SHAREPOINT AS A DMS OR DISRUPT THE DMS

BY JOE DAVIS

Most legal technology discussions are focused on the future, but the "Disrupt the DMS" session at ILTACON 2021 started by looking back.

Microsoft announced Matter Center at ILTACON 2014 as middleware that would allow SharePoint to be used as a document management system. Some saw this as the beginning of the end for the incumbent DMS vendors while others remained sceptical. In a surprise move, Microsoft released the Matter Center code as open source software toward the end of 2015, effectively signalling that they planned no further development of the product internally. Many at the time assumed that this was the end of the

"SharePoint as a DMS" discussion, and the traditional DMS still lives on today in law firms and corporate legal departments.

Those who thought the discussion was over in 2015 may be surprised at the number of in-person and online attendees at the "Disrupt the DMS" session. Changes in the landscape are causing the legal world to reconsider how they think about documents, and some are finding that not only is SharePoint a viable option, it is an increasingly attractive one.

Not Rocket Science
"Here's the truth – document management is not rocket science," says Keith Vallely, Vice President and Senior Consultant for Epona USA, a vendor in the "SharePoint as a DMS" space. "Originally it was a file share with

some folders, and you put documents in it. That's what was called 'organizing documents.' It got a little more sophisticated when metadata, versioning, security and search were added, and then it was called 'managing documents.' No matter how much more complicated we make it, it's still basically what it was originally, and that goes all the way back to the '90s. It never was rocket science, it's still not rocket science, and it won't be rocket science in 5 more years."

"At the end of the day," says Tim Brady, CEO of Colligo, a solution provider offering content management add-ons for Microsoft 365, "people want to store their critical documents and business records in a central location so they have one single source of truth, they want it to be secure, they want it to be organized so they can find what they're looking for. Legal has always been in our customer base, but it's really been the pandemic that accelerated that. There have been a lot of companies moving to Microsoft 365, but also re-evaluating the on-prem solutions they have, saying 'wait a minute, I'm paying half a million bucks for this thing over here, but I already have SharePoint. What can I do with SharePoint?' We've seen this in the legal vertical in particular."

Everybody has a different set of information that they would like to see

Why Make the Move?
For Ryan Helmer, IT Manager at Greene Espel in Minneapolis, the reason for leading his firm's move to SharePoint as a DMS was simple: "We wanted a better DMS for our complex litigation matters," he says. "The one that we had just didn't scale well in terms of managing documents – and when we looked at some of the flexibility that SharePoint has, it became apparent just how limited [our previous] system was."

Helmer is quick to point out that the switch required a lot of planning. "Those discussions took a while," he says.

"But I think it was good for the firm, because we started to understand as we talked with each other – attorneys and paralegals and assistants – everybody has a different set of information that they would like to see, and not everybody realized the challenges that [others] were dealing with, so it was a good thing for our firm."

Chad Ergun, CIO of Denver-based Davis Graham & Stubbs, also saw that his firm's needs were not aligned with their existing DMS. With contract renewals on the horizon, he says "we decided that the future will be in the clouds for us."

Once Ergun's firm decided to move their documents into SharePoint Online, they needed to ensure that their clients were onboard with this change. "Because at the end of the day, 90% of the data we have is handed over to us by the client," he says. Ergun used the security audits the firm was regularly completing for its clients as a guide, asking, "what if our DMS was in the cloud?" when reviewing hundreds of questions. "We were very confident when we started that we could convince the clients based on the certifications, regulations, and [level of] compliance that Microsoft was giving us."

Security was also a factor in Green Espel's decision. "Having Microsoft take on some of that burden" made completing routine security audits much simpler, Helmer says. "They make it pretty easy to meet security and compliance goals. The platform that you're buying into has such robust security capabilities that we just didn't have before. Some of those things were add-ons with our previous platform where you'd have to go to a third-party, but that's all built into the platform now." "Cost is always a factor, of course," Helmer adds. "Our old DMS was not particularly expensive for us, but it was going to get expensive. So [cost] was a consideration, but it was not the driving consideration that drove us to SharePoint."

Ergun's cost analysis took into account what it would cost to remain compliant if he kept his DMS in his firm's data center as well as the costs to go SharePoint Online. "People don't realize you still have certain licensing costs. There's a storage cost. Microsoft is nice and a great company, [but] they're not going to give you space for free," he says with a smile before noting that each user license comes with a terabyte of OneDrive storage that can be used for documents. "I think between the operational costs,

the initial costs, the licensing and usage, in 3-5 years our model saved us somewhere around 50-70% compared to going with a cloud-based [traditional DMS] provider.

