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Client Portals:

The objective of this very short survey was to establish whether there is any common definition of the term 'client portal', and if so what it may be. We were also keen to investigate whether there is anything in the market currently which fulfils the portal role at the desired level.

This is a summary of our findings.

What is a client portal?

Portals have been around in one form or another since the millennium. We set out to identify how widely adopted they have been by the property industry, and in what different forms they were being used.

The first question looked at how widespread the use of portals is, and we found that there is no consistent use of portals across the industry:

- Half of the survey respondents only have portal usage capabilities for 20% or fewer of their assets under management (AuM);
- Whereas the majority of the remaining respondents have adopted portals across 90% of their assets.

This inconsistency is reflective of the confusion around the term 'portal' across the board; interpretations of the term 'client portal' were wide ranging, from purpose-built systems right down to document exchange facilities such as Dropbox.

Respondents were asked to identify the types of portals they make use of, and a few of the companies surveyed provided data for the percentage of assets that use each type, as illustrated in Figure 2. The popularity of Health & Safety and Compliance portals should not be surprising, as these have been around for some time, and legal requirements put pressure on agents to invest in improving that area. Agent lead are almost as popular, and building portals also fairly prevalent, with client lead and building portals little used by comparison. While this information does not suggest equal usage across types, it does demonstrate that the market is interested in a range of potential portal provisions.

Figure 3 (overleaf) shows the names of Third Party Portals plotted against the different adoption levels. Distinctions between the two adoptive extremes are apparent: respondents with a high proportion of assets covered by portals do not tend to use in house portals, (defined as portals provided by the agent into which others can't connect). Instead they seem to rely on four well known third party property management systems or portals (Qube, Yardi, Vicinitee and Locale).
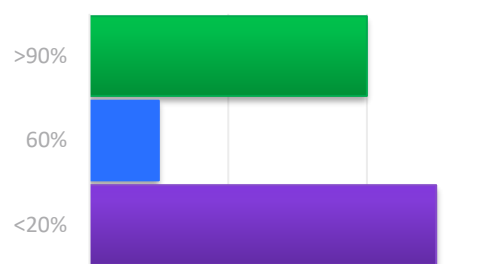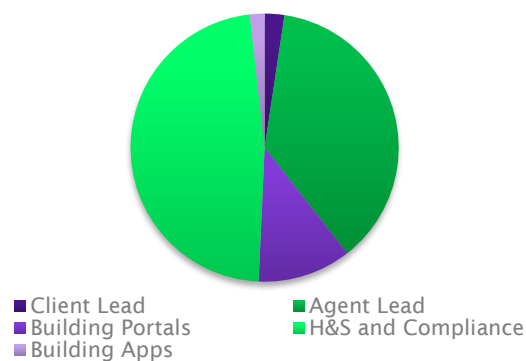

*Figure 1: % AuM that **can** use client portals*

Client Lead / Agent Lead
Building Portals / H&S and Compliance
Building Apps

Figure 2: Breakdown of portal usage by %AuM of Respondents using each portal type

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This use of property management systems as portals indicates that there isn't necessarily a purpose-built system on the market which can meet all the client's requirements.

Currently then, a client portal is any electronic interchange with a client. This is far too broad a definition, even without going into the difficulties of whether 'client' refers to tenant, landlord or both. This lack of a firm acknowledged definition of 'client portal' causes problems for the market as it leads to confusion, and thus a lack of confidence in the concept.

Client portals *are* available but underused

Even among the respondents with portal capability for 90+% of their assets, the effect of definitional lack of clarity is causing problems; many commented that the actual usage of those portals was much lower, one quoting a disparity of 93% between assets which do have portals, and those portals that are actually used. Another respondent commented that a number of clients actively request portals, but again, they often don't use them. This is frustrating as the systems are intended to save time and energy for both clients and property managers alike, and reluctance or inability to utilise them when they are available negates any benefit. Better interfaces are needed to provide property managers with more confidence to encourage self-service.

A number of respondents offered opinions on why usage compared to capability is so low, suggesting that poor client buy in, and property managers' reluctance to encourage self-service could be causing it.

The industry needs more certainty if it is to gain confidence in portals and use them for their intended purpose. This can be achieved by streamlining the number and range of portals available, and instead focussing on what is actually desired by clients rather than what we think they want.

Property Managers want one portal to cover all areas

In answer to the question of what areas client portals should cover in an ideal world, 90% of respondents wanted multiple areas covered by one product (figure 4 opposite).

