

Press Release

Microsoft: aiming to stay ahead

Microsoft is paving the way for a more integrated front and back end system. The company is fast becoming a major contender in the provision of business application solutions such as document management, collaboration, portal, customer relationship management (CRM), enterprise resource planning (ERP) and time management. Existing software vendors that specialise in DM, collaboration, portal, CRM, ERP and time management should start to worry about their future positioning and market share.

Microsoft's strategy is not about re-inventing the wheel; it is about observing and learning from the successes and failures of those software vendors already active in a particular market. When Microsoft decides to target a particular market, it offers such a competitive pricing and licensing option that other independent vendors would be hard pushed to compete. These competitive pricing and licensing agreements seem to entitle Microsoft to use us, the customer, as their guinea pigs to test their applications until they are rid of most of the annoying bugs. We certainly do not tolerate the same from other independent vendors; we expect their software to be bug free!

Microsoft is soon to launch its new version of Office — Office 11 that will support XML as a file format, thereby improving the integration of desktop applications and back-end systems. They are also releasing SharePoint Version 2, which would introduce new document management capabilities such as check-in and check-out, version control, single-click editing and digital rights management, along with tighter integration with SharePoint Team Services, BizTalk and Content Management Server (CMS).

These integrations will allow users to share documents in various locations; to simultaneously edit a document in real-time; to provide access to shared task lists, calendars, discussion strings and workspaces; to publish documents directly; and have plug-ins for applications such as SAP, Oracle, PeopleSoft and JD Edwards.

Then there is XDocs, defined as “a hybrid information-gathering tool that blends the benefits and richness of a traditional word processing program with the data-capturing ability and rigour of a forms package”.

Standalone XDocs benefits are restricted, but integrated with SharePoint and Office services; it could become the front end to an effective collaborative information gathering and sharing system to all back-ends that export an XML schema (SAP, Siebel, Domino).

Finally, their business solution offerings will include a time management, stock-control, a CRM and an ERP solution.

How would this move by Microsoft benefit the legal industry? The large firms may not see much advantage as they probably have made major investments already, but the small to mid-sized firms might find them appealing. Those firms that in the past had postponed deployment of such solutions will find it more affordable while they can use the same underlying structure for their front and back-end applications. They can now have an enhanced internal knowhow solution with SharePoint and its various integrations, a single data entry point with XDocs into their CRM, time management and HR solutions, and real-time collaboration on their extranets with SharePoint.

Is all this too good to be true? Well there is the limitation of the products to Windows 2000 and XP operating systems; the complex licensing issues; a perception issue as Microsoft is a new player in these markets; and finally there is the issue of quality... It is safe to say that unless you want to be Microsoft guinea pig, then wait until at least the third major release of these products before considering it.

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