

July 7, 2009

## Oracle WebCenter Jumps Into The Information Workplace Fray

Oracle Will Leverage Its Applications Position To Become A Player

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For organizations with strong strategic ties to Oracle for business applications, content, and business intelligence, the Oracle WebCenter product suite has emerged as a contender in an Information Workplace market previously dominated by IBM and Microsoft. On July 1, Oracle announced the 11g release of its middleware stack, including an ambitious set of products that will change the game in portals, content, collaboration, and Social Computing for dedicated Oracle shops. Oracle WebCenter's role as a next-generation native interface for Oracle's business applications also has transformative possibilities. Oracle customers will welcome the newfound clarity behind Oracle's WebCenter strategy, and Oracle's ambition in tackling thorny integration problems with competing products requires the attention of information and knowledge management (I&KM) professionals in even the most devout IBM and Microsoft shops.

### WHAT IS ORACLE WEBCENTER?

Oracle WebCenter, an umbrella brand for a family of products that includes Oracle WebCenter Suite and Oracle WebCenter Services, delivers at the convergence of portal servers, enterprise search, content management tools, collaboration platforms, enterprise Web 2.0 tools, and even business intelligence dashboards. Forrester's most recent Business Data Services software survey shows that increasingly, enterprises consider and pilot multiple workplace product categories simultaneously to deliver an Information Workplace vision (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, the goal of the Information Workplace is to deliver the right content, data, processes, and applications into the right context for information workers, while simultaneously reducing the cost of integrating lots of disparate products. For Oracle, that means:

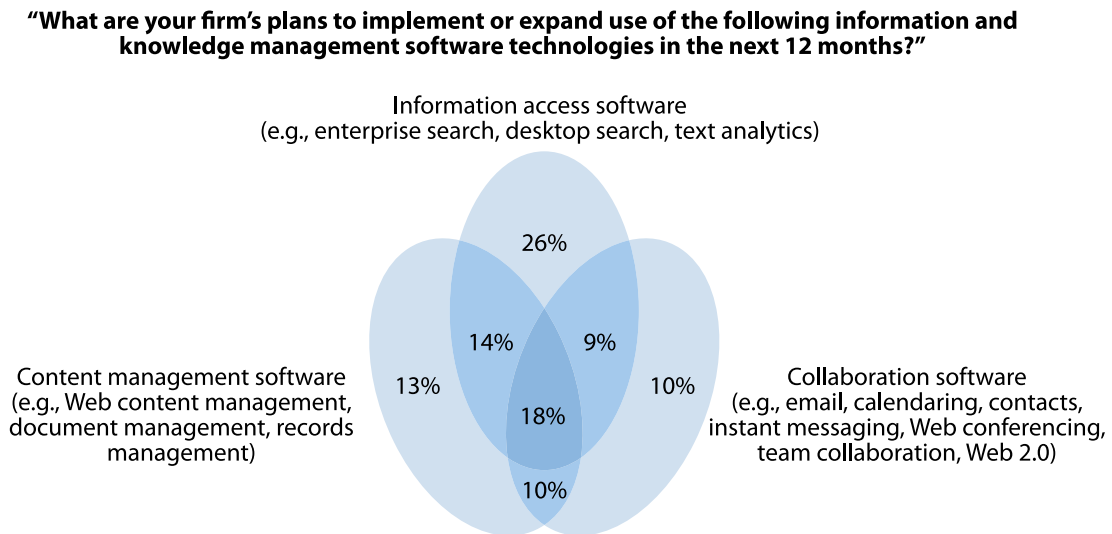
- **Delivering collaborative applications through multiple channels.** Applications and services built in WebCenter are exposed through Web browser interfaces, enterprise applications, Microsoft Office productivity tools, email clients, and mobile devices like BlackBerry and iPhone.
- **Injecting collaborative tools directly into enterprise applications.** Oracle's strongest entry point for reaching end users of software tools, rather than infrastructure buyers, is through its enterprise applications. WebCenter Services — including wikis, blogs, tagging, documents, workspaces, and profiles — could become a pervasive part of Oracle's Fusion Applications strategy.



