

How to Increase Your Employees' Productivity by Allowing Them to Find Information Quickly

By RDA Project Manager Andrew Crowder, PMP

The majority of organizations today are still utilizing the same software technologies to store their critical working documents that they used a decade ago. Since no IT organization would rely on decade old hardware to store its most critical information assets, why should it use the same old software technology? This decades-old technology is the network shared drive, or - as I like to refer to it - the black hole of useful information. How many times has someone told you that the information you need is on the S or Q drive? Then after hours of searching you either don't find anything or you find seven copies and have no idea which is the most current one. Or what if no one could tell you where to start looking within the organization's shared drive and you had to perform a network search? Would it even work?

Boost eLearning recently announced results of a new survey indicating 39 percent of all Google searches fail, leading to more than 40 hours – or one week – of lost productivity per user per year. In addition to lost productivity, a high search-failure rate also indicates that a user's current research results are likely incomplete, leading to missed opportunities, the value of which could far exceed any time lost.¹ So if the leader in search technology comes up short 39% of the time, how often does it happen in your company? What opportunities do your employees miss out on because they can't find the relevant information on your company's networks?

Solving Your Company's Information Storage Needs

The first step to solving your company's information needs is to migrate to a new technology. The one that I have seen that has delivered the highest levels of ROI for the organization is Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS). This product is quickly becoming the leader in online collaborative document storage. Why does this product seem to be taking hold so quickly? The major reason is the productivity gains that can be derived from implementing this product.

Microsoft has developed this product as an extension of the Microsoft Office suite so it provides tight integration between Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and the other Microsoft Office applications. Because your staff does not need to be trained on new office tools, they can start using the product quickly and with little formal training. In addition, SharePoint allows users to quickly configure their workspaces to meet their needs without the aid of a software developer. Users can also quickly setup ad-hoc work areas that allow for cross functional teams to collaborate and complete assigned tasks.

¹ elearnity, <http://www.elearnity.com/EKCLoad.htm?load=ByKey/DWIN7JCBZE>, published 9/9/08, viewed as reference 9/12/08

In addition, your organization's power users, the ones who create essential Excel and Access tools, will be able to pull off truly amazing feats using SharePoint. A couple of examples of what a power user can accomplish include: migrating a library management system from an access database to an online management system without the aid of a software developer or developing an online leave request system with workflow approval. If they reach their limits, SharePoint's has been designed as a development platform allowing software developers to utilize its many features to quickly stand up custom business applications.

As you can see, there is a lot to be gained from implementing SharePoint. While there will be a cost associated with this change, many organizations utilize a version SharePoint that is included with the Windows 2003 server operating system. Also keep in mind there is a cost to not implementing this type of system. This cost comes in the form of lost productivity as users search for information on the file shares and a lost opportunity cost because they don't even know that the information they need exists.

The Challenge

One key factor to keep in mind is that technology alone will not solve your problems. Technology must be implemented in a way that streamlines your employees' needs while remaining easy to use. Network file shares have persisted as a key technology because they are easy to use. Almost every computer user today understands how to set up folders and place files in them. When a document is placed on a network file share other users can then access these files, if they know where to look. The key is they have to know where to look and which version of the file is the most current one.

SharePoint uses collaboration websites and document libraries to help organize content. However, if an organization allows these sites and libraries to grow without implementing an information governance plan, they are only slightly better off than on a network file share. I say slightly better off since all the content that is stored in SharePoint can be indexed and searched using the built-in search engine. Employees may still be able to find what they are looking for although it will be much easier if you architect your SharePoint sites to fit your business need.

Overcoming the Challenge

The key to overcoming the challenge is to take time to understand how your organization operates and then build a structure that facilitates this operation. As an example, a company that bases its work around project teams may want to create a site for each new project. While a company that bases its business around departments or divisions may need to classify information in a different way. The key to successfully implementing a SharePoint information management solution is to understand the business need and work with SharePoint features to implement the best possible solution.

The Benefit

By updating and modernizing your company's information storage solution, you will allow your employees to more effectively complete their own work as well as share that work with each other. It is even possible to share information with your partners through this technology in a secure, trusted environment.