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The outcome will be to make it possible to publish in a semantically reusable way the context of a firm's internal content along with the content itself. For example, each document in your document management system could be described in a format to make it available to services able to share and exploit semantic content. End users will no longer need to know where to search and instead simply concentrate on what to search. After all, end users care little about the technology being used to support an effective search strategy, they simply want to ensure that they find what they need from a trusted resource when they need it.

Biography

Rob Martin is a founding Director of Solcara Ltd (http://www.solcara.com), a firm that specialises in designing, delivering and supporting innovative information management and search solutions. His role involves a high level of consultation with law firms and other information centric businesses, helping them to select and deploy the right search and know how solutions. He is an advocate for maximising the value of all existing investments, both systems and content and he advises firms on how to make the most out of what they have before they start to re-invent the wheel.

What's the Point? Next-Generation Legal Information Systems and Microsoft Sharepoint: Contender or Pretender?

Abstract: In this article Chris Wallis examines some of the recent and impending developments in technology for managing legal information – in all its various guises. He looks in some detail at the facilities offered by Microsoft Sharepoint and tries to identify its USPs.
Keywords: enterprise information management; law firms; software

Introduction

Why, oh why, you may ask, is information management becoming more difficult? The answer is obvious and is sitting right on your desk. Or on your lap. Or in your hand. Or all three. It's technology, of course – an array of infernal gadgets and semi-silent partners that we rely on to ease our passage through life, but which seem to succeed in

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doing precisely the opposite. Victims of our own success? You bet we are.

Our information landscape is becoming vastly more complex, due both to huge increases in the volume of accessible data and in the number of systems and tools at our disposal, and to the explosion of *ad hoc* communication and information dissemination mechanisms. At the same time, our lives are becoming more frenetic and we require near-instantaneous responses to our

informational (and other) demands. Consequently, we find ourselves trapped in a vicious circle: we need more powerful, more accessible, more integrated and further-reaching technologies, the very introduction of which will serve to generate more information and, if we're not careful, greater complexity. This, in turn, will require more sophisticated management, not only of the raw material – "data" and "information" plus the nuggets of "knowledge" lurking therein – but also of the technologies themselves.

Law firms are not immune to these developments. New methods of working are being thrust upon them, driven by demands from clients and their own employees alike, necessitating the deployment of the latest and shiniest, must-have widgets. It is unlikely, however, that the emerging technologies will be sufficiently self-governing to obviate the need for intervention on the part of information and knowledge professionals. If anything, there will be a greater need for such individuals, although the nature of their work will surely change.

This article examines some of the recent and impending developments in legal information technology, paying particular attention to Microsoft SharePoint 2007, which may (or may not) have the answers we're searching for.

Moving targets require moving rifles

The need for improving lawyers' access to information and knowledge, regardless of its location, has been fuelled by their reliance on specialist "point solutions" for document management, practice management, CRM, library management, KM, e-mail archiving and so on, each of which is only dimly – if at all – aware of the others. More recent complications have arisen in the form of collaborative deal rooms and extranets, the websites of external legal information providers, and the internet in general. In particular, the near-ubiquitous use of Google is responsible for the upsurge in interest in so-called "enterprise" or "universal" search engines – tools that can provide lawyers with rapid access to relevant resources, wherever they may be held and whatever their format, while simultaneously shielding them from the complexities of the underlying systems.

All this has instigated the convergence of intranet/portal, enterprise content management (ECM) and search technologies, a trend which is likely to continue for some time. The days of hand-crafted intranets, where much of the content is copied from elsewhere, tidied up and then published as static pages by small groups of people – typically some combination of the IS/KM, IT and Marketing departments – are numbered. Instead, greater emphasis will be placed on:

- Real-time integration of portal pages with other business systems, data repositories and productivity tools like Microsoft Office;

- A unified full-text search function, capable of indexing content on both sides of the organisational firewall and, where appropriate, of federating search queries to external engines;

- Passive data collection: this refers to the use of constructs that populate intranet/portal pages automatically with contextually relevant material. Examples include RSS feed aggregators, data viewers connected directly to a firm's business systems and "canned search" components, the results of which are generated dynamically by passing pre-defined queries and filters to an enterprise search engine;

