

## Making Document Management Work for Smaller Organizations



Every business is different. My business may be completely different than yours in terms of its objectives, staff, tolerance to risk, etc. But there is one challenge that is common across virtually every business— finding a way to effectively manage all of the information that is relevant to your operations.

### ***Why Smaller Organizations Are Different***

Larger organizations have solved the document management challenge by adopting large commercial off-the-shelf software packages that capture this information. These systems can bring tremendous value and have proven to be successful over and over again for these types of organizations.

The challenge lies in the fact that these larger solutions just aren't a good fit for smaller organizations. For example, associations, small professional groups, NGOs and other similar organizations, don't have the ability to adopt a larger system such as Hummingbird or similar type of application. The reasons are simple, and they are showstoppers – one, they are expensive to purchase; two, they are too expensive to install, configure and maintain; and three, they are far too arduous to use. Most document management systems impose a rigid process and structure, something that is foreign to most smaller businesses, and counter to the objective of being quick on your feet and responsive.

This paper discusses an alternative, pragmatic approach for smaller organizations such as yours to benefit from commercial software to manage documents while making it simple enough for your staff to be successful in using it. And, most importantly, it proposes a strategy for doing this in a cost-effective manner where new features, and support for growth and change in your business, can be accommodated without starting over.

### ***Managing ALL Your Information***

Information comes in many forms and formats. For today's businesses, whether large or small, most systematic information is stored in corporate databases of one form or another. This includes corporate financial information, human resources related information, customer-related data, etc. Much has been done to make consistent, accessible systems to create and manage the data to be stored in these databases, whether they are commercial off-the-shelf applications for financial accounting or customer management, or custom-built solutions that meet a specific business need.

However, managing structured corporate data is only part of the solution. A whole collection of "corporate wisdom" is caught up in formats that don't lend themselves to systematic storage in databases. This would include Microsoft Office-type documents, such as proposals, contracts, statements of work, budgetary spreadsheets, workplans, corporate presentations, etc. It also includes even "lighter-weight" bits of information included in email threads, discussion groups, instant message threads, and even phone conversations.

## ***The Document Library Structure***

The first task to be addressed is identifying what information we are hoping to store. As mentioned, this will include documents, spreadsheets and presentations, as well as email correspondence, discussion group threads, etc. It may also be necessary to store forms received from external sources, such as applications received from customers, background documents, etc. Whether these are already in electronic format, or we need to scan them, we want them to form part of our document repository.

The second task is to decide how best to organize these documents. This is an impossible problem to definitively solve, as there are literally dozens of feasible choices. Our recommendation is to choose a simple “Tree-like” structure that best mimics your business. At the top level of this tree will be the key method by which your business is setup. We refer to these top-level separations as categories.

For example, if you are organized by department, you may wish to organize your files in categories that mimic your departments. Others may choose their categories by geography; others by client-type or services sold. Regardless of what you choose as your primary categories, there will always be alternate ways to access all your information.

By establishing directory structures within document categories within each of these categories, we can then create a document storage structure that best supports that category. For example, at MikeTango, we have as one of our categories “Clients”. Within our Clients category, we track our documents by the projects we carry out for our clients, so our next level of folders is Project. Within each Project, we want to have the exact same folder structure to store the relevant documents. In our case, we create the following folders for each project: Statements of Work; Proposals; Day-To-Day Working Documents; Project Management; Issues; and Correspondence. Within the Project Management folder, we want subfolders of Status Reports; Project Plan Documents; and Customer Sign-Off Documents. Figure 1 shows our Folder structure.