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**Figure 1** Companies Considering Or Piloting Select Workplace Product Categories In 2009



Base: 644 IT decision-makers who are interested/considering or piloting content management software, information access software, and/or collaboration software in the next 12 months

Source: Enterprise And SMB Software Survey, North America And Europe, Q4 2008

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

## Oracle WebCenter: The Product Both Of Organic Development And Several Acquisitions

Oracle WebCenter has been in the works for several years. Now, with the latest release, the current suite is, in part, the result of internal development of the server framework for integrating applications. Oracle’s Secure Enterprise Search product, which offers raw indexing of content management systems as well as federation across Oracle products, is an example of these internal developments. The rest of WebCenter consists of acquired assets. For example, the product supports the knowledge directory acquired in the BEA/Plumtree acquisition for crawling and aggregating content across a company’s network. Similarly, the former BEA AquaLogic Ensemble product — a proxy server — is enabling WebCenter to inject its services, such as wikis, task lists, and blogs, into third-party products as diverse as Microsoft SharePoint and the publicly available iGoogle interfaces.

## It’s A Broad Integration Framework And Tool Set . . .

WebCenter is best thought of along two dimensions: application integration and collaboration. First, WebCenter is a platform for integrating lots of applications and includes:

- **Oracle WebCenter Composer for quick composition of workspaces.** WebCenter Composer is a WYSIWYG tool for visually composing applications inside of WebCenter. Accessible to nontechnical administrators, WebCenter Composer enables business analysts or even partners

or systems integrators to construct layouts within the browser and rapidly build workspaces from IT-approved components such as task lists, blogs, wikis, social networking capabilities, tag clouds, graphing components, and more.

- **A model for “layered customizations.”** Portal product customizations have caused enterprise pain for years because of the substantial costs they add to product upgrades. With the 11g announcement, Oracle claims customizations — like adding and suppressing features of the core platform — can be made without changing the base source code of the product. This is done through Oracle’s Metadata Directory Services, which is a common service for Oracle Middleware 11g products. This claim holds true for changes made in WebCenter Composer, as well. While Forrester has yet to see actual customer proof points of this capability, this potentially means that upgrade costs will go down and that manageability of changes between development and production environments will improve.
- **A business dictionary of reusable application components.** In Oracle’s terminology, its “business dictionary” consists of reusable application components — local and remote portlets, business intelligence charts, and fully interactive application services — that can be embedded in any part of WebCenter using the WebCenter Composer tool or via the lower-level JDeveloper application development environment. In its integration efforts, Oracle even developed a consumer for competitor Microsoft’s SharePoint WebParts and a way to import and visualize Microsoft’s Business Data Catalog components from SharePoint.
- **Standards support that goes beyond Java portlets.** WebCenter offers a variety of standards to integrate software services into the WebCenter framework, including support for REST, HTTP, JSR-227, JSR-168-WSRP 1/0/2.0, JSR 268, JSR 116, and JSR-170. An Oracle JSF-to-portlet bridge enables bi-directional integration between WebCenter and any standalone JSP app built with JSF, while federation to WCI-based BEA/Plumtree portlets and WebLogic local portlets ensures interoperability with these other Oracle acquired products.
- **Services for Web 2.0 tool sets.** Specifically, Oracle WebCenter Services consists of wikis, blogs, tags, and search. Why are these “services”? Well, Oracle’s vision is that these represent a set of tools that can and should be surfaced through any number of Web interfaces, not just WebCenter. Further, this lets Oracle scale these services at a workload level. In other words, do you want to support millions of users on a particular service? Then just provision the appropriate infrastructure to support that load, rather than the full suite.

