

White Paper

**Platform or solution? Useful advice
about choosing an intranet portal.**

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INTRODUCTION

Once a peasant man prayed to God for help with tilling a vast field. Soon, beside his house, he found four wheels, a motor, an uncomfortable chair, steering-wheel, and a lot of other mystifying objects, as well as a schematic guide for assembling a tractor.

- I ask for help and you just pile a bunch of junk on my lawn – said the peasant.
- ‘What a strange creature I have given breath to,’ said God. ‘Recently an artist prayed for help in making a painting. I made him a beautiful portrait of a woman with a divine smile. He was disappointed and asked for a simple canvas, paint, and inspiration.’

Different people solve problems different ways. It’s unlikely that a medieval peasant could make headway with instructions for assembling a tractor, or that an artist desiring tools for self-expression, would be satisfied with a ready solution.

The tempestuous development of the intranet market has brought us to the point of a large number of specialized products. Online and off-line. Crafted for highly specialized tasks or more along the lines of ‘some assembly required’. Commercial or free. For large business or home office. To any taste and budget.

As the developer of the Bitrix® Intranet Portal (BIP), we are frequently asked to compare our system with alternatives. But a point-by-point analysis of products simply comes to the dead end which is described in the fable above. It would seem that the variant systems are meant to solve the same task, but they differ so greatly in approach that such a comparison results in obscuring more than it reveals.

Often, expensive platforms are considered by portal customers. The developers of such systems are active in promoting their products and thus receive deserved attention in the market. However, the fact that customers express a desire to for a side-by-side comparison with Bitrix products is a powerful witness of the need for a sharper distinguishing between *platforms* and *solutions* in regard to advantages and scope of utilization when creating an intranet system.

This document will help fill in the gaps in knowledge and clarify the differences between the concepts of an intranet solution and an intranet platform, while covering potential applications of their combined use and demonstrating that these two concepts can fit into a single product as a solution for the most complex of problems. We will be glad if reading this paper helps give more tangible form to the needs of your organization and brings about the formalization of your intranet implementation strategy.

THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM

The proper defining of the task is the key to solving it. This is a simple maxim which, it seems, would only be disputed among only the most dubious and argumentative of academia. However, in the real world, it does happen that not even the cart and the horse are assured of their respective places.

“We need an intranet” is only the tip of the iceberg in defining the task. A keyword search on the Internet performed in the moments after this declaration is something akin to sending a second wheel of cheese down the road to find the first - which fell off the cart. It can lead to a very great danger – choosing the wrong product for your needs and budget. In the future, this can lead to significant financial waste, the need to rebuild the system, disenchantment and frustration among employees and lost time and profits. For the developer and the whole industry, this can lead to a discrediting of the concept of an intranet as an instrument for increasing efficiency.

Clearly, customer disappointment is not good for anyone. Thus, the matter of properly defining the task is a collective effort, where the supplier plays the deciding role. Yes, *deciding*, since only he has the experience and knowledge which will help the client come to the right decision and, as a result, be satisfied in the long term. The supplier bears responsibility not only for the project itself; his professionalism and precise addressing of the particular needs of the client represent the whole industry and its successful development.

“We need an intranet” is great. It is correct and justifiable. It allows optimization of processes and makes business more dynamic. Various studies have shown that the number of organizations which are satisfied with their intranet systems is from 80 to 95%.¹ Customers realistically evaluated first-year ROI at the level of 40-60%.² However, the desire for an intranet leads to a myriad of additional questions, and it is the answers to these questions which will determine whether the project is met with overall satisfaction.

We aren't going to attempt to address all the those questions – that is better left to the battalions of national and international forums where they are outnumbered by expert opinions. Rather, we'll content ourselves with the key questions that appear at the stage of formulating the goals of the intranet installation:

- What functions will the system perform?
- What functions will be needed in a year, and in three?
- What is the budget of the project?
- How will the system interact with the existing IT infrastructure?

¹ Mark Morrell's Blog on BT intranet users satisfaction:
<http://markmorrell.wordpress.com/2009/03/27/satisfied-bt-intranet-users/>

² InformationWeek: Intranet ROI: Leap Of Faith, <http://www.informationweek.com/735/intranet.htm>

- How will installation and maintenance of the system be performed?

