MacroView Business Technology

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Feature Article

So you want to manage documents in SharePoint…

The good news is that Microsoft SharePoint can be a very effective document management platform – popular with users, efficient in operation and able to handle very large volumes of documents. But it's not just a matter of deploying Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007. Indeed many organisations experience significant frustration with their attempts to use SharePoint for document management. This article looks at the common frustrations and misconceptions and how they can be overcome.

Interest in SharePoint for Document Management

At first glance, the idea of using SharePoint for document management appeals to many organisations. SharePoint 2007 has native document management capability – its document libraries can be used to store all types of files; SharePoint supports Check In / Check Out, Version History and Retention Policies. SharePoint document libraries can store additional classificatory or meta-data related to the files and provide an intuitive means of viewing and working with that meta-data. SharePoint offers Search functionality and of course SharePoint is web-based, which opens up the prospect of simpler remote access to and sharing of documents and files with key clients and business partners.

News of these document management features in SharePoint is motivating many organisations to look to SharePoint as a way of improving on existing File Shares (e.g. G: or P: drive) for managing their documents and files. SharePoint is relatively inexpensive; it has other potential applications beyond document management (such as maintaining the intranet and collaborating on project-related data) and SharePoint allows users to continue with the familiar approach of naming files and choosing a location for them as they are saved (which helps to reduce the cost of re-training staff who are accustomed to storing their files on File Shares).

These cost-of-ownership factors are even leading some organisations that have licenced a traditional DM system (such as Hummingbird DM or Interwoven Worksite) to consider whether they should be replacing their traditional Document Management systems with SharePoint.

A Common Mistake – Reproducing the Folder Hierarchy

SharePoint document libraries can contain Folders, and SharePoint 2007 supports a hierarchy of folders in a document library. This leads to a common mistake as organisations switch from their File Shares to SharePoint – they reproduce the folder tree structure that was present on the G: or P: drive with a folder tree in a single SharePoint document library. Migrating existing documents is easy because SharePoint allows you to cut and paste from Explorer View or when a document library is opened in Internet Explorer.

However this approach of reproducing existing File Share folders with SharePoint folders leads to frustrations down the track with searching and volume handling. The names of folders cannot be used to refine a SharePoint Search. In order to take advantage of SharePoint's capabilities a preferable approach is to make use of meta-data columns, which are defined at the document library (rather than folder) level. Storing large volumes of documents is best done with a tree of sites, rather than with a tree of folders in a single document library. For these reasons Folders are used sparingly in best practice SharePoint document management environments.

A Common Frustration - Navigating the SharePoint Document Store

As users first move into SharePoint they typically experience frustration with viewing and navigating the new SharePoint-based document repository. Previously Windows Explorer provided them with a tree-view of their File Shares – they could browse the document store by clicking the nodes in this tree-view. When the files are moved to SharePoint this familiar tree-view is no longer readily available. Instead the user navigates within SharePoint by clicking in 'flat' breadcrumbs, working with badly named My Network Places and all too often by keying the URL of a SharePoint site or library.

A number of after-market tree-view controls are available to make navigating a SharePoint document store easier and more intuitive. In most cases these tree-view controls are web-browser based. However users of Windows-based applications (including Microsoft Office) prefer a tree-view to be available directly from within their Windows applications – so that choosing a document library in SharePoint is as easy as choosing a folder in a File Share.

The WISDOM Document Management Framework from MacroView provides a tree-view experience that incorporates the familiarity of Windows Explorer with the advantages of SharePoint. The WISDOM tree-view allows a user to browse all parts of the SharePoint document repository for which he / she has access permission. The WISDOM tree-view will show the same views and meta-data columns as are visible in the standard SharePoint web browser interface.

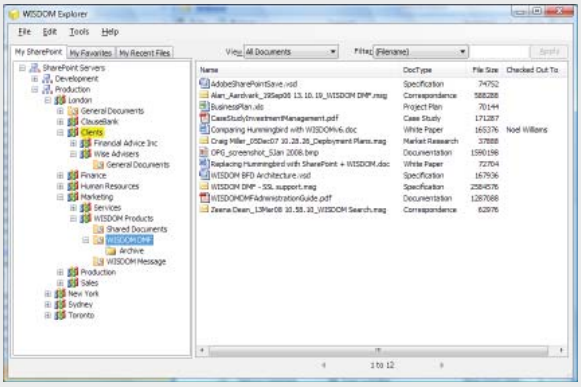

Figure 1: Tree view display of SharePoint document repository by MacroView's WISDOM DMF product.

