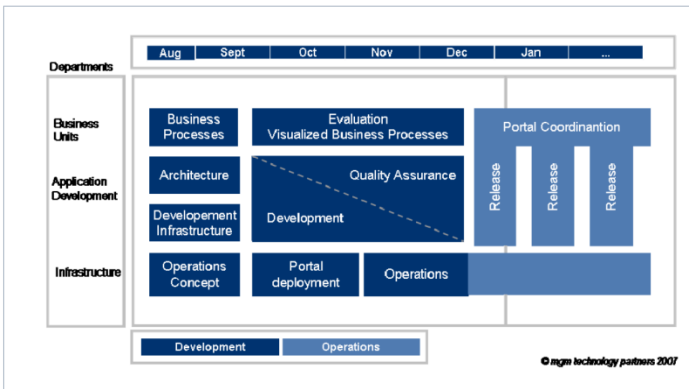

Figure 1

Similarly to the functional prototyping used in the proof-of-concept phase, the defined processes were visualized for departments and subsequently developed.

The architecture of a portal application and its integration as a future component of the portal are crucial to technical implementation. For this reason, the philosophy adopted required a conceptual breakdown of an application into reusable portlets with a definition provided for their various interfaces. The main advantage here was to achieve a controllable degree of complexity in development and in later operation. Even after a short time it was possible for application development to integrate two use cases of the existing business intelligence solution into the portal as a spike application.

In terms of the serviceability and development process of the portal, mgm recommended a separate portal application development operation. This allows for the greater interdependence of individual portal applications. For example, changes to the rights concept or distribution of page reproduction caused changes across several portal levels and instances. Portal aspects were added to the automated build and release management function, which already exists in the HanseMerkur environment, and harmonized with the internal editorial process. In this way, portal content and individual portlets can be incorporated.

Results

Within the limited amount of time available, mgm assisted the HanseMerkur team in the selection of suitable technology as well as the preparation of a development approach compliant with the organization. As a result, the first portal application - the corporate website www.hansemerkur.de - was brought into production within only three months.

"mgm technology partners, within a short amount of time, helped us acquire the necessary insights and knowledge to prepare us for the operation of a portal at HanseMerkur", summarizes Dr. Horst Karaschewski, Manager of application development at HanseMerkur, the project.

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