

SharePoint in the Small Business

A Viable Option?

SharePoint is Microsoft's fastest selling server product ever. Easy integration with the ubiquitous Microsoft Office suite may be one of the reasons why its use is now so widespread within the Enterprise. But SharePoint also comes bundled with Microsoft Small Business Server and as such is an option that many smaller businesses will be keen to consider. This paper examines the potential suitability of SharePoint as a solution for the SMB.

PENTALOGIC

Table of Contents

Introduction **2**

What is SharePoint and Why would I use it? **3**

But What can I actually do with SharePoint? **5**

Document sharing *5*

Intranet *6*

Resource Planning *7*

Task Lists and Project Management *7*

Managing and Sharing Documents *8*

What are the Costs Likely to Be? **10**

Software Licenses *10*

Customization and Add-ons *10*

Human Resources: Time and Skills *11*

What are the Alternatives? **12**

SharePoint Hosted Services *12*

Google Apps *12*

Other Alternatives *13*

Conclusion: Is SharePoint Right for My Business? **15**

Introduction

SharePoint is Microsoft's fastest selling server software product ever.

New survey data suggests that SharePoint is rapidly becoming endemic within the enterprise. When asked to identify if their organization had or were using SharePoint in a production capacity, 69% of respondents said they had and were still using it (AIIM Report).

But with SharePoint available as part of Small Business server, Foundation and WSS or cloud options, could it also be an option worth considering for the SME?

This paper seeks to take a practical look at what SharePoint has to offer the small business.

- What is SharePoint and why would I want to use it?
- What can I actually do with SharePoint as a small business?
- What are the costs likely to be? Time, money, people, infrastructure?
- What are the alternatives?
- Is this likely to add to the productivity/profitability of my business?

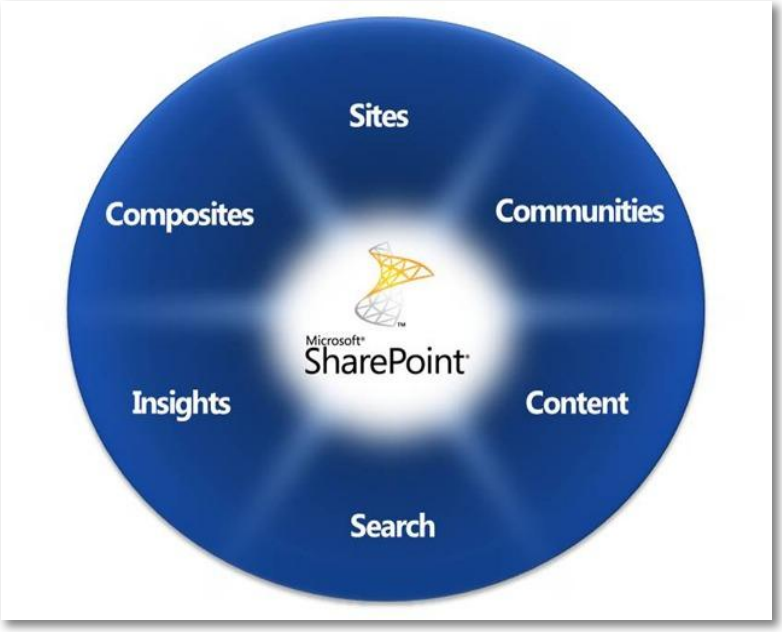
When you have finished reading this paper, we hope that you, as a small business owner or manager will be a lot closer to knowing whether SharePoint is a solution which might add value for your business.

What is SharePoint and why might I want to use it?

The Microsoft answers to these questions run as follows:

> ***Microsoft SharePoint 2010 makes it easier for people to work together. Using SharePoint 2010, your people can set up Web sites to share information with others, manage documents from start to finish, and publish reports to help everyone make better decisions.***
>
> ***The capabilities of SharePoint 2010 work together to help your company quickly respond to changing business needs. Using SharePoint 2010, your people can share ideas and expertise, create custom solutions for specific needs, and find the right business information to make better decisions. For IT, SharePoint 2010 helps you cut training and maintenance costs, save time and effort, and focus on higher business priorities.***

Or diagrammatically:



In practical terms what this means is that SharePoint is a server and web passed software product produced by Microsoft.

SharePoint offers four main areas of functionality:

1. Collaboration – SharePoint allows team members to share and work together on information in a much more streamlined way than is possible using just file shares and Outlook.

2. Search - enables users to quickly find content stored in lists, document libraries and other locations.

3. Content Management features – organization and control of documents and other content, including version history, security, auditing and approvals.