The latest version of WISDOM DMF makes navigating very large SharePoint document repositories both easy for the user and efficient in terms of bandwidth. WISDOM will automatically filter a large site tree and it uses MOSS Search technology to rapidly locate a site, document library or folder based on the characters in its name or title. The WISDOM tree-view can show multiple servers and handle an unlimited number of Site Collections, which is vital for large organisations using Personal Sites. The WISDOM tree-view can even federate multiple separate MOSS server farms into a consolidated tree-view, which is definitely an advantage for users in organisations that have operations around the globe.

SharePoint Strength – Storing and Using Meta-Data

The ability to capture and use additional meta-data about documents is essential for effective document management because the meta-data enables more flexible, efficient browsing and searching for documents. A good example is searching in document libraries across a range of SharePoint sites for all files related to sales proposals to a certain industry and that contain a certain word or phrase.

SharePoint can certainly store additional meta-data for documents; indeed meta-data architectures in SharePoint environments tend to be more flexible than in the traditional document management systems. The Business Data Catalog within MOSS 2007 is important in this regard – it facilitates linking to existing databases when capturing meta-data.

Key Weakness – Capturing Meta-Data for Email Messages

However SharePoint does a poor job in capturing the meta-data related to Outlook email messages. This is a common source of frustration for organisations as they make their first move to SharePoint-based document management.

Email messages are a vital source of corporate knowledge and typically are stored in personal mailboxes and so not well managed from a corporate perspective. This is why many organisations identify the improved management of email messages as their initial application of SharePoint's document management capability.

An Outlook 2007 user attempting to save an email message to SharePoint first struggles to navigate to the correct SharePoint document library (see above). He / she then finds that SharePoint may or may not prompt for values of meta-data columns in the chosen document library and even if it does, that these values are not recorded. This is very frustrating, because the messages will not be found by later searches that are based on meta-data (e.g. "Find all files related to Client X").

SharePoint 2007 does support 'email enabled' document libraries. Outgoing emails can be copied to SharePoint by including the address of the document library in the To, CC or BCC list. However with this approach, meta-data is not prompted for as the email is sent – indeed if any of the meta-data columns are Required, the newly saved message will be left Checked-Out and so not visible to other users until the Sender or an Administrator edits the properties of the message file using the SharePoint web browser interface.

Organisations with Exchange 2007 can use Managed Folders. Saving an email message to a Managed Folder will trigger Exchange 2007 to send a copy of the message to a document library within the Records Center in a MOSS 2007 environment. However additional meta-data columns in these libraries will not be prompted for as the message is sent. Instead the user will receive an alert at a later time, reminding that

meta-data is outstanding for multiple messages. By then the user may well need to open and read the message again to determine what meta-data to enter. This is not popular with users, as it increases the overall effort associated with saving the email message to SharePoint.

Third-Party Add-ons to Address this Weakness

Given the volume and potential importance of email messages it is not surprising that there are a number of after-market add-ons for SharePoint that improve the integration with Outlook and streamline saving of email messages to SharePoint, along with meta-data. These include products from Colligo, Knowledge Lake and MacroView.

WISDOM Message from MacroView runs in Outlook and captures meta-data in real-time as messages are saved to SharePoint. WISDOM Message allows a user to drag and drop to save email messages to favorite locations in SharePoint. It also features excellent handling of attachments (on both incoming and outgoing messages) and avoids duplicates copies of email messages in SharePoint.

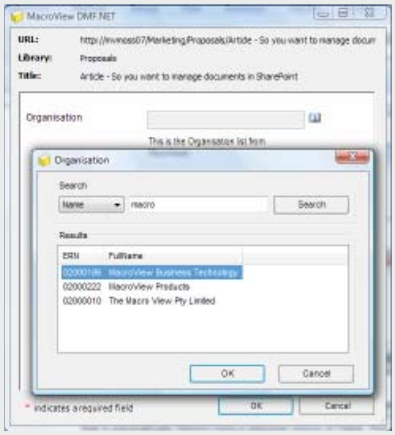

Figure 2: WISDOM DMF prompting for a Business Data column

WISDOM Message is part of MacroView's WISDOM Document Management Framework, which provides consistent meta-data capture for documents, files and email messages. The Framework supports all the SharePoint 2007 column types, including attractive prompting for Business Data columns. The latest version of the Framework allows you to drag and drop to move files from one SharePoint document library to another, ensuring that meta-data integrity is maintained as files are moved in SharePoint.

The Framework also includes support for cascading meta-data profiling – e.g. where the user chooses Project or Matter from a drop down list of valid values that is automatically filtered using a previous choice of Client. This is relevant to organisations that need to manage documents related to Clients and Projects (or Jobs or Matters) - such as architects, consulting engineers and professional firms generally.