Obviously, these questions will give rise to others. The better we work through them, the less risk that the resulting system will break with expectations. At this stage we already see that the conceptual question between a *platform* and a *solution* is coming into view. Do you have exotic needs that will require a platform product and investment in developing a customized solution for specialized tasks? How well will a ready-made solution address today's, tomorrow's and the future's requirements?

INTRANET DUALITY

Firstly, let's make clear the difference between a platform and a solution. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? And what is more appropriate to your business needs?

An intranet platform is a set of tools which can be used to build a complex system heavily specialized for concrete tasks, integration with specific applications, scalability and organic integration into the existing IT infrastructure. A solution is an out-of-the-box product that is capable of performing specific tasks from Day 1. Do you need a calendar? Voila! Blogs and forums – [click here](#). The photo gallery is there, and the employee directory is here. In essence, a solution is what you get when you are done 'filing down' a platform according to business operations.

A platform is like ingredients which need to be seasoned and cooked to taste. A solution is a prepared steak that you eat right away, but can't change.

- Can I have the beef with macaroni?
- No. The beef comes with rice; the meatballs come with macaroni.
- Go ahead and get it, we'll trade.
- No trading.

Déjà vu; dir. Juliusz Machulski; Odessa Film Studio, 1989

Now, it is natural for the respected reader to feel a certain sympathy for one of the two concepts described. If this has happened, then I suspect that you have made a first step toward identifying the real intranet needs of your organization. This preference is simply an instinctive desire projected onto the apparent possibilities.

It's important to note that a preference for a platform or solution is related to the size of the company. A reasonable assumption is that firstly, a moderately-sized company will have somewhat more standardized demands, and secondly, that there is little or no desire to invest scarce resources into the assembly of a tractor or the equivalent thereof. Additionally, it is often difficult for SMBs to formulate a full 'wish-list' concerning needed functionality, and they are completely satisfied with a standard set of features, even to the point of thinking "look at what *else* this can do!"

Large companies, on the other hand, know the market very well – what products are available and their desires, as well as having an impressive budget and IT workforce to apply to a customized system. They also know that a platform frees their hands to

modernize the intranet for the solving of future problems which are unimaginable at present.

THE TORTURE OF CHOICE

An intranet *platform* has the following general characteristics:

- **Scalability**
This is the capability to apply intranet assets over a territorially diverse organization and manage branches from a consolidated center. Workloads can be balanced throughout the system and expansion is performed essentially in real time, adding new hardware as necessary.
- **Integration**
A platform allows the intranet to be integrated into existing IT infrastructure, uniting data sources and coordinating applications for the creation of a unified chain of business processes between company divisions, both critical for decision-making.
- **Openness**
A set of effective tools to create a customized solution, detailed documentation of functionality, a specialized API interface for the development of additional modules.
- **Flexibility**
The capability to meet unique client demands for accomplishing tasks. LEGO-like construction allows virtually any type of intranet functionality to be created.
- **Centralized management**
A powerful means of centralized deployment, configuration, administration, updating and monitoring of the system for the execution of an enterprise-wide intranet policy and its synchronization with other corporate policies, including security, workflows and subordination.

Clearly, a platform is an expensive pleasure. Additionally, it requires not only money, but knowledge, experience, and (probably) external consulting from someone more experienced in the implementation of such systems as the in-house IT specialists. A platform undoubtedly requires major work to achieve integration into the IT infrastructure along with additional purchases of expensive hardware and software to support its operation. As a rule, the budget for installing a system on the basis of a platform exceeds the planned budget by 15-30% owing to unexpected expenses, as well as requiring 1-3 additional months of integration. This is to be expected, since accounting for every detail in such a complicated project is impossible.

This looks like a great tool! Take and make fulfill your boldest intranet fantasies! But...wait a moment. A platform has a plethora of weaknesses, which are massive barriers for SMBs and are not to the tastes of many large organizations.

- **Price**
The cost of implementing a platform includes an array of expenses on consulting, additional software and hardware. This is only the beginning, since the client

needs to cover expenses for maintenance. The costs of additional development and modifications of the system should not be discounted – often in the very process of installation new ideas come up.

- **Time**

A platform takes time. The lion's share of which is preparation: working out the requirements, creating an installation plan, division of duties, setting up business processes. The actual installation and configuration of the intranet platform generally occupies only 10-20% of the project time chart.

