

Infrastructure

Set Up

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Gear that powers the market

WHETHER YOU'RE WEARILY ROAMING the Comdex show floor or secretly gloating that you're not there, this week's Infrastructure section provides a terrific cross section of product reviews and technical analysis for Vegas party and IT decision-making patter.

In this section, you'll find reviews of Plumtree and NetIQ updates to their stalwart standards, Corporate Portal and Chariot, respectively; and a new ultraslim server from IBM.

Looking to equip your work force with handheld devices? Technical Analyst Jason Brooks, at right, reviews a unit that bridges the Palm-Pocket PC gap: the new Visor Prism edition, which is souped up not only with color but also a faster processor and expandability potential.

On Page 160, Senior Analyst Henry Baltazar discusses InfiniBand, whose scalability potential makes it "poised to become the biggest improvement in midrange-to-high-end computing in years."

Y2K+1

What's the next big thing?

AT THE CLOSE OF THIS YEAR, WE Acan't harp endlessly on a scary thing like Y2K shutting down the world as we know it, so we're gearing up to identify the gating technologies of 2001—that is, the technologies that will drive and shape e-business in the coming year.

We'd like your opinions on what those technologies will be at your organization and why. Send your thoughts to debra_donston@ziffdavis.com.

EWEEK LABS // REVIEW

PRISM: IN LIVING COLOR

Handspring Visor adds dimension to handhelds

By Jason Brooks

WITH THE VISOR PRISM, Handspring Inc. packs a rich 16-bit color display, a rechargeable lithium-ion battery and a faster 33MHz processor into its popular Visor handheld computer. Add to this the expansion potential of Handspring's distinctive Springboard slot, and the Prism can safely be called the most tricked-out Palm OS-based handheld available.

However, the \$449 Visor Prism lacks the low cost, long battery life and

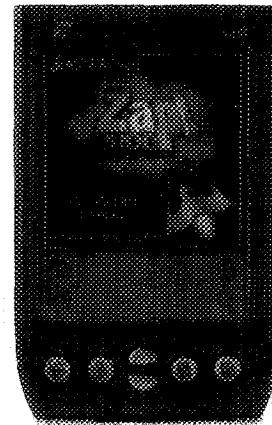
light weight on which its slimmer, less costly Visor siblings built their popularity—and even the Visor Platinum, which, like the Prism, will ship this month, costs \$150 less.

The Visor Prism's price puts the handheld into contention with sub-\$500 Pocket PC devices—most of which are faster, more feature-rich and more open to industry-standard expansion technologies.

The Visor Prism does carry great potential for expandability in its Springboard slot, and we've been impressed by the Springboard modules we've seen so far, particularly those that effectively incorporate wireless technologies.

However, we've yet to see Springboard modules with a CompactFlash

or multimedia card adapter that could open the Visor platform to the world of digital cameras, personal digital assistants and other devices that support these specifications.



Visor shows its colors.

DAVID LANG

Palm OS edge

HARDWARE ADVANTAGES aside, the Palm OS-based Visor Prism commands a much larger software library than is available for the Pocket PC, and enterprise application and hardware accessory vendors almost universally cater first to the Palm OS platform—a major competitive advantage for the Prism.

The Visor Prism's marquee feature is its backlit color screen, which is capable of displaying 65,536 colors, compared with [continued on Page 172]

EWEEK LABS // REVIEW

Corporate Portal update keeps its edge

By Jim Rapoza

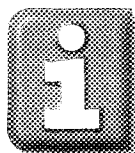
SOMETIMES, VENDORS WITH A leadership position in their product space rest on their laurels and fail to improve their product. Plumtree Software Inc. has avoided that trap by building many excellent new features into Corporate Portal 4.0, rearchitecting the product's server engine and fixing many of the flaws in its previous version.

EWEEK Labs' tests showed Version 4.0 of Plumtree Corporate Portal, which shipped last month, to be an excellent evolution of the product and a must upgrade for businesses using earlier versions. The portal now features improved user authentication, better browser-based administration, the ability to integrate with other Plumtree

EWEEK Labs takes a fresh look at several major portals Page 163

portal installations and system auditing features.