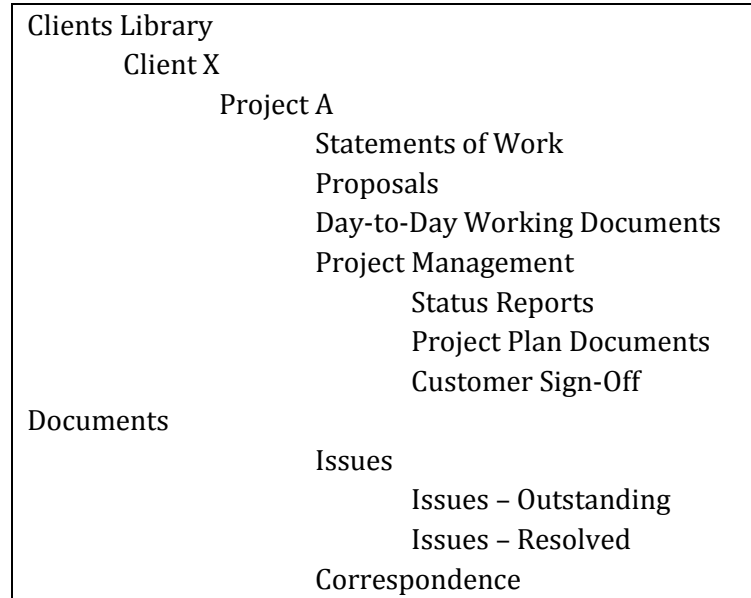


Figure 1. An Example Folder Structure for Documents

Many of you may be thinking – ‘hey, I tried doing this with a shared network drive or some similar approach, and it never worked’. We agree – it’s the common “simple” strategy every small organization tries - and inevitably it fails. Why? Well, there are a number of reasons; the key ones are:

- The creation and maintenance of the folders and subfolders is not automated and managed.
- There is no way to handle sharing documents, collaborating, controlling access, etc. Put simply, what is needed is database-like controls on the documents found in these folders, but a shared network drive doesn’t provide for these.
- There is no manageable way to change the folder structure after it has first been created.
- It is not well integrated with tools such as Microsoft Office, Outlook, etc.
- The use of the shared drive is not enforced, and is only useful if every user is disciplined enough to comply (which is almost never the case).
- There is no support for version control, access auditing, check-in/check-out, indexing, taxonomy, archiving, etc. of the documents in the library.

Ultimately, what we are creating is a mechanism for storing documents in folders in an organized fashion that maps to your business, and offers integration and controls that allow you to manage who has access to what.

How do we accomplish this?

## ***Microsoft SharePoint as the Document Storage Mechanism***

Microsoft SharePoint is capable of storing documents in a folder structure similar to that described above. More importantly, it has key tools built into it. For example, to enable check-in and check-out of documents to ensure multiple users don't make changes to the same document at the same time. It also has full version control built in, so you can follow the history of a document over time. It tracks who changes and views any particular document or folder, and logs that history. It also supports full backup and archiving. In short, it can serve as "the database" for our document storage.

So, is it simply a matter of loading Microsoft SharePoint onto your server and using it straight out of the box? Anyone who has tried this will be quick to tell you this approach is not likely to work. Interestingly, where this solution falls down isn't in its capabilities; rather, it's because people find it extremely onerous. In short, it's not very intuitive to use, it's difficult to manage and administer, and for most users, it's impossible to master.

## ***Enabling Users to Interact with Your New Document Storage System***

Our solution is to apply a set of customizations to Microsoft SharePoint to make it much more user friendly, and to abstract away most of the SharePoint user interface. In fact, our preferred mode of interacting with the document repository is to use Windows Explorer itself.

Windows Explorer is a tool that is well understood by virtually every user. Everyone in your organization is familiar with storing documents in "My Documents" directory, and the newer Windows7 extensions of libraries that hold photos, music, videos, etc. Our solution just extends this library notion, but instead of things being stored in "My Documents" they are stored in "My Company Documents" which maps to our SharePoint repository. Our categories become the equivalent to "Photos" and "Music". The training required for your users is minimal.

Integrating Windows Explorer as the tool to manage our document library offers an additional benefit. We can ensure that the appropriate "meta-data" for each document gets assigned automatically as documents get added to the library. Without going into detail, SharePoint uses meta-data as a means for describing the type of content represented by the document. This might include file properties such as author, date created, etc. as well as keywords such as noting it is a status report or the client name. Much of this information is implied in the library structure; we are able to capture this meta-data through windows explorer and provide it to SharePoint automatically.