4. Portal capabilities – allowing you to create intranet, extranet and web sites.

There are two other aspects of SharePoint which may prove important in evaluating its suitability as a solution:

1. SharePoint works with, and in a very similar way to, Microsoft Office. So it will easily integrate into existing systems, and for users it offers the comfort of a level of familiarity in the interface.
2. SharePoint offers the ability for the non-developer to create their own custom built applications.

But what can I actually do with SharePoint?

For the Small Business owner or manager it is crucial to move away from these conceptual definitions and identify what exactly SharePoint is going to be able to do for you, in your business, on a day to day basis.

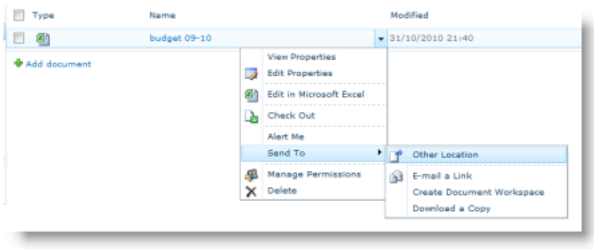


Here are some specific examples of how SharePoint could be used in a small business to improve typical daily tasks and procedures.

Document Sharing

In most SMB's documents are stored on a file share, and shared by email. So, for example, the monthly management accounts will be sent out by email, in draft, to all managers, for checking and amendments. The accounts department will then have to collate responses, manually making the requested changes to a master document. This method is labour intensive, time consuming and error prone – but it's how things get done in many organizations.

Even in situations where users are directed to the file share to make amendments to one document frustration can arise when a user cannot gain access because the file is being edited by a colleague.



SharePoint will give you one document in one place, instantly eliminating any need for email communication and the dangers associated with multiple copies. All edits will also be stored in SharePoint, letting you refer to any changes that are needed at hand and again reducing time spent reading through large volumes of emails in order to find the information you

need. This single feature of SharePoint is very powerful and the impact it could have on your small business should not be underestimated.

You might choose to use SharePoint's Document Sharing Features for working on:

- Creating Bids and Proposals
- Budgets
- Staff Appraisals
- Manuals and Product Documentation
- Brochures and Marketing Materials
- Reports and PowerPoints

INTRANET

Just as a few years ago the world decided that in business you "have to have" a website – whatever line of business you are in, now you pretty much "have to have" an intranet, if there are more than about 10 of you in the business.

But there is some sense in this for many organizations. At its most basic an intranet can as an easy, central location for making available critical company information: the most typical example being HR policies. The intranet can also be used a place to store and provide easy access to standard forms like Expense Claim Forms, leave requests, requisitions and purchase order forms, without fear of version control issues. It can be used as an "electronic notice board", to display company announcements like arrangements for the Christmas Party, or the latest internal job vacancies, without the need for sending of constant "Round Robin" emails.

Beyond that, you might choose to use your intranet to engage staff: run surveys, competitions, and post photos once you venture into the realms of 2 way communication and collaborative intranets there are endless possibilities.

You might pay programmers, developers and internal communications experts thousands to create an intranet for you.

Or with SharePoint, you really can take ownership of the project and create your own, with no need for involvement from developers or programmers. Using SharePoint's wiki and web pages, lists and libraries you have all you need to create a rich and engaging intranet. With you and your team taking ownership of the intranet project through SharePoint you will not only save money, but also have the opportunity to maintain a truly dynamic site, which is very closely aligned to the current requirements of the business.

You might use a SharePoint Intranet for:

- HR policies
- Health and Safety Policies

- Standard Forms: sickness, holiday requests, appraisals, expense claims.
- Company News
- Staff Surveys

Resource Planning

Who's available on Tuesday to meet this potential new client?

When will Tim have time to write this 40 page report for me?

Can I book a meeting room for Friday afternoon?

When can I book 2 weeks off work?

In many small businesses these and other resource planning issues will be handled with paper diaries, wall charts and Outlook calendars.

Vast amounts of time can be spent confirming bookings via phone call and email – and the hassles caused by double bookings and mis-communications can be huge.



Many departmental admins and PA's will have tried to solve these problems with Outlook shared calendars and most will have rapidly become frustrated with the shortcomings of this tool.

A SharePoint calendar list can be accessible to all employees (or whatever sub-set of employees you choose) and can solve resource planning issues by making availability of resources very easy to manage.

