

Web Portals: Internet Gateways for Construction Companies

Can a Single Business Tool Improve Customer Service, Project Management, and the Payroll Process?

The answer might surprise you

Welcome John! Portal Home Logout

XYZ Construction Company, Inc.

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News and Features

Second Quarter Results Announced
Sales reached an all-time high for the 2nd Quarter of 2003. Even more important, the Survey of Customer Satisfaction indicates that service and overall quality are also at all-time highs. Congratulations to everyone!

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Last Minute Reminders

Company Picnic
Be sure to join everyone on the XYZ Construction Company's staff along with their families at the annual Company Picnic. This year's event promises to be the best picnic ever! Join all the fun this Saturday beginning at Noon - see you there!

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Employee Directory

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ All

ID	Name	Title	Email
MAREDG	EDGAR MARTINEZ	CONTROLLER	
MESJOS	JOSE MESA	OPERATOR JOURNEYMAN	
MOYJAM	JAMIE MOYER	SERVICE MANAGER	

9700 Lake City Way NE, Seattle

By John Chaney, CPA/MBA
President
Dexter + Chaney



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A Dexter + Chaney White Paper – October 2003

Overview:

This paper discusses the use of Web portals for construction companies to streamline workflow and enhance operations. Topics include portal applicability for project management, human resources, paperless payroll, and customer service. How to evaluate whether your company would benefit from implementing a Web portal is also discussed.

An Introduction to Web Portals

Picture your project managers generating change requests from the job site for immediate customer approval. Would you get paid faster for those changes? Next, envision switching to electronic time cards, paychecks, and pay stubs. Would this save valuable time during the payroll process? Now, imagine providing real-time service and billing history to your customers online. Would this be a marketable benefit when selling your service work?

Sound far-fetched or futuristic? With a Web portal, all of these things – and more – are possible.

Simply stated, Web portals are gateways or entrances to Internet-based information sites or applications. (Think AOL, Yahoo, and online shopping malls.) Because they can serve so many purposes, companies are implementing their own Web portals to provide customized online access to specific target groups such as company employees, project managers, and customers.

A portal provides access to critical project management, payroll, human resources, and customer service functionality from any computer with an Internet connection.

Why should you consider implementing a portal for your contracting business? Because a portal provides access to critical project management, payroll, human resources, and customer service functionality from any computer with an Internet connection.



Let's take a detailed look at these portal applications and the specific benefits they deliver to your business. We'll also discuss how these applications integrate with your accounting and service management software to become an Internet extension of your operations.

Project Management

Payment for change orders is directly related to how fast you process change requests. Can you picture how a portal could shorten the change order process and speed up customer billing for changes on a job?

A process that could take 30-60 days or more to complete is now handled in a single workday.

As soon as a potential change to a job is identified, your project manager accesses the portal and logs an incident – along with estimated costs – into the system. The change proposal is then printed in a standardized format at the job site for customer approval. Finally, the approved change order is immediately returned to the office for processing in the next billing cycle. A process that could take 30-60 days or more to complete is now handled in a single workday.

Purchasing is a process that is often time consuming and paper intensive. With your current system, how much time does it take to issue purchase orders? Using the portal, your project manager can easily enter and print purchase orders at the job site for prompt distribution to vendors. Once a purchase order is entered in the portal, it is automatically committed for job costing analysis.

To further streamline project management, the portal can also be used to enter requests for information (RFIs), custom issues (such as owner directives), and daily log entries (for example, recording weather conditions or site visitors), which immediately updates the accounting and project management software at the main office.