Property Management was the most desired area across the board, which explains the current trend for using property management systems to fulfil the role of a client portal.

However, a more interesting point to note is the near equal balance of desirable areas, especially in respondents with high adoption. While respondents with below 20% adoption show a less balanced wish list, with preference for PM and FM coverage, the charts are undeniably similar.

The conclusion which can be drawn from this comparison is that the industry speaks as one with what they want from a client portal; a catch all solution.
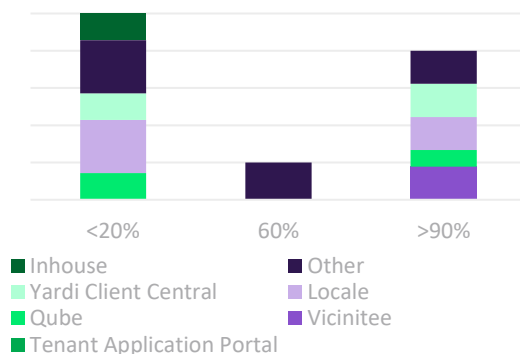

Figure 3: types of third party portal usage split by % of Respondents AuM which can use portals

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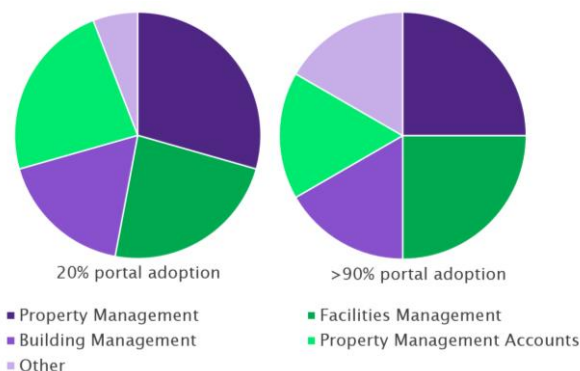" *Many clients specifically ask for portals* "

Figure 4: Comparison of what Respondents want from client portals, by adoption split

Most Respondents expect there to be an improvement of portals in the future

All but one respondent (whose portal coverage is already at 100%), have plans to improve their portal usage in the future, and 70% have optimistic timescales of improvement within 6 months (figure 5 opposite).

Many of the intended improvements are aiming to expand the number of areas covered by portals, further supporting our conclusion that the market is in pursuit of a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary solution. Evidence from a number of respondents shows that, in general, they prioritise accuracy of data over an instantaneous solution. This is a great basis to work on as it should mean that portals adopted have the longevity to provide good investment return.

Conclusion

Overall, despite the length of time portals have been available, progress has been disappointingly slow. If the industry is to move forward with portals and make real use of them as a tool for efficiency and transparency, clarity is required.

A client portal should be more than a document exchange system. A better definition could be that it is an "*electronic gateway offering automated reporting and multidirectional communication, in all key areas of property management*", however, we would encourage the industry to engage in further discussion to define the different types of portals as mentioned in this report.

Perhaps, if a cogent definition can be adopted, and the gap in the market it illustrates filled, 2018 will be the year that portals finally come of age.

Figure 5: Percentage of Respondents planning to improve portal usage and timescales

This paper is a short summary of the headlines from our portals survey. Thank you very much for taking part. If you would like to discuss these results further, please contact Andrew Waller using the details on the right.
For more information about our other surveys, please visit: http://www.remitconsulting.com/insight/our-surveys.cfm or contact us at:

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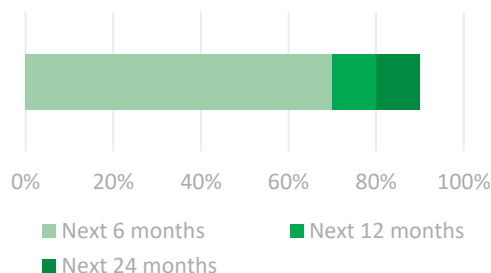07850 740 803
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Methodology

We asked six short questions on the subject of client portals to a small test group. The questions focussed on the % of assets under management making use of portals, the types of areas covered, and goals for improvement.

Respondents were also encouraged to share their own comments on the survey and the matters addressed, providing some pleasing additional anecdotal evidence for the conclusions below.

While the data gathered in this survey may not be statistically significant, it highlights a number of common themes and issues, which have allowed up to formulate a definition of 'client portal' and a gap in the market for a new generation of portals to come through.