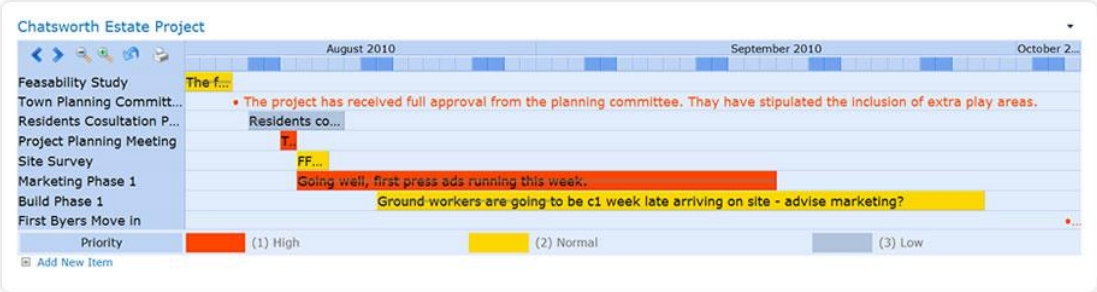
You might choose to use a SharePoint Calendar or custom list for:

- Planning Staff appointments and meetings
- Meeting Room Bookings
- Vacation and Absence Planning
- Planned maintenance and equipment calibration.
- Shift Planning

Task Lists and Project Management

Are your task and "To Do" lists scribbled on Post-It notes, backs of envelopes and various note pads and diaries?

This is how most of us work to an extent, and it can be fine. Up to the point where we need to share tasks with others, or someone is off sick leaving others to pick up their work, or you need to monitor progress on work done.



SharePoint's Task and Project Task lists offer a quick and easy way of overcoming these potential difficulties – without overburdening your time with data-input and administration.

Lists are quick and easy to set up and manage. Team members and managers will be easily able to add, amend and review items. Alerts can be set up to notify team members of new tasks created or assigned to them, or of changes to the status of a task. With 3rd party tools you can also set up Reminders to gently "nag" your team about due soon, or overdue tasks.

You might use SharePoint's Task and Project Task lists for:

- Personal "To Do" lists
- Customer Queries
- Simple Project Planning
- Recurring tasks, like timesheet submission, expense claims, contract reviews or staff appraisals.

MANAGING AND STORING DOCUMENTS

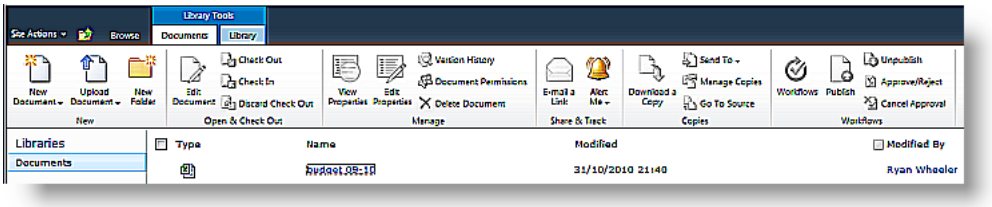
Document storage and management seems to become an ever more onerous task. For most businesses there is now a requirement:

- To store certain documents for certain periods of time.
- To have a clear picture of when and by whom a document has been edited or viewed.
- To have an approval process for documents before they are released to clients or 3rd parties
- To demonstrate that you are storing documents relating to your customers securely
- and to grant clients access to documents relating to them on request.

Working with documents stored on a traditional File Share it can be difficult to meet any of these requirements.

However, SharePoint is ideally suited to dealing with such issues. Indeed, over 90% of all organizations who use SharePoint, use it for document storage and management.

SharePoint document libraries allow you to store documents along with relevant meta data, like when a document was first stored, which departments it belongs to and which customers it relates to.



Version histories allow you to easily see when, how and by whom a document has been amended.

Simple workflow enables you to put in place an approval procedure to ensure that all documents are properly authorized before being sent outside the company.

And SharePoint permissions can be set up to ensure that sensitive information can only be accessed by those who have the appropriate authority.

Document Management is one of SharePoint's key areas of strength. Out of the box functionality and minimal set up can offer small businesses effective solutions of business critical issues in this area.

You might choose to use a SharePoint Document Library for storing and managing:

- Customer and Staff Records
- Quotations and Proposals
- Invoices
- Reports
- Contracts and Supplier Agreements

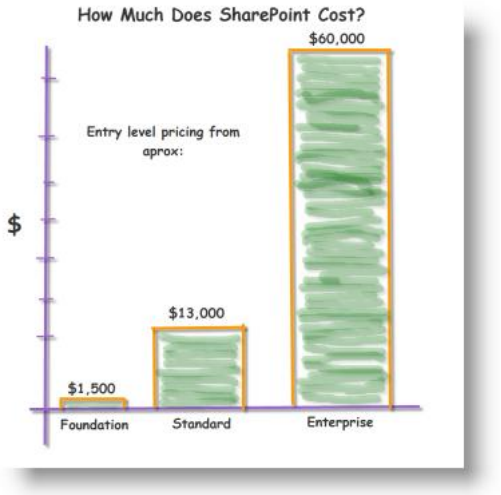
Further Reading

For more ideas on how you might use SharePoint in the real world please refer to our paper on driving SharePoint End User Adoption.