Buy vs. Build

Once Ergun and Helmer's firms made the decision to transition to a SharePoint-based DMS, they needed to address a variety of implementation questions and issues. Helmer remembers dealing with questions like "Well, it's Microsoft and it's their platform on the back end, so why can't we just save from Word into SharePoint?" He also cites Outlook as a friction point, noting that natively "there's really no functional integration with SharePoint there. So if you want to do any kind of email management, you're going to buy something." Both firms opted for solutions from Epona. "If you want to save from Word and PowerPoint and Excel and have it work like a legal DMS, that [functionality] also comes with Epona's add-in. That's one critical component to it.

"The other component that is really important is how you provision matters in the system," Helmer continues. Epona's software facilitates this process. "As we get new matters in from our

accounting system, then it builds those in SharePoint. There's a lot of considerations about how to do that, and I think there's a consensus about how to do that correctly. A third piece of what they offer isn't really a product; it's more of the consulting side, like 'we've been here, we've done this, let us tell you how to do this so you don't paint yourself in the corner and hate your life.'"

Despite Ergun's firm and IT group being much larger than Helmer's, Ergun also opted to purchase a solution rather than develop its own. "If I had the chance again, regardless of the firm size, I would definitely buy rather than build," he says. "Because you're not thinking about just the DMS. The DMS has add-ons and integrations with other products that we use, and those have to be also handled well."

Working together

A DMS is only as good as the applications with which it integrates. Fortunately, not only does SharePoint integrate well with other Microsoft tools (especially with the help of some third party add-ins), it also offers some features not found in other document management systems. Helmer cites co-authoring as one such feature. "We defaulted to every document [being]

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co-authored by default. You open it, and you're co-authoring. And what tells me that this is a killer feature is that our attorneys, four months after we rolled this out, were having some problems with co-authoring on a document, and I suggested that maybe we need to not co-author on this document. They we were taken aback, and they said 'Well, we can't do that, we rely on that!'" Helmer was amazed that in just four short months, his attorneys had gone from not being able to co-author documents to being completely dependent on having multiple people simultaneously edit a document. "I think after your attorneys get used to co-authoring, they won't accept anything [else]."

One application that has caught on like wildfire during the pandemic is Microsoft Teams. Colligo's Brady points out that "the legal industry has been slower to adopt Teams than many of the other organizations we work with. That being said, it has really inflected over the year, so even the ones that aren't using Teams from a provisioned content-sharing standpoint are still using it for chat and communicating with colleagues. I think it's only a matter of time before those firms that are the holdouts still using Teams but in a nascent way convert over to using it as their content sharing and collaboration platform as well. It's a rapid ascension in Teams adoption, and I think that's an indicator of where the industry is going."

Teams leverages SharePoint Online as its back end, so including documents on that platform allows for integration into Microsoft's emerging technologies. One recent announcement about a feature called Viva Topics has some law firms particularly interested. Richard Harbridge, CTO of 2toLead, a consulting company focusing on Microsoft 365 solutions explains, "let's say I'm in my Teams experience, and I get an instant message from someone. They're mentioning a

specific client or matter, or maybe a term or acronym that I'm not familiar with. The Topics functionality recognizes that term and hyperlinks it to a dedicated [SharePoint] page for it which has been auto generated - not manually created." Hovering over the link shows a preview of the data without leaving the initial application. "That works in Outlook too, which is a huge win for law firms," Harbridge adds.

The Topics page is compiled by mining the data from documents, and the system can also help to identify subject matter experts based on who contributed to those documents. The key in this scenario is that the engines that create Topics pages need to have access to the documents – which is one more reason to house the documents in SharePoint Online.

Harbridge notes that there are still some IT groups who have been slow to adopt cloud-based technology such as SharePoint Online. "I'm going to be really frank," he says. "The reasons for that are not valid. I'm involved in those conversations all the time and for every one of those customers that said, 'We're not going to do it,' six months later, they say, 'We're going to do it.' I ask, 'What changed?' but nothing really changed. It's just certain people in the organization have seen their power and influence wane because they keep making the wrong call. And cloud is the way of the future."

It's not a platform, it's a process

Epona's Valelly believes that changes in the technology and the way lawyers work in a post-Covid world have caused the legal world to look at document management differently. "More and more what's happening is that there is a recognition that document management is not a platform, it's a process," he says, and that process may be best served by technology that tightly integrates documents rather than keeping them in a separate silo. While a firm's DMS has long been the cornerstone of its technology stack, they are now folding that functionality into SharePoint. "It's not about capability – all the capability is there. It's not about security – you're more secure. It's not about money – you're going to save your firm money. Every law firm out there that has ever clicked the Microsoft 365 waffle and has ever wondered, 'Why shouldn't we take advantage of everything there?' has asked the right question. Now they just need to have the courage of their convictions. It's just that simple."

Perhaps in a few years, an ILTACON session will look back at 2021 as the beginning of the shift to SharePoint as a DMS.

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