



Determining Your SharePoint Architecture: Centralized or Decentralized?

SharePoint 2010 offers the enterprise increased power and flexibility that more closely mirrors the ways modern teams connect and collaborate.

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An important question to answer when moving to SharePoint 2010 is how to design the new environment – centralized, with a traditional, top-down managed portal, or a decentralized environment, featuring user-driven collaboration? Many companies struggle with this decision, and for good reason: these decisions determine how the environment will be managed, how customizations will be supported, and the level of difficulty of future upgrades.

There is no right or wrong answer as to how a SharePoint environment is managed. There are business process considerations, such as how the platform is to be used, how closely it will be tied to offline activities, and whether it will be integrated with your line of business applications. There are also cultural considerations, such as the technical capability of your end users, whether or not you have “power users” who need advanced capabilities, or whether the organization can support the rollout of entirely new capabilities that could change the way that it is accustomed to doing business.

Most organizations are familiar with the centralized environments of intranet portals. Some of the benefits within a centralized SharePoint environment include consistent use of content types and workflow, reduced metadata duplication, and documented customizations that make system updates and platform upgrades much easier. This model is easier to support and train end users, manage business processes, control information policies, and provide metrics and key performance indicators. It is also in better alignment with most traditional enterprise content management (ECM) platforms, making migration from these legacy systems to SharePoint easier.

But there are downsides to the centralized model: it takes a lot of design and planning, requires more upfront work and maintenance, an increased reliance on governance and formal change control boards, and difficulty managing across site collections and portals.

Most SharePoint end users prefer a more decentralized environment where they can control when and how they collaborate. From an administrative standpoint, there are definite advantages, such as little or no planning, very little upfront effort to deploy,

and low time/cost to train end users. With decreased emphasis on taxonomy and business process management, most decentralized systems work across site collections and portals. These systems more closely mirror the consumer-based collaboration platforms users are accustomed to using, such as social networks and microblogging sites.

The downsides to this approach are that they decrease consistency, increase metadata duplication, and make taxonomy management complex. Decentralized environments are also hard to update, to support and train on, to manage information policies, and to upgrade.

As companies contemplate the level of control and proactive governance to exert over their SharePoint environments, here are some things to consider:

- **Platform scope**

What are you trying to accomplish? Are the solutions you are trying to build or surface within SharePoint broadly used (requiring central administration) or local (small teams need to build and control their solutions)? What can logically be centralized to give the right level of control to the right person or team?

- **Cultural capability**

Are you set up to be able to manage SharePoint functions centrally or distributed? Just because you can build out centralized services doesn't mean it's the right thing for your organization. For example, a globally distributed organization might want to create multiple hubs. One centralized solution may not fit their unique needs. On the flip side, small regional teams may not have the expertise to manage the platform, and a centralized solution could help each team get the most out of the company's SharePoint investment.

- **Integration plans**

For many organizations, SharePoint brings more than just out-of-the-box functionality – it is also a unified platform through which other tools and systems are surfaced or accessed. This goes back to understanding the scope of your environment, and what you are trying to achieve for the business. How these other applications are used, and by whom, may determine how centralized or decentralized other SharePoint features will need to be.

- **Centralized services**

One of the more powerful architectural differences between SharePoint 2010 and older versions is the ability to utilize the various out-of-the-box centralized service applications (Managed Metadata Service, Access Services, Visio Graphics Service, etc), as well as the ability to build your own service applications. How you build these, how they should be managed, and which users should have access all depend on your scope, your integration plans, and the corporate or regional capabilities of your teams.

One of the primary benefits of SharePoint 2010 as a platform is the use of these service applications. By deploying shared services at the enterprise level, companies can utilize the flexibility and collaborative benefits of the decentralized model – allow-

ing end users to collaborate organically while still maintaining some degree of control over taxonomy and metadata, source data, InfoPath forms, and other critical business processes. Sites and site collections can consume these services, as needed, but retain local control over every other aspect of their environments.

This is not an exhaustive list, of course, but should help you to move in the right direction. There still remain administrative impacts, such as the need to define roles and service owners, and the need to define your governance model for your platform – but overall, SharePoint 2010 offers the enterprise increased power and flexibility that more closely mirrors the ways modern teams connect and collaborate.

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