Or for an example of the kind of business application that you could build and maintain yourself as a non-technical SharePoint user, look at the SharePoint Staff Vacation Planner Toolkit.

What are the costs likely to be?

There are those who will suggest that for some small businesses SharePoint can offer a “free” solution: this is not the case and all such claims should be treated with caution.



SharePoint is bundled free with Windows Small Business Server (c$1500), which gives you a comprehensive multi-purpose solution at a reasonable price. It is also available with most Microsoft server licenses.

The fact that SharePoint services come ready-packaged with other Microsoft solutions leads many SMB’s to either ignore the ‘free’ product or to start using it without thinking about what they really need it to do for them or planning a business strategy around it.

Though the initial SharePoint Foundation License may appear to be “Free” careful thought should be given to the other costs that you may incur when using SharePoint.

Additional Software Licenses

SharePoint is a server product, so the first thing you need to bear in mind is that in addition to your SharePoint server license, you will also need Client Access Licenses (CAL’s). You will need one CAL for each person, or each machine that you want to have access to SharePoint. Small Business Server comes with 5 CAL’s as part of the package. These start at $49 per person/device and can cost as much as $150 each, depending on which level of SharePoint you are using.

This article offers a further breakdown of the costs of SharePoint software licensing:

[How Much Does SharePoint Cost?]

Customization and add-ons

Though SharePoint offers plenty of out of the box functionality, where organizations become heavily reliant on SharePoint there is a good chance that at some point they will look at customization, or the purchase of 3rd party add-ons, in order to get an exact fit between functionality and business processes.

Microsoft has always positioned SharePoint as a “platform” providing tools for custom development and encouraging 3rd party add-ons to extend out of the box functionality. Indeed, around half of all organizations who deploy SharePoint have invested in some custom development or 3rd party tools. One industry report states:

> ***A majority of 58% have been able to do most of the things they needed with SharePoint. 39% have used customization to meet their needs, and 28% have added third-party applications. 27% felt there were considerable shortcomings in some or all areas.***
>
> ***(Ref, AIIM Industry Watch, SharePoint strategies and experiences, July 2010)***

Once you start to look at customization and add-ons costs can quickly mount up.

Shrink wrapped 3rd party add ons which add functionality in a particular area like alerts and reminders, or reporting, can be quite cost effective, starting at just a few hundred dollars.

Commissioning a custom development project can give you a solution that is tailor-made for your business. However, for the business that lacks experience in commissioning IT projects the experience may become costly and frustrating.

HUMAN RESOURCES: TIME AND SKILLS

Though SharePoint can be (and in many smaller organizations is) set up and run by business users with little or no IT experience, there is still a learning curve, and a time commitment to be factored into the equation.

In smaller organizations most staff already wear many hats – or "multi-task". Are you able to identify an individual or group who are willing and able to take on the task of setting up and running SharePoint?

Can these extra responsibilities be absorbed by your existing team, or will additional resource be required?

Whilst it is unlikely that an SMB running a fairly standard SharePoint deployment is going to need on-going, in house SharePoint resource, it may be that you would wish to consider investing in some training or consultancy at the initial set-up stage.

If, like many SMB's your IT support is outsourced, it will also be worth ascertaining what level of SharePoint experience your support company has.

What are the alternatives?

For the SMB looking to enhance their IT infrastructure in-house hosted SharePoint is just one of the options available.

In this section we will look at some of the alternatives you might want to consider when deciding which is the right route for your organization.

SHAREPOINT HOSTED SERVICES

Almost every software solution has a "cloud" based alternative these days, and SharePoint is no exception. Microsoft and other providers offer hosted SharePoint solutions that may be attractive in terms capital investment and set-up and maintenance investment.

By opting for SharePoint on-line, through Microsoft or another provider you avoid the need to invest in your own servers and the need to hire staff to implement or manage the solution for you, provided that you will not require major customization work and if the limited SharePoint services will be sufficient to meet your business needs.

Pro's and Con's

As an SMB you would be looking at working with a standard SharePoint se-up in a multi-tenancy environment.