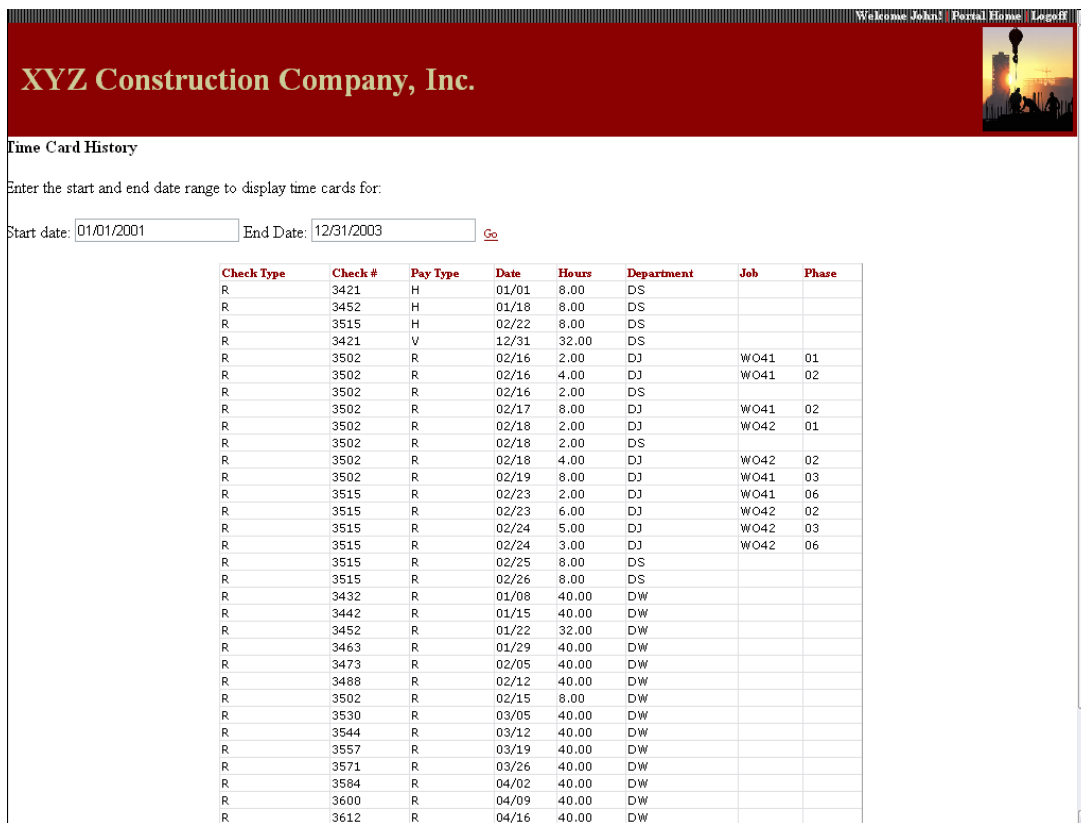
The Web portal can be used for collaboration between the project manager and the project owner.

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The Web portal can be used for collaboration between the project manager and the project owner. Job site pictures, daily logs, up-to-date RFIs, and even the latest meeting minutes can be displayed. By making this information accessible via the portal, your customers can monitor job progress without having to contact your project personnel. Would this be an additional benefit when selling your construction services?

Paperless Payroll

Perhaps you already provide direct deposit for employee paychecks. Would it make sense to take this further by implementing electronic time card entry and distributing pay stubs online? The portal makes the possibility of a paperless payroll cycle a reality.



Check Type	Check #	Pay Type	Date	Hours	Department	Job	Phase
R	3421	H	01/01	8.00	DS		
R	3452	H	01/18	8.00	DS		
R	3515	H	02/22	8.00	DS		
R	3421	V	12/31	32.00	DS		
R	3502	R	02/16	2.00	DJ	WO41	01
R	3502	R	02/16	4.00	DJ	WO41	02
R	3502	R	02/16	2.00	DS		
R	3502	R	02/17	8.00	DJ	WO41	02
R	3502	R	02/18	2.00	DJ	WO42	01
R	3502	R	02/18	2.00	DS		
R	3502	R	02/18	4.00	DJ	WO42	02
R	3502	R	02/19	8.00	DJ	WO41	03
R	3515	R	02/23	2.00	DJ	WO41	06
R	3515	R	02/23	6.00	DJ	WO42	02
R	3515	R	02/24	5.00	DJ	WO42	03
R	3515	R	02/24	3.00	DJ	WO42	06
R	3515	R	02/25	8.00	DS		
R	3515	R	02/26	8.00	DS		
R	3432	R	01/08	40.00	DW		
R	3442	R	01/15	40.00	DW		
R	3452	R	01/22	32.00	DW		
R	3463	R	01/29	40.00	DW		
R	3473	R	02/05	40.00	DW		
R	3488	R	02/12	40.00	DW		
R	3502	R	02/15	8.00	DW		
R	3530	R	03/05	40.00	DW		
R	3544	R	03/12	40.00	DW		
R	3557	R	03/19	40.00	DW		
R	3571	R	03/26	40.00	DW		
R	3584	R	04/02	40.00	DW		
R	3600	R	04/09	40.00	DW		
R	3612	R	04/16	40.00	DW		

Your time cards can be entered via the Internet, which reduces errors and eliminates the need for paper documentation. Job crews and service technicians can use the portal to enter their time for job costing and non-job duties.



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The entry screens, which are optimized for usability, automatically download into your pre-time card system for review before being processed by payroll.

Paychecks are automatically deposited, negating the need for printed checks. And finally, paycheck information is delivered electronically to employees via the portal, eliminating the distribution of paper pay stubs.

Employees use the portal to view paycheck information, including pay rate history for each check they receive. This access streamlines communication between your payroll staff and employees regarding pay rate questions and time card issues by allowing employees to easily look up how their paycheck was calculated.

Human Resources

Managing your human resources is no small task. Would it be helpful if your office and field staff could update and maintain their own personal contact information such as address, phone numbers, home e-mail, number of dependents, and so forth?

The portal provides an easy way for your employees to keep their personal information up-to-date. Why not remove the burden of updating this information from your HR staff? Make better use of their time by allowing them to perform other tasks such as screening applicants, conducting performance reviews, and logging drug-testing results.

