



White Paper Information Management Best Practice

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It is very easy to create a document library in SharePoint, add some metadata (fields of information) and a workflow (a process to route a document from one person to another at a specific time e.g., to approve a document).

However, anyone doing this in the real world soon faces dilemmas: “Should a document be routed in parallel or serially?” “What metadata fields should we use and how should we best structure them?” “How do we apply security when we have different projects with different team members?” “Should we have one large document library, or use smaller one”?

In the past people didn’t really know what to do for the best and just set them up based on the whim of the application developer concerned. This will lead to massive downstream problems. Systems didn’t make sense to users and future expansion of the system was hamstrung by early design decisions.

Unfortunately, this still happens – usually when local IT departments unleash the product via application developers with no previous experience of content management projects.

These days we know a lot more. We have a body of ‘best practice’ to draw upon and can configure SharePoint with much more confidence. We know what works and what doesn’t. This means we can implement SharePoint into companies in a more generic way, without having to be too concerned with the specific feature requests from different departments which have traditionally added huge amounts of time to projects.

Best practice means for the customer that they will manage documents and content properly. For example, revision control where incremental drafts are minor versions and approved documents are major versions and where retention policies are applied to different types of documents and templates used.

As an example, when a technologist gets their hands on SharePoint and sets it up for document management they face many choices; do we use version control? Do we have major and minor versions or just major versions? What metadata should we apply? What workflows should we set up and how do we apply them since different departments have different requirements.

Who answers these questions? The IT department doesn’t know the business well enough to answer and because the business hasn’t used SharePoint before they cannot answer either.

There are best practice books available but these fail to answer many of these questions.

In actual fact, best practice is really drawn from research and from experience of working in large corporate roll-outs that have run for many years and have had to (from painful experience) work out what works best and in what circumstances.

Case Study – Rail Transport Company

“A major, London based transport company had implemented a document management system a few years ago which cost a lot of money, but had failed to be used on anything more than a few users.

The company had seen a demo of a new version of the system and thought the new “ease of use” would be the deciding factor in getting the system adopted.

I was asked to assist with the upgrade.

It was quickly evident, however, that the upgrade in itself was destined to the failure of the previous project. The underlying functionality bore no resemblance to “best practice”. Therefore, whilst the new interface might be cleaner for users, they would still be using it in a way that made little sense to them. They’d have to fill in too many meaningless attributes when creating documents, the workflows were too complex, version control was being used on documents that just didn’t need it, and the terminology used was confusing. Moreover, the application developers would have to produce many different variants of document lifecycles, and write customizations that had little value.

The main focus of my work was then to teach the company best practice. After that, their developers were able to get on and be self-sufficient with the project.”

Dave Walmsley – NetMonkeys’ Practice Manager

NetMonkeys has a practice manual which lays out best practice both from a usage point of view and a technology point of view.

This best practice is drawn from bodies such as “Dublin Core” .industry research, and work undertaken with other partners and major customers.

Best Practice is always introduced and explained to customers, including the experiences of other companies. This is often a very crucial moment. Prior to this, customers often have requirements based upon life without a content management system!

Therefore, customers can be assured that all projects undertaken by us will be robust, scalable, and in line with how other world-class organizations are managing information.

What Does Best Practice Mean in Practice?

Often, the traditional way of thinking about IT systems that can impact the whole company means going from one department to the next, asking them for their requirements and configuring workflows, document attributes lifecycles, security and other aspects to their specific requirements.

Unfortunately, this leads to many systems within a system.

The best practice way is to appreciate that there is much more to be gained by having all employees working in a standard way, since information crosses departmental boundaries.

This means building in the best practice components. A document only ever lives in the states of Draft, In Review, Approved and Withdrawn.

There are only two standard workflows; one for review of content, one for approval. These workflows apply to all content.

And so on with attribution of documents, security, design of the user interface, structure of libraries and folders etc.

That, of course, is the theory. There always will be some local variances. Again, there is a best practice way of incorporating these in a way that doesn’t compromise the rest of the system.

There is also a best practice way of conducting a project, which involves prototyping at the right time so that customers can visualize the system before it is built, and a “best practice” way of writing functional specifications and testing.

Best Practice on its own will not guarantee success, but history has shown how vital a component it is