In addition, the product is now less reliant on ASP (Active Server Pages), offering new support for Java and Perl in the portal applications that Plumtree calls "gadgets." Version 4.0 also makes much better use of open standards such as [continued on Page 163]



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Extensible Markup Language.

Corporate Portal 4.0 uses what Plumtree calls a Massively Parallel Portal Engine, which is essentially a server-based messaging system that handles content in a more scalable and fault-tolerant manner than previous versions could. In tests of complex portal pages, Version 4.0 outperformed a Corporate Portal 3.5 implementation on a duplicate system.

With this release, Corporate Portal

sheds its image of being little more than a big application service provider application, but it still runs only on Windows NT and Windows 2000 Advanced Server systems. Change is coming, however, in the form of a Solaris version that will ship next year, according to company officials.

When we first reviewed the Plumtree portal years ago, we thought its price was too high. The new version costs a mind-boggling \$100,000 for 250 named users, but this is par for the course in the pricey corporate portal

market. Competitors such as the Sun-Netscape Alliance's iPlanet Portal Server, InfoImage Inc.'s Freedom and Data Channel Inc.'s Data Channel Server all come in at about the same price or higher.

For such a complex system, Corporate Portal is refreshingly straightforward to set up. We had our portal up and running in no time.

Version 4.0 corrects a significant shortcoming in previous versions by adding support for user authentication through LDAP (Lightweight Directory

Access Protocol), which supplements the NT user support found in earlier versions.

The LDAP support broadens the portal's appeal and makes it much easier for companies to tie Corporate Portal into advanced access control and authentication systems.

The browser-based administration in the product is much improved, and we could handle most management tasks with it. However, "most" is the key word here. Several tasks still need to be done in the [continued on Page 164]



LABS'-EYE VIEW // Timothy Dyck

The key problem I've seen with portals is that they've tended to provide warmed-over generic content that Yahoo's free myyahoo.com service provides just as well—and often better.

That's why Plumtree Software's Corporate Portal 4.0 support for content plug-ins that the company calls "gadgets" is so important.

As Jim Rapoza writes in his review, gadgets can now be written in Java and Perl, opening up the product to whatever applications in-house developers can create and to whatever corporate data those languages can access.

Plumtree has also delivered on the promise of gadgets by posting on its Web site a large selection of prebuilt gadgets to access components of critical corporate applications such as SAP's R/3, Microsoft's Exchange, Siebel Systems' Siebel and Onyx Software's Onyx. This is the proper direction for corporate portals to take because it leads to prime territory that Internet portals like myyahoo.com will never be able to reach. —West Coast Technical Director Timothy Dyck can be contacted at timothy_dyck@ziff-davis.com.

Portals making progress

WHEN EWEEK LABS PERFORMED AN EVALUATION OF SEVERAL MAJOR corporate portal applications earlier this year (see www.eweek.com/links), several vendors said they would be releasing upgrades with significant changes to their products.

Six months have passed, so we decided to check up on the various portal offerings from eVal participants Data Channel Inc., infoimage Inc. and the Sun-Netscape Alliance (as well as Plumtree Software Inc., whose upgrade is reviewed starting on Page 153), to see what has changed and to assess the significance of new developments in this space.

One of the most common new features we found is support for WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) and handheld devices. This is a nice development, but we see it as more of a feature check than anything of real value right now. Most information delivered on corporate portals is not well-suited to delivery to WAP-based portable phones.

Several vendors have also improved their products' features for sharing content within user communities. We find this to be an interesting step because it moves portals from being little more than central gateways to company applications to becoming providers of core functionality. In a way, this change also puts some portal applications in direct competition with products that traditionally have been tied into portals, such as Lotus Development Corp.'s Notes.

The products that we looked at also have been enhanced for improved scalability and performance. This is an obvious progression because the vendors are probably working to satisfy clients that want to expand their implementations beyond the scope anticipated by the vendors.

In the accompanying review of Plumtree Software's Corporate Portal 4.0, we noted several new features designed to increase stability and integration and to enable more community features for portal users. Similar capabilities are also being added to competing products.

