

Taking SharePoint to another level—ICS Solutions' ShareWorkz

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For those of you who are Microsoft watchers or users, you will know that Microsoft, this year, has been re-emphasizing its SharePoint portal server. One of the major UK SIs providing support for SharePoint is ICS Solutions, based in Basingstoke in Hampshire.



ICS are some 20 years old and hold 5 Microsoft Gold competencies. ICS have not only helped other companies implement SharePoint but they have built a part of their business around a SharePoint Portal, called DreamTeam Portal, that provides a resourcing source for specialist Microsoft contractors. At the beginning of August 2007, I went to a public seminar held at Microsoft UK in Reading to hear ICS talk about a new business avenue—ICS acting as an ISV for a SharePoint based product called ShareWorkz.

ICS developed ShareWorkz based on their experience of working with SharePoint and their close relationship with analyst house Nielson Norman. The first version of ShareWorkz was released in April of 2006 with version 2.1 coming out in December of 2006, Version 3 was released in May 2007 and version 4.0 is expected at the end of the year. ICS have sunk some £1.3m in developing the product. ShareWorkz overcomes many of the problems associated with traditional portal developments. So what do you get out of the box?

Instant Creator

Well firstly, ShareWorkz provides Instant Creator which produces a working solution in less than one hour. To prove this, Seb Matthews, ICS Business Development Manager for ShareWorkz, demonstrated to the audience the building of a simple internet in 14 minutes 51 seconds. Very impressive! Into an Excel spreadsheet, information about 6 people was added and a department structure was documented. By pressing a button the process was started of generating the XML to create the portal. The user interface has the look and feel of Microsoft Outlook/Microsoft CRM. ShareWorkz also implements the approach of Microsoft Rights Management Server, so that users are only shown what they can do. When you compare the capabilities of the Creator and the time taken to a cost of £150k over 14 months to produce an average successful internet portal, then this facility on its own looks really good value.

Intranet Content Publishing

Efficient corporate communication can often represent a huge challenge. Most organisations recognise the importance of information sharing, but many lack the ability to make information easily available. ShareWorkz provides an Internet Content Publishing facility that allows an organisation to have a central point for the publishing and sharing of information. "RAD", described by Matthews as designed along the lines of Microsoft Word, provides a recognizable content capture/input mechanism. The product supports the use of user-definable and extendable template page layouts. There is also a workflow approval

system based on Microsoft Workflow Framework. There are also tools that enable existing web sites to be brought under ShareWorkz control.

Document Management and Collaboration

Nielson Norman research has shown that internet users can waste an hour or so a day with poorly designed sites, because they can't find what they are looking for. ICS have therefore ensured that ShareWorkz provides a document storage and collaboration solution which has user-defined work spaces (called WorkzSpaces). The product supports not one tagging mechanism but two. The first is dynamic and is based on the business entities such as Customers, Projects and Suppliers. The second is a user-defined mechanism that allows personalised classifications to be built. There is a Google-like search engine called "Multi-Finder". In the demonstration, we were shown ShareWorkz working with Microsoft Dynamics CRM, where the latter set up the dynamic tagging. We were also shown ShareWorkz working with Microsoft Office in order to help users find the right place to store a document. One of the real good things that was demonstrated was that users can be prompted to tag documents when they go to store them.

Project and Team Collaboration

Users can create their own collaboration sites by selecting from pre-built templates or by building their own. The default includes support for Brief (mission and objectives), calendar and tasks. There is a mini version of Multi-Finder available for searching. ShareWorkz shows its SPS inheritance with support for version



IT Analysis

handling, “Alert Me” and checkin/checkout facilities. There is an email link that is not switched on by default, which allows the user to send a link rather a document. (This is similar to the feature in Microsoft SharePoint). Automatic creation of system-wide project tags is supported. A feature that showed ICS’ experience was the ability to send the project site to an extranet facility; even better was that the internet and extranet sites could be created and maintained at the same time! ShareWorkz uses Microsoft Exchange database search capability to pull emails into a project view. Microsoft Live Communication Server alert and presence capabilities have also been incorporated into ShareWorkz.

Instant Extranet Creator

This is what Matthews called “the killer feature of ShareWorkz”. Anyone who had gone through the process of creating extranet sites in SharePoint with all the necessary security knows how time-consuming the production of an extranet site can be. ShareWorkz provides the capability to create extranets for customers, partners and suppliers of an organisation in the same way as it supports intranets by using supplied templates or producing your own. This facility was demonstrated and Matthews was right—it certainly wowed the audience with its ease of use and facilities. One neat feature was the ability to expose shared data from internal databases.

Process Collaboration

This feature of ShareWorkz allows an organisation to view and interact with portal content by processes rather than by organisational structure. There is a library of more than 30 standard templates, such as holiday bookings and expense claims, provided. New processes can be created. For human workflow, ICS have worked with K2 (another Microsoft ISV and part of the Microsoft Business Process Alliance).

There is a link to SAP either through ODBC or through the SAP SharePoint Server interface. This integration is supported for any product that has SharePoint Server integration facility defined.

Business Collaboration

The final facility! Unlike all the other features this is not quite out of the box as it does require some configuration work to make it work, but this should be expected as what works for one organisation won’t for another. This is based around a concept called “SPOT”, meaning a Single Point Of Truth. This is all about providing a single place within an internet where users can retrieve all the known information about a given business entity—customer, project or supplier. The customisation does not involve cutting of code. Like SharePoint, there is “MySite” facility. This facility was demonstrated using the link to Microsoft Dynamics CRM. The basic CRM features were shown running through the portal. The business entities that were dynamically tagged were content, invoice, order, document and email. All the documents associated with a particular order were shown, including associated emails. Any data stored within the portal can be associated with a SPOT.

Conclusion

ShareWorkz is interesting from a number of points of view.

Firstly we have a Systems Integrator (ICS Solutions) becoming a Software Vendor (ISV). This involves an organisation in a number of changes. Developing, selling and maintaining a software solution is not the same business model as selling consultancy and services. ICS Solutions have recognised the differences and to minimise the impact have set up a separate operating division to handle ShareWorkz. They have cunningly

used the Microsoft server and user calcs model for pricing ShareWorkz, which makes it easier to understand for Microsoft users. It also makes a good marketing ploy in comparing ShareWorkz to SharePoint Server! Pricing wise at £15k for the server, I feel that ICS have chosen well—it is certainly worth this for the features that you get. The User calcs are discounted as the user number increase starting at from £70/user for 25–100 users and falling to £30/user for 1,000–3,000 users (under 25 users you pay no user calcs only the server price). There is a compulsory annual maintenance charge of 20% of total server & user licenses cost. So, make sure, if you are considering this product, that you include this cost in your ROI calculations.

ICS Solutions have a good reputation in the Microsoft partner market for their knowledge and expertise in the development of portal solutions. All this knowledge and experience seems to have been input into the design of ShareWorkz, thus making it a product that, from the demonstration that I saw, look easy to use with some real practical wiz bangs that make it so much easier, quicker and less costly to get a credible quality internet and extranet solution up and running.

If you are looking at a portal solution or looking to change your current tools, I would recommend that you take a look at ICS Solutions ShareWorkz. It may not suit some people but it certainly will allow end users to maintain and even set up sites without heavy IT involvement.

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