The WISDOM Document Management Framework is designed to 'plug the gaps' that exist in out-of-the-box SharePoint 2007, so that an organisation has a full-function, easy-to-use document management environment.

SharePoint Search – Powerful Engine with a Disappointing User Interface

SharePoint 2007 has a powerful Search engine, but organisations looking to use SharePoint for large-scale document management find that the out-of-the-box interface to SharePoint Search leaves a lot to be desired.

The Advanced Search page that comes with MOSS 2007 does allow searching for documents on the basis of custom meta-data attributes as well as by words and phrases contained in those documents. However there is no out-of–the-box support for wild cards or Boolean logic in search criteria. The default SharePoint Advanced Search page is necessarily very generic and not ideal for any particular organisation.

Award-Winning Search Interfaces with WISDOM Enterprise Search

MacroView comes to the rescue here as well, with a MOSS add-on called WISDOM Enterprise Search. This product makes it easy to create attractive customized user interfaces to the MOSS 2007 Search functionality. These interfaces are tailored to an organisation and make it much easier for users in that organisation to specify search criteria that will be successful. WISDOM Enterprise Search supports wild cards and Boolean logic within search criteria.

In June 2007 MacroView was judged the worldwide winner of the MOSS 2007 Innovative Search Solutions competition, based on a custom search solution for a leading international law firm that was developed using WISDOM Enterprise Search.

The screen shot below shows a search interface that is designed for use in a professional services firm. This interface allows the user to specify key attributes such as Client and Project by clicking in drop down lists that are populated by retrieving data from an existing CRM database. The user can also click in a tree-control to specify one or multiple valid values for Industry.

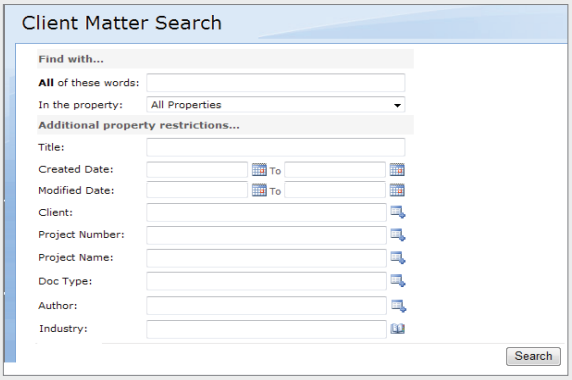

Figure 3: Customized interface to MOSS Search created by MacroView's WISDOM Enterprise Search product.

Thanks to WISDOM Enterprise Search, the user experience when searching reflects the way meta-data was captured when the documents were saved to SharePoint. Searches are more successful because the user can only specify valid values for the various search criteria. This leads to a significant increase in user satisfaction, compared to the standard MOSS Search interface.

Other 'Traditional' Document Management Functionality

Some of the toughest scrutiny of SharePoint's document management capability comes from organisations looking to use SharePoint to replace their existing 'traditional' document management system.

Unique Document IDs

Such organisations often want to know if SharePoint can continue to allocate a unique Document ID as documents are saved to the document repository. While standard SharePoint does not allocate a unique Document Id, these can be created by custom event handler logic, which fires as each file is added to a document library.

Alternatively vendors such as MacroView provide pre-written customisations that automate the allocation of unique Document Ids, ensuring that existing Ids are preserved as documents are moved within the document repository.

Document Security

The ability to control access to documents, including at the individual document level, is a critical requirement for most organisations considering a move to SharePoint as their new document management platform. SharePoint Server 2007 features tight integration with Active Directory security and flexible role-based permissions. It also supports document-level security.

The WISDOM DMF Professional product from MacroView builds on these strong security foundations to allow document level-security to be configured by users with Contributor permission to a document library. In most deployments this is more appropriate than the out-of-the-box MOSS security, which restricts ability to set document level security to only Designer or Administrator user.

Offline Operation

Another area of great interest to some organisations is SharePoint's support for working offline. Standard SharePoint 2007 allows the contents of a document library to be exported to an Outlook folder, so that files in the library can readily be viewed when the user goes offline. However there is no real provision in standard SharePoint for changes made or new documents created while offline to be synchronised into the document repository when the user is next online.

Again, there are a number of after-market add-ons that address this requirement. Colligo is a leading player in this market, but the latest version of MacroView's WISDOM DMF add-on is definitely worth considering if the offline usage is part of an overall document management solution.

More Information

For more information on WISDOM products and how they can enable highly effective document management solutions based on Microsoft SharePoint 2007 contact your Information Management specialist, Vantage Key Consulting.

MacroView Business Technology

WISDOM
Solutions for SharePoint and Office

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