Later this year, InfoImage plans to launch Freedom 3, which is expected to be more scalable than Freedom 2, have better data integration and support user communities. Like every rival, InfoImage is also adding support for WAP and content delivery to non-PC devices in Freedom 3.

Although they haven't shipped major new releases of their portals, both Data Channel and the Sun-Netscape Alliance have upgraded their products to address weaknesses and add features. Version 4.1 of the Data Channel Server adds reporting, improved content linking, better personalization and full search options. It includes support for non-PC devices and features improved stability. The Sun-Netscape Alliance has completed the integration of its iPlanet Portal Server with GrapeVine Technologies Inc.'s Compass Server, addressing the major content indexing holes that hampered the original release of iPlanet Portal Server.

Other portal vendors expected to ship new releases in the near future include Hummingbird Ltd. and Epicentric Inc. —J.R.



EWEEK LABS // EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corporate Portal 4.0

- U USABILITY
- A CAPABILITY
- P PERFORMANCE
- I INTEROPERABILITY
- M MANAGEABILITY

Plumtree Software's Corporate Portal 4.0 is a very worthy upgrade to the well-known portal. The new version fixes several weaknesses and gains key features that serve to reinforce the product's standing as one of the most polished and complete corporate portals available.

SHORT-TERM BUSINESS IMPACT // Current

Plumtree sites should prepare to move to Version 4.0, which strengthens the product in critical areas. Companies previously turned off by the portal's reliance on ASP may want to give it a second look.

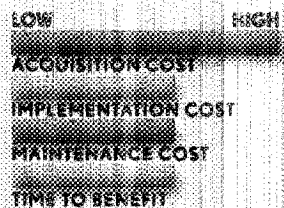
LONG-TERM BUSINESS IMPACT //

Vendors of corporate portals, more than makers of most other product types, need to keep their products current with new standards and take advantage of emerging technologies. Corporate Portal's effectiveness will rise or fall with Plumtree's success at enabling its product to tie to emerging applications.

Excellent integration and community features; improved authentication support; new core server engine.

Requires two administration environments; runs only on Windows servers; expensive.

Plumtree Software Inc., San Francisco; (415) 263-8900; www.plumtree.com





JOHN TASCHEK: WIDE ANGLE

MANAGERS CAN BE FREAKIER THAN HACKERS

IT WAS A FRIGHTENING PROSPECT, BUT EWEK AND SECURITY company Guardent (guardent.com) finally brought the hacking (that is, computer enthusiast) community together with vendors and users in one room. The intent of this meeting was to initiate work on a best practice for how security exploits should be released to computer vendors and the public.

We called this the Vulnerability Summit (vulnerabilitysummit.org), and given the highly entertaining and sometimes caustic nature of the responses to my earlier column on it (see www.eweek.com/links), it was high time for such an event.

I suppose things could have gotten ugly. Fortunately for all of us, everyone maintained a professional attitude, and though there was more than a full day's worth of lively discussion, everyone seemed to have the same goal—safer computing. The other reason war didn't break out was that none of the attendees showboated, and all maintained mutual respect for one another.

There are, unfortunately, obstacles to everything. One thing that surfaced at the summit was the possibility that—as bizarre as it sounds—corporate man-

agement was a bigger threat to security than the big, bad hackers (as in attackers) of the world.

The reasons are simple and appalling: Corporate management understands profits better than it understands the importance of a secure environment. Corporate management has always been preoccupied with risk management. The execs are always asking themselves how much damage their companies could sustain without drastically affecting the bottom line. The less cynical among us (Pollyannas!) call this the cost-benefit analysis.

In the past, this sliding scale of profit vs. quality assurance may have been useful. But there are buffoons in every company, and they're the same ones who came to the conclusion that it was cheaper to settle lawsuits than it

was to redesign the gas tank on the Ford Pinto to another location.

But we're now coming to the point where this buffoonery is impacting the safety of our industry. At the summit, I heard stories of how top financial institutions resisted installing known patches onto their firewalls, even though serious security holes—and their appropriate fixes—had been disclosed months before. Why? Managers believed that the cost of installing the fix outweighed its benefit.