### ... And A Solution For Delivering Web 2.0 Services To Information Workers

Beyond the obvious integration strengths of WebCenter’s Framework, WebCenter Spaces is a direct shot across the bow of the emerging collaboration platform market dominated by IBM/Lotus and Microsoft. An out-of-the-box application built on the core WebCenter framework, WebCenter Spaces includes several important features:

- **Spaces for personal information management.** Specific to the individual information worker, “personal spaces” include calendar, events, email, documents, and unified worklists. Worklists surface tasks, workflow items, and notifications routed from underlying business process management workflows, as well as automated messages from enterprise applications.
- **Group spaces for interactions with teams and communities.** The design point for WebCenter group spaces is ad hoc and collaborative. Information workers may provision group spaces themselves and use them for anything from authoring a single document to coordinating an event or meeting to participating in a long-lived community. Integration with personal profiles also enables tracking activity streams of different members in a business social network.
- **Business role pages.** Information workers today take on many different roles within the workplace — manager, team leader, or marketing associate, for example — and role pages let IT and business people configure role-specific email and IM-centric, document-centric, or business key performance indicator (KPI) pages. For example, a salesperson might see a mix of pipeline reports and graphs alongside team member lists and discussion forums on these pages in WebCenter.
- **Native integration into Oracle’s content management and business intelligence.** Through integration points into Oracle’s Universal Content Management product, WebCenter spaces can surface enterprise-grade content management capabilities — like compound documents, rendition services, digital asset management, and workflow — directly into workspaces. Further, tagging and searching business intelligence content becomes a core part of role pages and workspaces in WebCenter for those companies running Oracle Business Intelligence (OBI).

#### “UPGRADE” TOOLS SHED LIGHT (OR SHADOW) ON WHAT CUSTOMERS SHOULD EXPECT

Oracle is cagey about discussing what WebCenter means to existing customers of former BEA WebLogic Portal (WLP), BEA AquaLogic User Interaction (ALUI — aka, Plumtree), Oracle Portal, and Sun ONE Portal Server customers. Oracle will continue to support Oracle WebLogic Portal, Oracle WebCenter Interaction (ALUI), and Oracle Portal for customers who choose to remain on those products. The Oracle WebCenter Suite provides:

- **Bi-directional integration with Oracle WebLogic Portal.** Eager not to disrupt the loyal installed base and developer ecosystem behind WLP, Oracle will pursue a strategy of incorporating new WebCenter functionality into WLP via standards-based interoperability and federating to WLP local portlets for rendering in WebCenter. While this is suboptimal for companies looking to rationalize products and unify presentation-tier technology and development and administration tool sets, it’s likely to be the supported approach between WLP and WebCenter products in the near-to-medium term.

- **A tool for upgrading ALUI portals and communities to WebCenter.** Oracle will provide a tool for mining ALUI environments and automatically upgrading navigation taxonomies and portlets to WebCenter. Forrester sees this as a clear indication that in the long term, ALUI will be de-emphasized as an integration and collaboration environment in favor of WebCenter Spaces. As a result, we recommend that clients reconsider long-term bets on building new apps with the ALUI tool set and begin to assess WebCenter or alternatives for long-term Information Workplace strategies.
- **Tools for both migrating from and integrating with Microsoft SharePoint.** Oracle offers a tool for migrating customers off Microsoft SharePoint — including mapping all metadata associated with SharePoint environments. Further, through WebCenter Ensemble, SharePoint shops can incorporate WebCenter services directly into SharePoint via proxy supported by regular expressions. This is a clear acknowledgement by Oracle that it needs to both coexist and compete with SharePoint in the long term. But in the near term, expect Oracle's integration into SharePoint to far surpass SharePoint's integration into WebCenter.
- **Continued support for Oracle Portal 11g.** Oracle continues to support Oracle Portal customers with the release of Oracle Portal 11g. With 11g, existing customers will be able to have interoperability with new WebCenter features. However, customers looking toward broad Information Workplace strategies should make WebCenter the center of their strategy moving forward.

