

What is SharePoint's Role in an ECM World?

By Bud Porter-Roth

What is SharePoint's role in an Enterprise Content Management (ECM) world? Is SharePoint itself an ECM solution? Or, does SharePoint work with other ECM systems as simply a front-end? It seems strange to still be writing about these questions and discussing them since the most current version of SharePoint (Microsoft Office SharePoint Server or MOSS) has been in the field for almost two years now and earlier versions of SharePoint for years before that.

But, in fact, SharePoint's role and capabilities are still a question to many companies. In a current discussion board on SharePoint, people were at both extremes saying that SharePoint was not an ECM system and others saying that SharePoint "most certainly was an ECM system" – and these were people that were using SharePoint.

The Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM) (www.aiim.org) defines ECM as: "The strategies, methods and tools used to capture, manage, store, preserve, and deliver content and documents related to organizational processes." Without parsing each word in the definition above, SharePoint on its own can do all of the above and with third-party applications, it can do all of the above very well. However, if we look at the Microsoft MOSS product page, Microsoft does not use the acronym ECM or mention any associations ECM and related ideas. So, let's forget whether SharePoint is an ECM system or not, SharePoint is what it is and it shouldn't be pigeonholed by other definitions.

What is SharePoint?

At its most simple, SharePoint is:

Enterprise Content Management: Create and manage documents, business records, and Web content. Users can create their own document libraries, define extensive metadata for documents, allow documents to have versions, assign workflow routines to documents, and include such things as check-in/check-out to control the document collaboration process.

Collaboration: Allows teams to work together effectively, collaborate on and publish documents, maintain task lists, implement workflows, and share information through the use of wikis, blogs, and RSS. Documents can be controlled at the document level, directory level, or library level to include security settings, policy management settings, version control, and other features.

Portals: Create a personal My Site portal to share information with others and personalize the user experience and content of an enterprise Web site based on the user's profile. My Sites are essentially fully configured personal sites in which all of the SharePoint application is available. Portals can be destination sites that serve as the home page for groups, departments, and businesses.

Enterprise Search: Quickly and easily find documents, content in business applications, people, and individual expertise such as language skills, programming skills, and others. Search can be enhanced through the use of metadata assigned to documents.

Business Process and Forms: Create workflows and electronic forms to automate and streamline your business processes such as a vacation request. Workflow enhances the forms capabilities allowing forms to both provide information and collect information as needed.

Business Intelligence (BI): Allow information workers to easily access critical business information, analyze and view data, and publish reports to make more informed decisions.

Requirements, Requirements, Requirements

But is SharePoint an ECM system? Perhaps the only way to answer that is to avoid the question and approach SharePoint by determining what your business application process is and if SharePoint can make it better.

With all initial endeavors to install a document or content management “system” of some type, it must all come down to defining what process is already in place (the AS IS process) and defining what the new system must do (the TO BE process). Only when you understand these two parts of the problem can you begin to define the potential software applications — SharePoint, Documentum, FileNet, Alfresco, etc. For example, if you want to store thousands of documents for several years, SharePoint and almost any ECM system will handle that requirement. However, if you want to store millions of documents as legal records, each document having a different retention period, and the documents must be stored on non-rewritable/non-erasable disk, SharePoint may not be solution. In fact, it is almost impossible to envision the TO BE process without knowing what is technically feasible.

SharePoint’s Sweet Spot

MOSS incorporates Microsoft Office components into a larger architecture that enhances the individual effort and allows that individual effort to be *easily* integrated into a larger group or collaborative effort. For example, a group of five people work on an ongoing accounting spreadsheet (Excel) but can only work on it in a serial fashion. For the sake of expediency, versions are not made and there is no rollback if a large mistake is propagated throughout the spreadsheet. When data is complete and rolled up each month, the manager manually emails out the spreadsheet.

In SharePoint, the spreadsheet can be made into a list and each of the five people can work on it in parallel. Versions are kept and when complete, workflow automatically sends the completed spreadsheet to recipients or even better, nothing is sent except the location of the spreadsheet and approvers can see and comment on the spreadsheet directly. Recipients can respond, via workflow, with any comments and these comments can be captured and kept as part of the ongoing documentation. This can be done by the workers with no IT involvement.

SharePoint’s sweet spot is really in two areas: (1) document and work collaboration and (2) empowering the user to help build his/her collaborative environment. Users do not need to ask IT to build a new library, add metadata attributes, or setup and manage workflows. With additional training and rights, individual users can customize their SharePoint environment and enhance the work process in a way not possible with the large “industrial strength” systems.

I consider SharePoint to be analogous to the entry of the original personal computer (PC). PCs were initially very expensive and didn’t do very much except to mimic a typewriter (at about 100 times the cost of a typewriter!). However, people saw that PCs had the capability to truly enhance the work place and applications like VisiCalc proved the wait was worth the time. PCs

are most likely the greatest workplace productivity enhancement to date but have also caused the greatest productivity problems — lost files, duplicate files, duplicate work due to lost files, and on and on.

Products like SharePoint are attempting to bring control to document management by placing that control in the user's hands and making the user responsible for their own work environment. While the original ECM systems did bring some degree of control to document management, they did not always meet user's needs and those systems could not easily be changed. While not as feature-rich as some mainstay ECM systems, SharePoint is bringing this level of end user control to document management.

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