- "Push" technologies: rather than place the onus of finding relevant resources entirely on the end-user, increasing use will be made of self-service subscriptions and alerting mechanisms. These are often search-driven, where a user will specify a set of search criteria or subscribe to a pre-defined search. Thereafter, the user will receive an alert whenever any change is made to the corpus of material that matches the search criteria;

- Personalisation: firms are moving from impenetrable, one-size-fits-all intranets to those that display information tailored to individual users and/or to individual business units. This will be realised by a combination of passive data collection and "push" technologies, with user and/or group profiles providing the necessary filters;

- Business intelligence: nowadays, lawyers want on-demand access not only to traditional know-how, but also to key performance indicators, management reports and the like;

- Remote working: the need for remote access to e-mail, documents and business systems, whether from home or when on the move, is set to increase dramatically;

- Distributed content management: rather than restrict the creation and publication of content to a few individuals, more users are being encouraged to contribute material, thereby improving knowledge capture and ameliorating the problem of publication bottlenecks. An extension of this is self-service website creation, where users are able to create entire websites around a particular client, matter or project, without requiring in-depth technical know-how or intervention by a systems administrator;

- Informal communication and knowledge dissemination: to a large extent, e-mail has already supplanted the traditional currency of lawyers, the formal legal document. In recent times, the internet has seen an explosion in the number of blogs (websites that provide commentary or news, which visitors cannot edit but can themselves comment upon), wikis (websites that allow users to add and edit content collectively) and podcasts (multimedia files published

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to the internet and available via subscription, usually at no cost). While the number of legal blogs and wikis is still comparatively small, and legal podcasts rarer still, it is surely only a matter of time before they become more widely adopted, especially by younger lawyers who are familiar and comfortable with the concepts.

The satisfaction of all these requirements would hitherto have required the introduction of a host of new technologies with the attendant, all-too-familiar problems of commissioning, installation, integration, testing, training and maintenance. However, a recently-released technology suite, Microsoft SharePoint 2007, may well allow us to kill these many and varied birds with fewer stones than previously was thought possible.

A Microsoft SharePoint primer

SharePoint started life in 2001 as a web-based collaboration tool built on Microsoft's Exchange e-mail server. A replacement appeared in 2003, providing a framework for creating websites and portal structures and for managing the data displayed therein. This version eschewed Exchange for a "proper" database in the form of Microsoft SQL Server. The latest release, SharePoint 2007, is essentially a much-enhanced update.

Like its predecessors, SharePoint 2007 comes in two flavours, now known as:

- Windows SharePoint Services 3.0 (WSS), which is available as a free download for Windows Server 2003; and

- Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 (MOSS), which has WSS at its core and additional components that, of course, do not come free. To complicate matters, MOSS itself has two licensing models, the Standard Client Access Licence (CAL) and the Enterprise CAL.

For a free product, there is certainly a lot to WSS. Its key features include:

- Creation and management of branded intranet, extranet and internet sites, based on predefined site templates;

- Rich-text editors for free-form web content creation;

- Customisable, multi-column list structures for storing documents, tasks, events, issues, announcements, etc;

- Web parts: interface constructs that make up a SharePoint page, such as simple HTML displays, RSS viewers, components that manipulate the content stored in the lists described above, and sophisticated mini-applications that integrate with external systems and databases;

- The ability to define custom "content types" (metadata profiles) for documents and list items. Each content type may comprise a combination of standard metadata fields (containing Dublin Core information, for example) and user-defined fields;

- Document management functionality, such as submission and approval, check-outs and check-ins, security, version control and off-line document editing;

- Collaborative and interactive features, such as document workspaces, meeting and project workspaces, discussion boards, surveys, blogs and wikis;

- Security-sensitive, full-text searching of content stored within the WSS database;

- Integration with other Microsoft products, such as Active Directory, Exchange, Windows Workflow Foundation (WWF) and Office (Outlook, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, etc.)

- Support for mobile devices: WSS sites now render in simplified format on portable devices such as web-enabled mobile phones;

- A distributed user model, where each user can be designated as an administrator, content manager, contributor, "reader" or combination thereof for any given site. Once accorded the appropriate privileges, any user can create new content and even new websites;

- Site usage analysis and reporting.