## ORACLE WEBCENTER UNCERTAINTIES TO WATCH OUT FOR

Oracle deserves kudos for its progress with the WebCenter Suite. But due to several major uncertainties, I & KM pros should ask Oracle:

- **Is Oracle application development onboard with WebCenter?** The predecessor to WebCenter within the traditional Oracle line, Oracle Portal, was never broadly adopted as a standard interface for Oracle business applications. So, one key issue to track is the uptick of WebCenter as a standard interface for emerging Oracle Fusion Applications. There is no better proving ground than Oracle's Fusion Applications, which could leverage WebCenter for seamless access to transactional applications with contextual business intelligence, content, collaboration, and social capabilities. This would represent a fundamental step forward in terms of business application functionality that Oracle would be in a unique position to deliver. Oracle has demonstrated initial movement in this direction, and the vision is compelling. The big question is how deeply the teams developing business applications at Oracle will recognize and embrace the opportunity.
- **How does Oracle WebCenter Spaces relate to other Oracle products?** In addition to WebCenter Spaces, Oracle is investing in a collaboration product named Oracle Beehive that

shares some document-centric collaboration characteristics in common with WebCenter Spaces. While Beehive is designed more explicitly around email, calendaring, instant messaging, and Web conferencing, it also includes a workspace component, and the boundaries between products are not entirely clear. Oracle has demonstrated integration between the two products as well as a road map for further integration. However, expect the product overlap to drive confusion around how best to apply these products to solve specific business problems. Shops that invest in WebCenter and don't want to switch out email and real-time collaboration systems should look to WebCenter for workspace functionality, rather than Beehive.

- **Can WebCenter win the hearts and minds of information workers?** In spite of all of the terrific new Web 2.0, document sharing, and workspace features, many decisions around buying collaboration tools are still driven by email preferences — a market dominated by Microsoft and IBM. With 85% of information workers still relying on email, new de facto standards for how people communicate and collaborate are still a long way off.<sup>2</sup> Oracle's strategy of injecting collaborative tools into enterprise applications is a great entry point, but making WebCenter a ubiquitous brand that information workers and IT pros recognize will take a lot more investment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### PREPARE FOR A NEW INFORMATION WORKPLACE CONTENDER

Oracle paints a compelling vision with WebCenter Suite. By providing a robust portal and workspace environment on top of Oracle's application, content, and BI offerings, Oracle becomes an Information Workplace contender of great interest to IT shops with strong ties to Oracle as a strategic supplier. When thinking about Information Workplace strategies, I&KM professionals should:

- **Make Oracle WebCenter part of strategy planning.** To get their jobs done, information workers access information from many sources. Some of those sources are line-of-business applications. If you're an Oracle shop, WebCenter could provide unique pre-integrated, contextual access to transactional information, content, and expertise.
- **Look for overlap in portal and collaboration strategies.** Portal and collaboration tools have a way of sneaking into an organization, despite the best intentions to standardize. As you consider the implications of WebCenter on your Information Workplace strategy, consider the overlap with other collaboration products in your environment, some of which may be tied tightly to your portal strategy. This will be particularly relevant to shops that are looking to standardize on an IBM Lotus or Microsoft strategy. The WebCenter, SharePoint, Lotus, WebSphere overlap will require special attention.

- **Take a close look at their portfolios and rationalize their strategies.** If you're a dedicated Oracle or BEA shop, assess the practical implications of moving to a WebCenter platform and/or WebCenter Spaces. While the vision is compelling, the task of rationalizing Oracle Portal, AquaLogic User Interaction (or Plumtree), and WebLogic Portal will not be trivial. Pilot integration and migration tool sets from Oracle carefully before committing to the WebCenter platform.
- **Get to know this product.** If you're an Oracle shop, adoption of WebCenter may become a fait accompli, as Oracle may well end up making it the standard interface for Oracle Fusion Applications over time. This, combined with Oracle Universal Content Management under the covers for storing unstructured information, could represent an Oracle Trojan horse to your content, portal, and collaboration strategy.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Enterprises are progressing toward an Information Workplace where tools are integrated seamlessly and employees can work from anywhere. See the June 1, 2005, "[The Information Workplace Will Redefine The World Of Work At Last](#)" report.
- <sup>2</sup> Source: Enterprise And SMB Software Survey, North America And Europe, Q4 2008.