

IMPROVING THE COMPANY INTRANET

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The FM corporate website is increasingly becoming a major focal point for both internal and external communication - between management, internal operations, other customers, departments and even external suppliers. With this greater visibility, the development of strategies for planning and managing the technical, informational and, increasingly, process-related components of the FM website becomes an important role for the facility manager.

Internet Technology Evolution

It is useful to first look at the general trends of the Internet industry in the past several years to understand the technical side of an FM web strategy. The progression of stages, as depicted on the top half of Figure 1, provides a likely path for future directions in the FM Internet world.

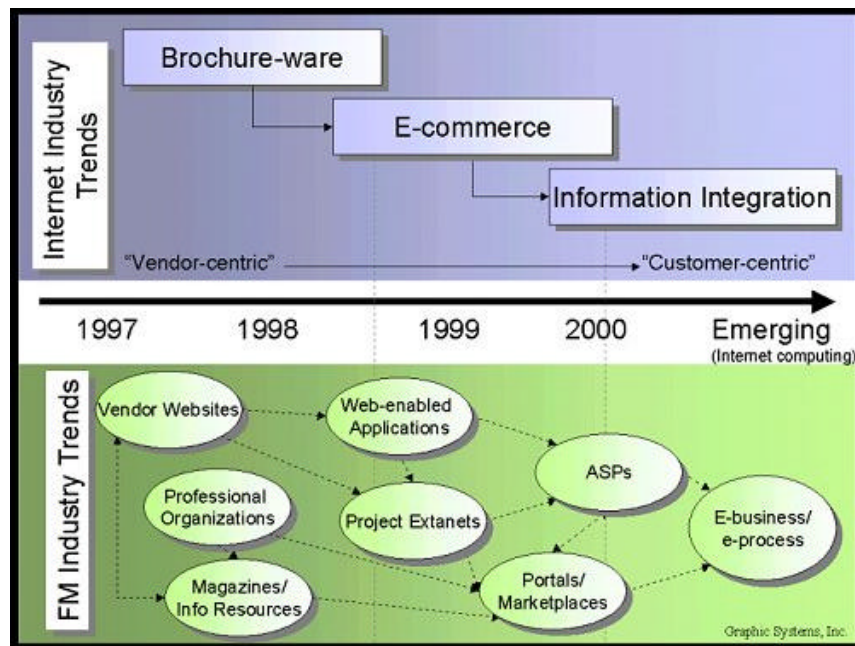


Figure 1: Internet technology evolution and concurrent FM technology trends.

1. The first Internet technology generation, dating from approximately four years ago, has been referred to as "brochure-ware." Using a Web search engine, such as Yahoo! Or Altavista, a customer will find the URL

location of a provider, and go to the site to learn more about a specific product or service of interest. Brochure-ware is characterized as "vendor-centric" in that users would explicitly access a vendor's site for information purposes, viewing static (via HTML) and dynamic web pages (via ASP -Active Server Pages).

2. The second wave of the Internet, called "e-commerce," encompassing the last two years was, likewise, vendor-centric but with transactional processing. E-commerce sites develop much more back-end integration incorporating high-end graphics and security features with activities like automated order placement and tracking.
3. The third generation of Internet development has been called "Information Integration." This current phase changes the paradigm from vendor-centric to customer-centric functions in which there is both front- and back-end integration of business functions triggered by the customer initiating a transaction request. Computing in this environment is Internet-based, replacing conventional client-server software with the ASP (Application Service Provider) model. With ASP, the Internet itself becomes the server and the browser is the client workstation.

Mapping the Internet Evolution to the FM Industry

To a large extent, the deployment of web for the facility management industry parallels these Internet generations. The bottom half of Figure 1 depicts the FM-specific trends taking place during the three Internet phases. There have been hundreds, if not thousands of new Internet vendors. Many target real estate, space, asset and work management. Most offer product and services using an ASP model. Most vendors (about 175 at last count), however, are targeting the construction e-commerce front in the form of Project Extranets and Portals/marketplaces. Some vendors have disappeared as fast as they came. Several mergers and acquisitions have taken place. Many long standing FM software vendors have been slow to adopt an aggressive Internet development strategy, waiting for the dust to settle to see where they may fit in, if at all, with the Internet vendors.

Besides trying to figure out successful revenue models that incorporate the Web, most existing FM vendors are in the latter part of the first generation of development - having some web functionality integrated with their traditional client-server application. This is typically in the form of data entry and reporting functions, access to download or view CAD files, or perhaps an on-line work request module. Several CAFM vendors including Peregrine (<http://www.peregrine.com>), Prism (<http://www.prismcc.com>) and FIS (<http://www.fisinc.com>) have already moved into an ASP computing model and are positioning the next releases of their software to operate entirely through an Internet browser. It will be interesting to see if and how these vendors continue to support their current client-server products.

