
SharePoint Governance: Is Semantic Technology the Answer?

“Microsoft SharePoint,” one European information technology professional told me on a Skype call last week, “is the new MS DOS. And much of governance is involved in semantics.”

“Semantics?” I said. I had no data at my fingertips to dispute him. I knew that last year, a Microsoft Gold Certified partner shared with me that SharePoint had more than 100 million licensees. If my informant was right about semantics, SharePoint may be the biggest windfall to hit indexing since the invention of the scroll.

I do know that one of my employers sent me and dozens of others to classes in MS DOS when the PC revolution kicked in. I received an email alerting me to a two day class in SharePoint governance. I was confused about the explanation of the class. Do you know what “SPGov + IA” means? I did not. I navigated to a site called SPGovia.com and learned that the acronym was a distillation of SharePoint Governance & Information Architecture. <http://spgovia.com/>. I started to get a headache.

With SharePoint’s significant market saturation comes a number of challenges. These range from training partners, resellers, and users about SharePoint and its features. When a system sprawls across an organization, there is the challenge of making certain that documents are findable, share certain common indexing, and that a user can locate a specific document. Security can also poke its nose into large distributed systems. Access control lists work quite well when two conditions are met. The first is that the ACL is current, accurate, and propagated across the distributed network. The second is that users keep their password someplace other than a sticky note in the corner of their cubicle. A further challenge is making certain that the versions of a document are distinct and accessible. Few experiences match the collision of a deadline and four or five documents that are almost identical. The “almost” is what makes healthy tummies go sour.

Coping with these and related content challenges has become a modish consulting business. A few definitions or swipes at definitions may be helpful. First, what *is* SharePoint. The MS DOS quip, while thought provoking, suggests market dominance, not functionality. At Microsoft’s SharePoint 2010 site, this definition appears <http://sharepoint.microsoft.com/en-us/Pages/default.aspx>

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 main point is sharing information. The example features collaboration or what Microsoft calls “work[ing] together”. The definition also calls attention to SharePoint as a system for managing and publishing documents.

Fair enough. SharePoint is a content management system and it contains sharing and collaborating features. Wikipedia comes at SharePoint a different way; for example, the SharePoint article says that SharePoint is a “technology that allows a company to host Intranet Web page.” Other definitions exist, adding nuances such as centralized, password protected spaces and a platform on which to implement business processes.

The validity of the comparison with MS DOS is becoming clearer to me. SharePoint supports a number of information-centric applications and the different types of work users do with information. MS DOS supported many types of programs for a personal computer. SharePoint, it seems, supports many different types of information applications for an organization.

The notion of governance, therefore, is important. The fact that a widely-used enterprise software system requires governance is interesting. I had heard about a non-profit group called SharePoint Governance <http://www.sharepointgovernance.org/default.aspx>. The organization focuses on issues related to SharePoint “growing pains.”

We need a second definition. Governance, according to Google, is a word that takes meaning from its context. SharePoint is an application and a platform. There is a governance for linguistics, one for non-profit organizations, one for stakeholders, and one for services oriented architecture. After reading each of the definitions for governance, the one crafted by SOA4All <http://www.soa4all.eu/glossary.html> struck me as appropriate for SharePoint; namely: “A concept used for activities related to exercising control over services in an SOA [services oriented architecture].”

What I found interesting was the keen interest in “governing” SharePoint. Like one of the countries roiled by turmoil, SharePoint appears to require the equivalent of NATO to help keep the software, the content, and the users under control. Some of the challenges SharePoint licensees face are revealed in the top rated technical papers available from the SharePointGovernance.org Web site. At the top of the list is “A Guide to Moving SharePoint Content Out of SQL” by Andrew Chapman. The document is nine pages in length and contains a wealth of information about the technical issues associated with storing binary large objects in Microsoft SQL Server. The solution to the challenge is to move the content out of SQL Server to a file system. The phrase “file system” refers to putting individual files into a directory and file structure. The other approach is to stuff the SharePoint content into an archive, essentially a giant storage device. The third approach is to move the SharePoint content to a different enterprise content management system. On the surface, the idea seems quite straightforward, easier perhaps than dumping everything into a big storage device or transforming structured information into unstructured information and copying the files into directories. You can download this white paper at <http://goo.gl/krhm4>.

After reading the white paper, a number of questions occurred to me. The obvious one, “Why does a licensee need to move content out of a system designed to manage content?” remains unanswered.

I poked around for some information about what appears to be a significant need for “governance.”