All aspects of the deployment are managed for you, thus minimizing your investment in time. In terms of cost, these solutions are usually charged on a "pay as you go" monthly basis. So there is little or no initial capital outlay or set up cost. This may appear attractive at the outset, but it will be worth doing some quick calculations to ascertain when the monthly cost of SharePoint online will have passed the costs of hosting your own.

Another major advantage of the on-line solution is the opportunities it offers for remote working. As the solution is on-line it can be accessed from anywhere. For the SMB with remote workers this may offer an attractive alternative to setting up an effective internal VPN.

The flip side of this is that you will be working with somewhat limited functionality. Because you are likely to be operating in a multi-tenanted environment there will also be limits on your flexibility. Most hosting providers will not accept 3rd party add-ons and options for customization may be limited.

The other major consideration, especially for those working in a heavily regulated environment, is security. In a cloud based scenario you have very little control over the security of your data, and some industry regulators will simply rule this out as an option.

GOOGLE APPS/DOCS

For some types of SMB Google Apps may offer an attractive alternative to SharePoint.

Google Apps is a suite of online productivity and collaboration applications developed and delivered by Google.

The offering centers around the email application, Gmail or Google Mail – which is the entry point to the suite for many users. It also offers instant messaging, calendars, document creation, storage and management and intranet and website facilities.

Pro's and Con's

The initial attraction of Google Apps is often the price: a genuine "free" option does exist, but most businesses choose to go for the "premium" solution at $50 per user per year. This represents s a huge saving over SharePoint and most other solutions on the market.

Advantages go beyond this though. Google Apps was developed as an on-line solution, this is how it was designed to work, so the online offering is in no way a compromise and both storage and speed and all the "Google Power" you would expect behind them.

It is also a much less structured and formal solution. Permissions, authorization, structures and controls are all a lot less cumbersome than they can be in SharePoint. Particularly, sharing content with individuals or groups outside of your organization can be much easier with Google Apps than it is with SharePoint. For certain types of SMB's these may be attractive issues.

For Google App the features that are positives for some users are going to be the negatives for others. It is a purely on-line solution – there is no off-line working capability and this may present problems in situations where internet access is an issue.

Equally, the fluidity and flexibility of the solution – the lack of imposed structures and controls and the ease with which content can be shared outside of the organization will be a distinct disadvantage in some situations.

And of course since this is a purely on-line solution all of the usual security concerns still apply.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES

Besides Google Apps there are a host of other alternatives to SharePoint for the SMB. Which you choose to look at would largely depend on what area of your infrastructure you were most focused on improving.

Applications from 37Signals could be worth considering for those looking to improve project and contact management, whilst Salesforce offers web-based CRM and collaboration features.

There are a wide number of options and almost all start from a particular business process area: customer relationship management. This may be an advantage for those SMB's looking to focus on a particular area, but for organizations looking all round IT infrastructure and Business Process improvement few applications can match the broad based functionality and flexibility of SharePoint.

Some of the other alternatives you might want to consider, depending on your business structure and priorities, include:

Zoho

Hyper Office

Box.net

Those of you looking at alternatives might find the comparisons on this site useful:

http://sharepointalternative.com/

Conclusion – Is SharePoint Right for my business?

Is SharePoint right for you as a Small Business?

In this paper we have established that whether or not SharePoint can add value for your organization is not so much about the size of your operations as about the nature of your processes and your current focus for improvement.

For those currently working with Microsoft Office, Outlook and file shares SharePoint could easily deliver substantial improvements in:

- Collaborative working
- Document storage and management
- Resource Planning
- Task and Project Management
- Intranet
- And a variety of other areas.

However, despite claims that SharePoint can be yours free, this is not the case, and you will need to carefully assess what costs you are likely to incur in terms of:

- Software Licensing
- Hardware
- Training and Consultancy
- Customization and 3rd party add-ons
- Staff time.

Because many SMB's get SharePoint apparently "free", bundled with Microsoft Small Business Server, there can be a tendency to just "try it out" and see what it can do. Deploying SharePoint in this way could be a costly mistake. A failure to plan could lead to a confusion of data, or to a situation where the organization finds itself investing in software, consultancy or development almost by default, without ever having taken the time to thoroughly assess whether SharePoint offers a solution which is a good fit for business needs.

For a successful deployment a well thought through governance plan is needed. Read more on SharePoint Governance here.

It is only when you have established the potential benefits for your organization and weighed up the likely costs that you will be able to make an informed decision as to whether SharePoint can add real value for your organization.