WSS is essentially the entry-level version of SharePoint 2007. On the other hand, MOSS is a portal technology that acts as an umbrella over collections of WSS sites. The Standard CAL version has the following key features over and above those of WSS:

- True portal pages and data aggregation web parts that provide slice-and-dice views across multiple WSS sites;

- Customisable user profiles for storing personal information;

- "My Sites": self-administered sites for each user;

- Audience targeting: the ability to channel information to specific groups of users;

- Built-in workflows for document review and approval, signature collection and issue tracking;

- Enhanced enterprise content management functions, including digital rights management and records management for information expiration and auditing purposes;

- Full-text searching across multiple WSS sites and enterprise content stores outside SharePoint, such as file shares, external websites and public Exchange folders;

- People searches, based on information stored in the MOSS user profiles.

The Enterprise CAL version extends the capabilities of MOSS to include the following:

- Integration with InfoPath Forms Services, which allows users to manipulate XML-based forms directly from a web browser or suitably-enabled mobile device;

- Integration with Excel Services, giving users web-based access to centrally maintained spreadsheets;

- The "Business Data Catalog" (BDC), which provides a framework for integrating SharePoint with line-of-business applications. Suitably configured, the BDC allows externally-managed data to be surfaced via web parts and full-text indexed by the MOSS search engine;

- Business intelligence dashboards, for displaying key performance indicators and on-demand reports.

Given this mind-numbing list of features, LIM readers may be surprised to learn that deploying SharePoint 2007 presents something of a dilemma to law firms – particularly to the IS/KM and IT principals of larger firms. While using SharePoint to create dynamic websites is nowadays tantamount to a no-brainer, a number of SharePoint's features overlap uncomfortably with those of the dedicated, "best-of-breed" applications that firms have spent years (and often a great deal of money) cherry-picking. Compared with these applications, especially industry-leading document management systems such as Interwoven WorkSite, SharePoint's equivalent functions still come up short. Also, given the all-pervading interest in search technologies, it is unfortunate that SharePoint's enterprise search capabilities remain its biggest shortcoming. For example (and for reasons known only to Microsoft), although the underlying MOSS search engine supports the use of wildcards and standard Boolean AND… OR… NOT… syntax, these features are not accessible via the out-of-the-box search interfaces. Furthermore, SharePoint does not support hierarchical metadata, which presents something of a problem when attempting to deploy taxonomy-based classification schemes.

As a result, law firms are seeking simultaneously to leverage SharePoint's undeniable strengths and to paper over its more obvious cracks, typically by adopting one or more of the following approaches:

- Replacing native SharePoint functionality with the superior functions of incumbent best-of-breed solutions. This, of course, necessitates integrating SharePoint with these systems, something that is easier said than done with SharePoint's BDC interface. Consequently, firms must consider using purpose-built, third-party integration and aggregation technologies ("middleware") such as Handshake;

- Enhancing native SharePoint functionality with third-party add-ons. A good example of this is the use of search components from companies like Coveo, Mondosoft or Handshake – considerably cheaper options than the wholesale replacement of the MOSS search engine with high-end products from vendors such as FAST, Recommind or Autonomy;

- Embarking on potentially lengthy, esoteric and expensive software development projects to bolster SharePoint's native functionality. This approach is complicated by the fact that, for many firms, SharePoint 2007 is still largely an unknown quantity. This, in turn, is not helped by the fact that technical documentation, accredited training courses and external consultancy services remain thin on the ground, often necessitating probative exercises within all but the most trivial of development projects.

Conclusion

Many law firms are considering the use of SharePoint to meet the ever-increasing informational demands of their users. However, confusion still abounds over what SharePoint is and what it can offer. This article has attempted to clear the mist, if only a little.

The criticisms and caveats expressed here have been necessary, but are not an attempt to decry SharePoint. Far from it. SharePoint 2007 is a wonderful tool, capable of supporting many of the emerging trends in legal information management. It is just not a panacea. That said, each release of SharePoint has been a quantum leap ahead of its forebears. Given Microsoft's almost limitless R&D budget, and its much-publicised determination to beat rivals such as Google at their own game, it is surely only a matter of time before SharePoint's current limitations are addressed and it graduates from Serious Contender to Undisputed Champ!

Biography

Since obtaining a PhD in Information Engineering from Cambridge University in 1998, Chris Wallis (chris.wallis@tikit.com) has worked as a programmer, analyst and consultant, primarily in legal IT. Chris joined Tikit Ltd in 2003 and is now a Managing Consultant, specialising in portals, enterprise search and KM. Being a technologist and a South African, he likes his sky blue.