- **Dependence**

Installing a new platform puts the organization at the mercy of the installer and individual developers. Rarely will a system integrator accept responsibility for the support of a platform system that has been developed by someone else – there are too many nuances to guarantee the stability of its performance. Furthermore, a platform often brings with it more software from the developer, such that the client finds himself awash in products from a single supplier, even if he only uses each for a single, minor function.

- **Homogeneity**

Dependence on one developer slowly reduces the freedom of choice of the customer. One common eventuality of this situation is that resources are used to prevent the obsolescence of the platform and to justify the large investment, rather than development based on real tasks. The cost of switching platforms is usually prohibitive.

An intranet *solution* differs in the following way:

- **Ready for immediate use**

The phrase 'out-of-the-box' doesn't quite capture this property. As a rule, installing a solution requires no more than an hour, with a few more hours needs to understand the particulars and enter content. An intuitive web interface with standard website navigation simplifies installation and permits quick orientation within the system for users.

- **Ready functions**

A solution does not require additional development to become functional. All of the advertised features of a solution are operational immediately after installation.

- **Installed templates and demo data**

An important advantage that an intranet solution provides is the presence of templates and demonstration data which, in practice, provide a model of an intranet system. Our experience shows that customers change the template in only 2% of cases and continue to use about 80% of the standard structure.

A *solution* is characterized by a significantly more affordable price, advantageous TCO and ROI, ease of management, fast installation, and often includes a measure of cross-platform capability. Migration from one solution to another is not a process that is easily quantifiable, but it is very safe to say that it is much less costly and simpler than changing platforms. There is one weakness of solutions which can be very important to large organizations. They are not open to further development, meaning that integration with existing infrastructure or third-party applications may be difficult or













impossible, and scalability in territory or user number may present insurmountable barriers.

A GOLDEN MIDDLE

Bitrix has been developing content management systems since 1998. The company has vast knowledge and experience in the building of effective intranet systems which incorporate the openness and flexibility of a *platform* and have the readiness of a *solution*.

This architectural balancing act is the major competitive advantage of Bitrix Intranet Portal (BIP), allowing it to meet the needs of SMBs as well as very large organizations, equally equipping customers with ready functionality and allowing setting them free to develop in the present and future.

The table below compares the characteristics of the aforementioned architectural concepts and BIP according to key parameters for a model intranet system in an organization of 500 users.

	Solution	Platform	Bitrix® Intranet Portal
Ready functionality			
	<p>Ready functions are an advantage of solutions and in this area BIP completely satisfies the requirements of internal automation, information exchange and knowledge management. The product contains a rich assortment of communications media (blogs and forums, instant messenger server, email, video conferencing), social networking functions, collaboration features, creation of workspaces, workflow and a visual constructor for business processes, dynamic knowledge base, morphological search of texts and files (D.I.G.™) and many other functions which exceed current intranet standards.</p>		
Development of new functions			
	<p>On the other side of the coin, developing new functions is the realm of platform products. In this field, BIP also provides wide opportunities. New modules can be created and included into the ready solution and provide completely new functionality to the product.</p>		
Openness			
	<p>BIP contains a powerful and well-documented API which allows virtually any business logic to be expressed in a project. BIP comes with source code, allowing the customer to create and modify components and specific functionality, and run a full audit of the product. The logical superstructures built on top of databases (information blocks) utilize an open standard and the PHP environment achieves unprecedented simplicity and transparency for further development of BIP and new business tasks.</p>		
Scalability			
	<p>Scalability is an advantage of platforms, which give a durable and expandable framework for both functionality and territorial distribution. BIP supports complex cluster architecture for work in web farms, includes compatibility for high-performance, highly scalable databases (MS SQL, Oracle), and offers built-in workload balancing technology and centralized management of Bitrix-based server pools. Virtualization with VMware and Parallels Virtuozzo Containers allows cascading of complicated installations of the product for minimum service downtime, performance and security.</p>		

