

Ontology to find room at the inn

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AN electronic clearinghouse that uses emerging technologies to deliver more powerful searches will be tested by the Australian accommodation services industry.

Researchers at the University of Technology, Sydney, will use ontology-based technology to develop software that can overcome information barriers between buyers and sellers in a marketplace.

Ontology promises to integrate internet-connected databases, regardless of system platform or design, to deliver results with greater relevance and depth of meaning.

"Ontology refers to a dictionary of the basic concepts in any particular domain put into a data format," lead researcher Robert Steele said.

"The idea of ontology is you set up all the standard terms and define relationships between them."

Today's search engines used plain data without meta-tags or some sort of meaningful aspect, he said.

Techniques under development could be used for a range of procurement needs, particularly for government, he said.

"The Holy Grail is to embed more semantically rich information," he said.

"We are doing that in the limited domain of accommodation services to start with."

The clearinghouse was a network of networks with each member site being a node, Mr Steele said.

Ontology-based architecture allowed information sharing among nodes without any need for stakeholders to change either their technology set-up or in-house standards for

describing and managing data," Professor Steele said.

"There is an issue that different accommodation providers may use different formats to say search for room availability - so there isn't a connection between their computer systems.

"This will provide a way to dynamically update what is available from each provider so you can get a real-time search of all the inventory and a differential pricing strategy."

For the project, the university has teamed with industry partner Lido Group, an Australian accommodation and travel management company specialising in brokering accommodation procurement.

The university, which has received more than \$300,000 in government and industry support, has a clearinghouse prototype in development but needs about \$1 million to bring it to market.

"There is potential for other players in the accommodation and travel area to be involved and that would help us speed up the process," he said.

The project is being done over three years under the Australian Research Council's Linkage program.

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