I did some investigation and found the ideas in “Governance—What Does It Mean for You?” stimulating. You can locate this article at <http://goo.gl/3eobY>. Governance, in general, touches four different aspects of SharePoint. But the salient idea is that governance helps a SharePoint user “get from the Present State (unhappy place) to the Future State (happy place). The implementation of governance involved a consulting project that focuses on understanding the goals of the system, assisting with organizational change, delivering measurable business objectives, and maximizing the value of the client’s SharePoint investment. In short, SharePoint governance boils down to figuring out what the system should do and then making the system deliver functions that meet these objectives. You can read the method the author of “Governance—What Does It Mean for You?” has developed at <http://goo.gl/tMpOk>.

I did some research and located a number of useful articles, each providing predominantly business planning suggestions and recommendations for SharePoint governance. Among the rather large set I gathered, I found these particularly useful:

“SharePoint Governance for Site Owners” <http://goo.gl/fJ9Ld>. This essay explains the importance of metadata, what I call “indexing”. The main idea is that an indexing policy and consistent term assignment are useful. This was an angle on governance the more formal definitions did not present.

“SharePoint Governance Checklist Guide” <http://goo.gl/dKVxy>. This is a Microsoft document originally prepared for SharePoint Server 2007. I thought that the series of checklists for information architectures, enterprise search, project and operational management, development and configuration, and a half dozen other topics were useful. The tips were of varying degrees of usefulness. I would urge you to download a copy of this document before moving too far with your SharePoint project.

“What Is a SharePoint Governance Plan?” <http://goo.gl/S831i>. Originally written in 2007, this 700 word article packs a punch. In a few words, the scope of issues one must consider with regard to SharePoint governance is clearly presented.

What is evident to me is that SharePoint and governance are the digital equivalent of peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, or any other pair welded into one’s consciousness. SharePoint requires governance. This basic observation is not too surprising in the enterprise software and application market, however, many products are delivered as tools or individual components. The licensee must shape the raw material into a solution that meets the quite

particular requirements of an organization. The shadow of SharePoint embraces the idea that SharePoint requires governance; that is, SharePoint can be a handful.

The second learning I carried from my exploration of SharePoint is that semantic technology as well as basic indexing are woven through SharePoint's various functions. A number of specialized software companies focus on indexing SharePoint content, identifying entities in SharePoint documents, and adding bells and whistles to the built-in SharePoint document processing services. Companies delivering semantic payloads include Concept Searching, Smartlogic, SurfRay, and Access Innovations to name four with quite advanced text processing tools for unstructured information. However, SharePoint tools are available from giants like EMC and Fujitsu to somewhat smaller firms such as Idera and K2. A thriving ecosystem of vendors has emerged to assist with this facet of SharePoint governance.

A third take away is that SharePoint is finding its way into a great many organizations. Based on my survey of the governance literature, many of these organizations find themselves struggling with what I call the "management surprise." SharePoint has, it seems to be, been deployed without much understanding of what happens when content is stuffed into SharePoint. Most of the system administrators are not specialists in semantic content analysis, controlled term development and usage, and editorial procedures. Once SharePoint is available, the need for these information basics increases dramatically.

The bottom line is that SharePoint governance is becoming a distinct line of business, and the phrase "SharePoint governance" has quite particular meanings. SharePoint is not MS DOS, as my European colleague posited. SharePoint is a microcosm of an information's knowledge. The buzzword "governance" is little more than a quite old and difficult problem of managing the information, tacit knowledge, and informal communications that give life to an organization.

Semantic methods are going to be an important part of SharePoint governance. But semantics will not address some of the more difficult challenges arising from work flows used to create and access information, ensuring speedy and comprehensive system performance, and enforcing the essential security and regulatory functions which organizations must observe and then enforce consistently.

How important will SharePoint be? I think it may well be one of the most significant enterprise software platforms in the foreseeable future. Whether delivered from on premises servers, from the cloud, or from a set up that combines the two approaches, SharePoint will touch hundreds of millions of users.

SharePoint governance may be the response to a natural consequence of deploying a knowledge and information platform as advanced as Microsoft SharePoint. without figuring out how to tag the information in an appropriate way.

This is good news for the semantic and metatagging consultants. And it is good news for Microsoft. For the users, I am not so sure. Francis Ford Coppola allegedly said, “Anything you build on a large scale or with intense passion invites chaos.”

Stephen E Arnold, April xx, 2011

Mr. Arnold is a consultant. More information about his practice is available at www.arnoldit.com and in his Web log at www.arnoldit.com/wordpress.