## ***Integrating Your Document Management System with Your Business Applications***

We have also ensured the integration extends directly into the tools used by your staff. So, for example, when a user goes to Save a document in Word, the default location (and, and if you prefer, the only location) for storing the document is in the "My Company Documents" folder. Once the dialog is presented, the user is forced to choose in which subfolder the document is to be stored. So, to continue

our example, if my word file is a new status report for Client X, the user will use the file dialog to select the 'Status Reports' subfolder in the Client X folder.

The same type of extension has been done to all aspects of your employees' activities. For example, opening a Word document automatically (and transparently) causes the document to be "checked out" from SharePoint<sup>1</sup>. If a second user tries to access that same document, he or she is immediately informed that the document is checked out, who is controlling it, and what their options are.

By default, we have also made version control be managed through the save process in a transparent manner. That is, each time a user saves a document, the revision is recorded using SharePoint's version control mechanism. Most users never need to access previous versions of a document so we have not exposed this, but instead enable users that must make use of this capability to use SharePoint's built-in version control manager when it is needed.

In our base configuration, we have carried out this integration with Windows Explorer, Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, as well as Outlook and Internet Explorer. It can be extended to other tools as well – whatever tools you use that allows users to create and save documents.

The end result of this integration is that users can work with the toolsets with which they are already familiar with no extra effort added to their day-to-day activities, while leaving your organization with a robust document management system.

### ***Why Does This Matter??***

The document management approach we have described here is a cost-effective, relatively simple mechanism from a technology point of view. But the key question is – can it help you in managing your business more effectively. Our experience is definitely! It can be used to increase the productivity of your staff, to reduce the time lost to constantly searching for documents, and can drastically improve your business from a continuity and disaster recovery point of view.

Consider if these common scenarios sound familiar to you:

**Proposal writing.** You have multiple senior staff members working collaboratively on a document over a weekend. Unfortunately, you have no means to manage this collaboration, so your staff end up emailing edited copies of the document back and forth, with the hope that someone (perhaps you!) can "pull it all together" at the deadline. Inevitably, text gets lost or overwritten, tempers flare, and everyone involved is frustrated with the process and the end result.

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<sup>1</sup> Determining whether to lock the document as it is opened is a configurable feature. Your organization may choose to make checking out a document an explicit step. While this gives better control, it forces all users to do this each time they open a document.

**Audit.** You are going through an audit process, and need to find documents relating to a particular topic after the fact, including finding those documents as they were at some point in time. Unfortunately, documents are scattered across the computers of various employees, and knowing whether you have the most current version is impossible to tell. Mixed in to this may be that one of your key employees at that time no longer works for you, and you find out another key employee had a computer failure a few months ago and they lost all their documents.

**Invoicing.** Your organization has a long-term contract in place that you can do interim billing against, but need to ensure that certain milestones and deliveries have been met. Instead of being able to go to one location to find these documents, you end up having to hunt across your organization to determine whether your customer has signed-off and accepted the milestone documents. And if your business depends on many of these types of contracts, you end up with very little visibility into just how well things are going across the business.

**Indexing and Knowledge Base Management.** You are in the middle of writing a proposal and want to be able to reference a passage from a document one of your staff prepared six months ago. Unfortunately, that staff member is out of the office, and you don't know where she stored the document. You find something that looks like what you want, but it's labeled \_ draft, and you can't tell whether it is the right version or not.

These are all real scenarios that our clients have faced, and each of them could have been managed effectively or averted using our SharePoint-based solution. Activities such as collaboration are now managed through a common check-out and version control mechanism. Documents are stored in a common, shared structure instead of scattered across your employees' individual machines. Full text searching and indexing is possible, across your whole organization.

### ***Summary***

This white paper describes a pragmatic, easy-to-use, and cost-effective approach to implementing a document management strategy that is well suited for smaller organizations. It leverages SharePoint as its foundation, but describes a number of customizations that, when taken together, provide a robust document library system that is easily used by staff and is easy to manage, maintain and extend. For more information regarding this solution, or any of MikeTango's other IT-based solutions offered for smaller businesses, please see [www.miketangogroup.com](http://www.miketangogroup.com).