It's the IT manager's job to alert

MANAGERS UNDERSTAND PROFITS BETTER THAN THEY UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF SECURITY.

management about security issues. But management might ignore the alert, especially if computer systems have to be downed, or—egad!—if the purchase of new software is involved.

In a way, I can't blame the buffoons for their thinking. We hear stories all the time about how simple hardware installations have downed Web

sites, such as eTrade, for days. We see messages on supposedly 24-by-7 Web sites that say they'll be down for maintenance between 2 and 4 a.m.

These are big problems indeed. Yet they are nothing compared with the impact of not securing a network. There are whole new breeds of attacks out there. We only hear about a fraction of the exploits. The biggest and most dangerous attacks are hidden from the general public and corporate management.

Eventually, however, we'll see a rise

in online organized crime—it's only natural—and much more dangerous attack methods. This could be disastrous for the company that places short-term profits

over long-term security policies. It will be even more disastrous when lawyers convince Congress that companies should be liable for computer security negligence. ☎

How does your management deal with security? Write me at john_taschek@ziffdavis.com.

PLUMTREE from Page 163

separate Content Manager, a Windows application. We'd like to see Plumtree make all administration functions accessible in the browser interface.

Two excellent new features increase a company's ability to tie a portal to partners' portals and other portals within a large enterprise. With the Federated portal feature, we could link our portal to others, making it possible to share content and enabling users to perform searches across several portals. With the Syndication feature, we could share content and gadgets with other portals, making it possible, for example, for a business partner to incorporate another company's inventory data into its portal.

Added value

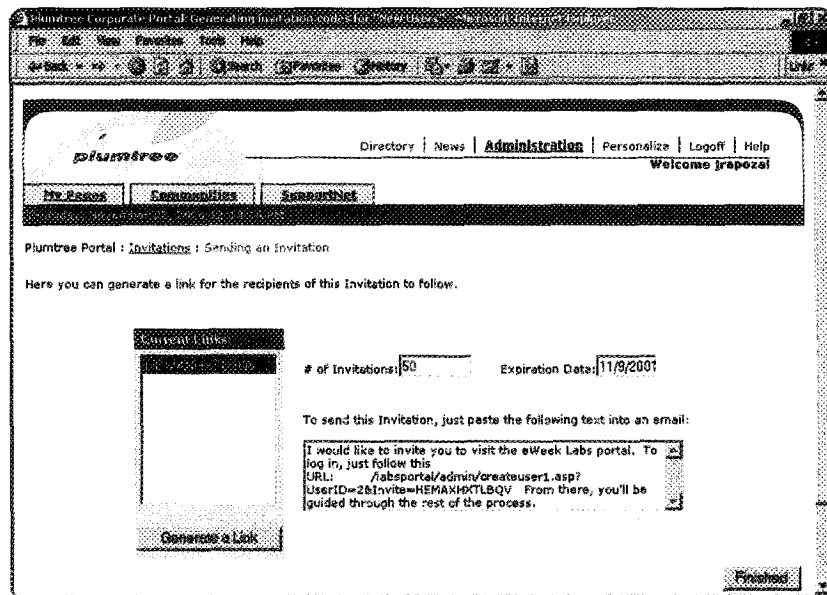
ANOTHER NEW FEATURE ELEVATES corporate Portal from being a simple gateway to business applications to being

a provider of core business functionality. The new Communities feature enabled us to create forum areas for workgroups in our business, allowing them to share content and threaded discussions and to manage tasks.

Plumtree has also addressed the problem of getting people to use a portal through the new Invitations feature, which makes it possible to create a special mail link that can be sent to users (see screen). When they click the link, they are logged in to the portal with a preconfigured user profile.

Plumtree has taken several of these new features and used them to create the SupportNet, essentially a portal for Plumtree users that provides information, support and access to other users in the Plumtree community.

For everyday users of the portal, Plumtree has added new features to the interface. One of the best of these



Corporate Portal's Invitations feature makes it easy to get users to visit a portal.

enables users to define multiple personalized pages. This makes it possible to organize and lay out content differently for pages dedicated to different

content areas and projects. ☎

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