Customer Access

Providing quality service work is only half the battle for service contractors. The other half is providing quality customer service *after* the work is done. Imagine giving your customers real-time access to their service and billing history online. Can you quantify the value of this with respect to customer satisfaction, repeat business, and the potential for referrals of new customers?

The service history component of the portal empowers your customers to take an active role in monitoring their service work.



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It gives your customers immediate feedback and detailed information on any service work performed at their site or sites. They can also see what equipment is covered under maintenance agreements and view the billing periods for those maintenance agreements.

The service history component of the portal empowers your customers to take an active role in monitoring their service work.

When your customers log on to the portal, they are able to access the service history for the work sites tied to their particular user I.D. They can see all the work orders from a particular time period and can call up an individual work order to see details such as notes, labor, materials used, additional work recommended, and so on. The approval dates and signatures are also available to review. This makes it easy to confirm that an authorized person within their organization approved the work.

XYZ Construction Company, Inc.

WORK ORDER DETAIL

AMERICAN REFRIGERATION COMPANY
3200 N.E. 125TH STREET
THIRD FLOOR
SEATTLE, WA 98125-1234

Work Order 8451

Site: ALBERT BELLE LOCKER ROOM 100 HOMER LANE BELLEVUE, WA 98004	Bill To: ALBERT BELLE 1000 HOMER LANE SEATTLE, WA 98105
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CONTACT:AL	OWNER PHONE:(206) 625 - 1196	TYPE:RES
LEAD TECHNICIAN:HUNBRI	QUOTE:2000.00	ENTERED DATE:03/06/99 TIME:09:07:14
2nd TECHNICIAN:	CONTRACT:	EST ARRIVAL:
JOB SITE PHONE:(206) 655 - 8599	CUSTOMER PO #:VERBAL	EST. WORK DATE:03/07/99
OTHER PHONE:2066558677		TERMS:2% 10 DAYS, NET 30

Work Ordered

Work Completed

SERVICE WITH A SMILE
ROUTINE INSPECTION WORK ORDER
PAYMENT DUE AT THE TIME OF SERVICE
WORK PERFORMED IS WARRANTED FOR 90 DAYS



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Your customers can also view billing and payment history, often answering their own billing questions without having to contact the office.

The information accessed by the customers is provided directly from your accounting and service software. They are essentially viewing the same information that your billing staff views when they look up a customer's service history at the office. Delivering this key service history information to your customers online provides a competitive advantage.

The portal gives you a significant customer benefit to help sell your service work while building loyalty and confidence with your customers.

Does your business need a portal?

Consider this: when implemented, a Web portal provides a personalized, always-available source for obtaining important information and accessing business applications. It has great potential for enhancing communication and allowing employees and customers to take a more active role in streamlining your contracting business.

What's more, once the portal is set up, offering this functionality online does not require duplicate data entry or extra effort to maintain. Why? Because the portal is an integral component of your accounting, service management, and project management software.

A Web portal provides a personalized, always-available source for obtaining important information and accessing business applications.

Data entry done via the portal immediately updates the main office software. Likewise, data entered at the main office is displayed in real-time on the portal.

If you answer yes to one or more of the questions below, implementing a Web portal just might be something to consider as you take your business into the future.



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Ask yourself these questions:

- Would managing projects from the job site allow your project managers to do their jobs more efficiently?
- Would logging change requests as soon as they become known – and providing the change proposal for instant approval – increase the speed at which change orders are processed?
- Are you interested in enhancing your purchasing process?
- Does the potential for a paperless payroll cycle make sense for your business?
- Would it benefit your company to allow employees to update their personal HR information directly in your accounting software?
- Would allowing your customers to answer their own service history and billing questions benefit your accounting staff?
- Would it be a significant benefit in the sales process to be able to offer online service history to your customers?

If you answered yes to one or more of the questions above, implementing a Web portal just might be something to consider as you take your business into the future.

Also, keep in mind that the information and applications contained within the Web portal are completely secure and customizable to meet the unique needs of your contracting business. The portal is also scalable; it can grow as your business needs grow.

Final Advice

Are you wondering how to go about implementing a portal? The best place to start is with your construction management software vendor. Find out if they offer Web portal applications or if they intend on adding that functionality in the future. If you are in the market for new software, be sure and discuss your interest in a Web portal before making a switch.



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Additional Information

For information on Dexter + Chaney's Forefront® Construction Management Software and Forefront® Web Portal designed specifically for construction companies, call (800) 875-1400 or visit www.dexterchaney.com.

About the Author



John Chaney, CPA/MBA, is a co-founder of Dexter + Chaney of Seattle, which develops Forefront® Construction Management Software. He is an industry leader in the design of construction management software.

John earned his MBA from the University of Washington (1980) and his BS from the University of the Pacific (1978).

Dexter + Chaney is located at 9700 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115-2347; phone 800-875-1400 or 206-364-1400; fax: 206-367-9613; e-mail: info@dexterchaney.com.



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