<p>Integration with existing IT infrastructure</p>			
<p>Open architecture means that Bitrix stands out for its high degree of integration readiness with existing IT infrastructure. A customer may incorporate third-party apps into the system, including ERP, CRM, SCM and PLM-class products, creating new modules for porting specific data between applications. BIP is compatible with office packages of Microsoft and OpenOffice.org, supporting data storages connection to intranet document libraries, import/export of data in popular formats, and creation of universal public grids. This last feature provides a consolidated view of data from various sources in a single knowledge center, simplifying search for information and provides a solid basis for decision-making.</p>			
<p>Productivity</p>			
<p>BIP demonstrates exceptional performance indicators in relation to efficient use of hardware capacity. Well-engineered architecture, optimized code, multiple caching methods and support of virtualization guarantee the product's stability in heavily loaded environments. Independent testing showed that up to 5 million unique visitors could be handled by BIP Enterprise Edition on an HP ProLiant DL165 G5-class server. Integrated performance monitoring and improvement can help make the risk of downtime caused by lack of resources insignificant.</p>			
<p>System requirements</p>			
<p>BIP can supply all of the intranet needs of a small or medium-sized business while being deployed on a typical office computer. To run a typical 500-user portal, the recommended resources are simply a server with a dual-core processor, 2GB of operating memory and 1 GB of disc space.</p>			
<p>Cross-platform support</p>			
<p>Bitrix products are noted for their support of a wide assortment of environments and capacity to work with all popular operating systems that support PHP. These include Windows, Linux (LAMP) and Mac OS (MAMP). The overwhelming majority of commercial intranet systems work in the .NET environment, stripping the customer of freedom of choice and requiring expensive additional supporting software.</p>			

Built-in security	● ○ ○	● ○ ○	● ● ●
<p>In contrast to competing products, BIP contains a powerful integrated security framework which can independently protect the intranet system from hostile network surrounding. The PRO+PRO™ technology includes a web application firewall, web antivirus, one-time password protection, anti-phishing, behavior-based blocker, various methods of session protection, and SSL traffic encryption. A flexible system of user access rights lets the portal reflect company security policy precisely. Alternative products contain only basic functional security features and are simply not safe enough without installation of additional applications and extra costs.</p>			
Simplicity of use and management	● ● ●	● ○ ○	● ● ●
<p>BIP unites two concepts of software distribution: off-the-shelf and out-of-the-box. The product is a viable, even exceptional solution for SMBs from many sectors, with demo data that provides highly relevant previews of operations. Average lead time for launching the intranet is only three working days. BIP has a friendly, intuitive web interface built according to common web navigation principles. This eliminates the need to train employees in basic use and speeds their adaptation to the environment. An eLearning module providing training in the portal is also included.</p>			
Price and installation time	● ● ●	● ○ ○	● ● ●
<p>The cost of a typical installation of BIP for an organization of 500 users is around \$40K – 50K, including the license, pre-sale consulting, installation, technical support, additional software and hardware. The cost of installing a typical competing product is from \$70-100K, while a platform is generally much more costly, weighing in at \$150-300K. Deploying a platform requires no less than 6 months, which is on average 3 times greater than the entire decision-making-plus-installation process for BIP.</p>			

CONCLUSION

Choosing software is the key moment in the process of implementing an intranet system, the foundation upon which the achieving of long-term strategic goals will depend. A mistake at this point will increase risks which can lead to the need to restructure or replace the system with all the associated loss of profits and time.

Bitrix® Intranet Portal puts a unique mix of solution and platform into the intranet market. Its architectural composition and complement of ready features could let it be classified as a “platform with a high level of readiness.” This characteristic lets the product work equally well in heterogeneous corporate networks and in smaller projects for SMBs.

BIP genuinely combines the simplicity, affordability, and readiness of a *solution* with the scalability, integration and flexibility properties of a *platform*. It fully addresses the critical tasks and functions that make intranets so integral to modern business: collaboration, communications, workgroups, knowledge management, social networking, etc. But in addition, the product easily allows for the introduction of new modules, integration, and tasks which are natural in the course of the growth of an organization.

Considering the leading position of BIP concerning total cost of ownership, this product deserves close consideration by companies in the process of choosing software for their intranet.

ABOUT BITRIX

Bitrix is a privately-owned company developing an advanced business communications platform to bridge SMBs with their customers (Internet), partners (Extranet) and employees (Intranet). Founded in 1998 and headquartered in Alexandria, VA, Bitrix now incorporates 70+ staff, 30,000+ customers and 4,000+ partners worldwide. The customer list includes Hyundai, Volkswagen, Panasonic, Gazprom, Xerox, PricewaterhouseCoopers, DPD, VTB, Samsung and Cosmopolitan. Localized into 13 languages, the company's products are distinguished for their pioneering technology, unique security features, extreme performance capacity and unmatched ease-of-use.

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