

IT Doesn't Matter—Business Processes Do

Howard Smith and Peter Fingar
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Reviewed by Robyn R. Render and
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Understanding whether and why IT matters is important for higher education and specifically for higher education leadership. Not surprisingly, CIOs firmly believe that IT does matter. In *IT Doesn't Matter—Business Processes Do*, Howard Smith and Peter Fingar's critical analysis of Nicholas Carr's *Harvard Business Review* article "IT Doesn't Matter," the authors agree with Carr to a point. The book also validates the many rebuttals to Carr's article, however, from IT, business, and economic leaders and experts.

With extensive background and repetitive analysis, Smith and Fingar lay out a clear evaluation of the evolution of IT, looking at the past, present, and future role of IT from varying perspectives. They analyze the past 50 years of IT and clarify the meaning and relevance of data processing in contrast to business-process management. Additionally, the second half of the book devotes a good amount of attention to the commoditization of IT and to whether this dilutes its strategic importance. Smith and Fingar's concluding chapters provide both warnings and advice for CIOs, CEOs, and the entire executive officers' team. They remind us that it is business processes and the value derived from them that really matter.

Smith and Fingar begin their analysis with the following statement: "Carr is right about many of the individual points he makes, but is he right about the right things when it comes to the role of IT in enabling strategic advantage or in his conclusion that IT doesn't matter?" Then, through a discussion of nine key issues, Smith and Fingar provide evidence for their argument that Carr did not get it quite right.

1. *Industrial Age versus Information Age technology*. Gains from information

automation should not be compared to advances in the automation of physical activities provided by the steam engine or railroads.

2. *The IT industry versus the business use of IT*. The advantages derived from the use of technology continue to exist even if one agrees that technology is commoditized.

3. *Infrastructural technologies*. Companies that consume technologies leverage opportunities when there is a critical mass.

4. *The first 50 years of business and IT*. Data processing is now giving way to process processing, or using IT to perform a business process.

5. *Applications versus business process management*. The previous focus on functional automation will shift to integrating applications into business processes that ultimately bring value.

6. *Grids, Web services, and computing utilities*. Companies will gain access to computing power without acquiring specialized hardware.

7. *The essence of Web services*. Web services provide the opportunity for business-to-business applications without expensive, proprietary investments.

8. *Best practices and best-in-class business processes*. There is a need to go beyond best practices built into the software and seek best processes.

9. *The IT buildout*. The IT buildout is seen as not closer to its end than to its beginning.

The remainder of the book covers the evolution of processing, from its automated beginnings as "data processing" to its current manifestation as "business process management," and Smith and Fingar go to some effort to define and differentiate the role of IT in each incarnation. They assert that the next 50 years of IT will involve optimization of business processes. This could be important to higher education in two ways: Business-process optimization should be an important consideration in how higher education as an industry uses IT for strategic competitiveness and in how these trends affect curricula, especially for business and management programs.

Three main takeaways came from these discussions. First, to determine the strategic significance of IT, one must understand the evolution of IT and its future. Smith and Fingar conclude that Carr's focus was on the wrong 50 years—that we should be looking at the next 50 years of IT. IT's future advances will increase opportunities for linking business strategy, processes, and execution. Second, the authors argue that Carr misinterprets IT's influence and importance in the boardroom. They disagree that "there's less need for those types of individuals [CIOs]." Third—and perhaps the most relevant to higher education—is IT's future impact on leadership behavior. The CIO's role in leadership as a translator is essential in communicating the power of IT at both the infrastructure and business-process levels so that innovation and competitive advantage can flourish.

This book is an important read for higher education leaders as they sort through the hype, rhetoric, and promises of competitive advantages in the midst of addressing 21st century challenges in higher education.

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Designing Portals: Opportunities and Challenges

Ali Jafari and Mark Sheehan, Editors
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Reviewed by Jan Doebbert and John O'Brien

Readers from colleges and universities looking seriously at portal development will welcome a book that promises

to provide comprehensive information on portal design. True to the matter at hand, they will expect a book about portals to provide a wealth of information in a single location. There is no question but that this collection of informative essays offers high-level and operational insights that make the volume a must-read for campuses in various stages of a portal expedition. As valuable as *Designing Portals* may be, however, it never fully achieves the feel of a good portal, one that offers readers a one-stop resource rich in information, tightly and concisely organized, and easy to navigate.