With ASP use, customers use their Web browser to access the desired software and data located either on the vendor's computer, or on the computer of a Web hosting service (or on the customer's web-server). Licensing is in the form of a monthly usage fee (usually about 8-10% of the software purchase price per month) paid to the vendor. The advantages of ASP can be significant. There are no up-front user hardware or software costs, and the deployment of a complex piece of software, such as CAFM, can be much more rapid than the client-server versions of the same software. Most of the time, plug-ins and upgrades of the software are downloaded on the Internet so that IT departments do not have to "touch" the customers' PCs by downloading software. As with all Internet applications, there are data security and firewall issues that still exist but, so far, the advantages of ASP seem to outweigh its disadvantages.

New software and service providers of FM technology such as Project Extranets and e-marketplace portals, are more nimble in offering the latest in Internet technology. Facility Managers, (as well as IT Managers and Business Unit Managers) are wondering how to integrate these FM e-commerce offerings into their internal operations. But many providers have merged or are no longer in business, making consumers confused and weary of investing in the software, even though they believe they somehow should be taking advantage of the Internet. Increasing, the "wait and see" approach becomes a viable option, by-passing the current myriad of commercial off-the-shelf solutions in part or all together, focusing instead on e-business/e-process -- integrating business applications into an Internet-based corporate computing environment.

Some traditional FM vendors have begun partnering with Internet e-commerce vendors shifting to the customer's e-business and e-process model. One of the more interesting vendors to do so is Datastream (<http://www.dstm.com>), author of the popular MP2 maintenance management software package. The Web is used for two primary purposes: for work order submittal, status checking and reporting by accessing a client-server based MP2 and, more interesting, for procurement functions. Through its iProcure portal site (<http://www.iprocure.com>), a user can submit purchase requisitions to MP2 (or, using workflow, have inventory levels trigger requests), approve or reject requisitions, scan on line parts catalogs, order parts and process payments (see Figure 2). With this functionality, the application becomes one of the few e-businesses and, with workflow, e-process solutions.

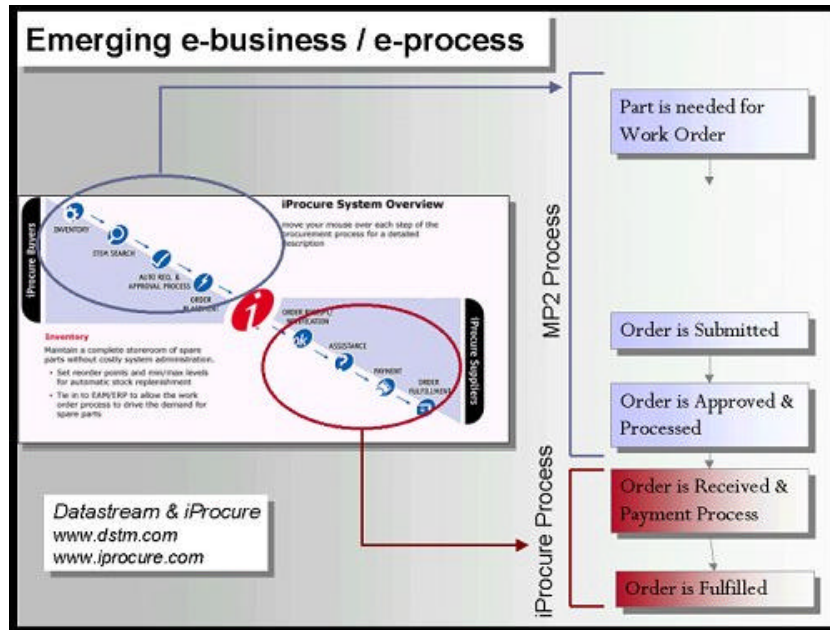


Figure 2: Emerging e-business /e-process solutions provided by long standing CMMS vendor, Datastream and iProcure.

Conclusion:

In the FM software industry there is an evident development away from client server computing and towards the ASP/ Internet computing environment. Although there are few financially successful ASP business models existing currently, ASP use seems to offer the most promise in terms of realizing cost savings and significant productivity gains for the end user. To take advantage of this new environment, organizations need to be responsive to process change and must radically change the way in which they design their computing systems. And the Facility Manager must wear several more hats, requiring knowledge in new business models and organizational structures, Internet technology, change management, procurement, and ERP and legacy applications and their integration into FM e-process solutions.

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