

For many years file management has been neglected, to the point where document mismanagement may take up as much as 60 per cent of an office worker's time. This situation needs to be addressed and can be, using advanced file management software.

Next generation file management

During the past five years most companies' IT priorities have included implementing an ERP system, deploying a messaging architecture, setting up an intranet and defining an e-commerce strategy. Why? Because they increase employee productivity and drive sales growth. However, there is one technology that your users interact with more than any other – an integral part of every user's computing experience but that has not been a top priority for anyone in over ten years – file management.

This venerable utility enjoyed its heyday in the late 1980s in the DOS days of Xtree. Today, it is embodied by the ubiquitous Windows Explorer, which performs file management for the desktop, the LAN and the WAN. Despite its widespread use, file management technology has become outmoded in today's networked and mobile-computing environment.

The Gartner Group recently reported that document mismanagement, including electronic files, claims 40 to 60 per cent of office workers' time, 20 to 45 per cent of labour costs and 12 to 15 per cent of corporate revenue. Common document management problems include hunting for lost files, using files with out-of-date information, recreating files that already exist or have been deleted, duplicating files in different locations, insufficient collaboration and poor coordination of review and approval cycles.

A modern file management system needs to:

- Provide extensive information about each file
- Support compound documents that include multiple files
- Control multiple versions of documents
- Promote collaboration among editors
- Include a comprehensive review and approval process
- Be capable of logging every action performed on every file
- Support simple and advanced keyword search
- Possess independent, multi-level security

- Be accessible from a web browser
- Provide encryption for file transfers across the Internet

Windows Explorer clearly fails to meet these requirements. So what does? For over a decade, document management systems have been presented as the way to tame document chaos. Indeed, the features found in a modern document management system address many of the needs of the modern computer user. However, despite their strengths, document management systems are best used to automate specific line-of-business documentation processes. Users looking to use ordinary document-management software for general file management will be disappointed by its rigid approach and burdensome administration – and might be shocked by its high price.

By the time you read this, Windows 2000 should be available, alongside it, the previously released Office 2000 and the promise of Exchange 2000 soon after. Combined with SQL Server and IIS, these Microsoft tools offer the possibility of better file management but users must be willing to pay a very high price. First they will need to purchase licenses for all of these tools. Second they will have to set up the tools and get them to work together. Third they must add some key features such as review and approval workflow and encryption and lastly, they will need to commit 100 per cent to the Microsoft platform.

Advanced file management applications are a far more manageable and effective solution. Such applications combine the ease of use of traditional file management utilities with the rich functionality of document management systems. They are designed from the ground up, to utilise the Internet, support mobile workforces and integrate with your existing technology. So when prioritising your information technology projects this year, consider an advanced file management system to dramatically increase the productivity of your computer users. ■

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- Productivity

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