Several of the best chapters include discussions of strong models for governance of an institutional portal project. Recognizing that portal initiatives unearth some of the trickiest campus issues—ones that involve territory and autonomy—the authors stress that the process must bring together all stakeholders and work out problematic business issues together. Nonetheless, the final product must be a coherent, complete plan for moving forward. *Designing Portals*, for all its strengths, does not convey that kind of decisive coherence. For example, instead of defining “portal” initially and moving on, many chapters begin by revisiting the definition and do not define the term in exactly the same way. This inconsistency is a problem because those struggling with portal projects often have particular difficulty defining what a portal is (and what it is not). The multiple definitions are more than just a challenge for readers.

Aside from repeated definitions from the authors of different chapters, there are also unhelpful repetitions in fundamental questions that might have been avoided with more aggressive editing. For example, Chapter Eight—almost halfway through the collection—is more than a little late to ask, “Why build an enterprise portal?”

The collection includes several very useful resources and tools, such as a list of home-grown portals. The list will be invaluable to institutions contemplating building rather than buying their portal. In addition, several essays, espe-

cially Jafari’s “The Next Generation of Internet Portals,” provide powerful glimpses of the academic portals of the future. These visionary insights will be especially inspiring for those wading through the daunting, unforgiving work required on the front end of portal design and development.

Other useful resources provide further evidence of the structural shortcomings readers will need to navigate. Providing more than one rubric that could be used to assist in the design, selection, and/or evaluation of portal components somewhat confuses an already confusing issue. Both the rubric in Chapter Two and the longer rubric in Appendix A start with “ease of use” and cover similar ground (including ADA compliance, standards, single sign-on, and so on). But a dissonance results from the differences in the lists, and this tension is left unresolved.

While the format of the book demands that readers search for results, *Designing Portals* succeeds dramatically at providing useful templates and guides for implementation of portal technologies. In this case, the repeated overview of planning processes may arguably be justified. Case studies provide evidence to support a disciplined and strategic approach to implementation of portal services. Through the presentation of multiple essays, a comprehensive approach emerges that individual readers can customize for their own context. The primary issues of functionality, scalability, technical design, and content management are addressed adequately to make the book a useful reference for various levels of portal deployment, though the discussion of security and data-privacy management is limited.

The discussions of portal architectures by Robert Duffner and Christopher Etesse provide a graphical representation of the technical standards that will allow education to achieve the expected benefits of portal implementation. Enhanced learning and student experience, lifelong user IDs for students and alumni, targeted content dissemination, and efficiency in service are integrated through the portal

architecture outlined. The result, as Etesse suggests, is that “we won’t recognize portals as being distinct, they will just exist.” Understanding the integration of data, technology, and content presentation is effectively presented as a core concept of business-process improvement.

Another strength of the collection is its ability to convey the rationale for business process change. For example, Katy Campbell and Robert Aucoin present a concise and thoughtful discussion of the issues surrounding the changes and spaces of higher education. Their presentation of a values-based design—with specific examples of tools and applications that represent best practices—moves the rhetoric of technology up close and personal. Campbell and Aucoin present a compelling case for using portal design to support constructive transformation of higher education. The design is supported by guidelines for evaluating learning portals, and these same guidelines could be widely applied to other Web technologies across educational settings.

One of the editors observes that portal technology is still in its infancy, and this may be the best explanation for why this collection is both crucial and a little clumsy. If the episodic and overlapping structure is occasionally tiring, it is perhaps the best one can hope for at this stage of portal maturity. Perhaps a book with a single author or a compilation with a more restrictive editorial approach would have offered clearer conclusions. Perhaps such an approach would present a more helpful and directive set of recommendations to readers. But such a book, perhaps, would have less thoroughly captured the confusion of challenges and opportunities that is also sometimes called innovation. *C*

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