Is SharePoint a Document Management System?

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Answering this question is like trying to answer the question “Is Pluto a planet?” The answer lies within what you are expecting from the system. In the case of Pluto, it depends on how the International Astronomical Union chooses to define the Solar System. In the case of SharePoint, it depends on how you choose to define your document management system.

I promise you two things as you read this article:

1. No technical jargon that will leave you scratching your head wondering why on earth you just wasted five minutes of your life.
2. No biased opinion – this comes from a long history of hearing what executives need from their document management system.

At the core, a document management system is designed to automate a business process. In its simplest form, this involves capturing paper documents so an end user can retrieve the image from their computer. In practice, executives and end users have a laundry list of needs to be met in order to consider a solution successful.

The list always includes:

- Integration with legacy application (the main system the operator works from every business day)
- Reports -- an audit trail showing who, what, and where...
  - Who has reviewed the documents?
  - What changes were made to the documents after they entered the repository?
  - What documents are stored in the system?
  - Where are the documents stored?
- And finally, the piece de resistance… return on investment (ROI).

It’s funny that when you simplify your list of needs the answers become crystal clear.

**Integration:** Many people not familiar in the document management space think that SharePoint’s integration with other Microsoft products is the easy way to meet this requirement. The reality is for companies of any size this solution doesn’t work. The only complete solution is for SharePoint to integrate with other legacy systems such as accounting, HR, or health information systems. Consequently, in most cases SharePoint can solve the problem but not without customization.
The customization can be simple or more complicated with coding that must be maintained. Beware of deploying SharePoint to the masses without testing the integration. Many unique environmental situations can affect the end-user experience for either the positive or the negative.

**Reports:** Successful companies are running their organizations with detailed reports. These reports help the companies understand how the systems are saving them time, money, and complying with government regulations. They are also sharing the reports with other managers so the entire organization can make better decisions. SharePoint falls short in this area because of the lack of a true workflow solution. The current version does not have the ability to track detailed information for an extended period of time. The good news for SharePoint users is a better answer may be just around the corner. The next version of SharePoint will include a more robust engine capable of tracking the transactions on a real-time basis.

Good reports need to be more specific. As with any good report the value is based on the quality of information available. Since SharePoint currently lacks fundamental information (Meta Data / Index information) the end result of an out-of-the-box SharePoint solution is that end users will not have access to information that permits them to manage their enterprise. This becomes a sticky issue when executives are attempting to solve compliance problems such as records retention for Sarbanes Oxley (SOX) compliance.

**Return on Investment (ROI):** SharePoint on its own is not likely to give you an ROI. You will still need to invest money into the infrastructure in order to see it. The customization described earlier is important for the end-user experience. The personnel who will develop and maintain the code will need to be retained to ensure long-term success. Without it, system acceptance will not hit the levels most executives demand from a core application.

Also, we have not identified how to capture paper documents, which must be handled by a separate solution. Paper documents need an efficient on-ramp into the SharePoint repository that includes accurately building index data and correctly storing the documents within the associated SharePoint library. None of these tasks are handled out of the box by SharePoint.

But, when SharePoint is combined with pure play document management tools, the end result is a quick ROI and a wonderful end user experience for everyone up to the CEO.

**So what is the best answer?**

The best answer to solving the SharePoint document management solution is a hybrid approach. SharePoint is an exceptional tool that is evolving at a rapid pace. The end users like the features and functionality because it resembles their current day-to-day tools. Yet the items we described previously can not be overlooked.

The Hybrid approach takes the best that SharePoint has to offer and mixes in the pure play document management tools available for capture, storage, and workflow. The end results are:

- **A great end-user experience:** Instead of being frustrated with a tool that misses what the end users needs to maximize productivity, they will benefit from out-of-the-box integration with their core legacy application. The document management system will be a productivity enhancer they will rely on each and every day.
- **Executive reports:** Data will be available to the executives directly from their desktops. SharePoint portlets (windows into the Meta Data) will be on their screens and tracking pertinent data that will help the company increase productivity and profitability.
- **Return on Investment < 18 months:** The added-on functionality provided through the Hybrid approach will give the company an ROI of less than 18 months.
- **Accurate information:** There is nothing more frustrating than trying to locate a lost document. By using a Hybrid approach the system’s accuracy will benefit from tools that
are designed to capture and store structured data in a manner that prevents loss of
documents.

The final answer may not be exactly what you wanted to read, but when you understand the high-
level risks associated with implementing just SharePoint, the answers will be as clear as calling
Earth a planet.