

Managing and Sharing Important Documents - in Small to Mid-Sized Businesses



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Introduction

Content sharing and document management systems deployed in the cloud can offer unique benefits for small and mid-sized businesses.

But you may well ask, “**If we don’t use on-premise document management now, why on earth would we use it in the cloud?**” Why indeed? And yet many of the most useful aspects of document management become even more useful when you use a cloud solution:

- Sharing and collaborating on documents inside *and* outside of the business
- Accessing and uploading them from anywhere and on any device
- Restricting access to specific individuals or team members
- Searching business reports and information wherever and whenever you need to - work, home or on the move
- Getting project team-sites up and running quickly without big implementation costs
- Being certain that important documents are backed-up and safe from viruses and malware
- Supports a disaster recovery plan for your data
- Lowers your infrastructure and maintenance costs

What is Document Management?

A document management system is just like a catalog or library of documents. For each document the system will detail what it’s about, who wrote it, who can see it, who *can* change it, who *has* changed it – and where and how it can be found. If documents are to be shared internally, or even more importantly, externally, then these things need to be managed and audited. In this way, a document management system helps business with regulatory compliance and annual audit requirements.

If a document arrives on paper, the easiest way to share and manage it is to scan it into a digital file. This not only reduces photocopies and physical storage space, it also “mobilizes” the document immediately, making it available to staff working remotely or at home. Many organizations also process some of their business forms, claim forms and invoices by scanning them in and electronically routing them through the process.

Most business sectors can benefit from a document management system – we’re all subject to health and safety regulation, employee legislation, contracts, invoices, approvals and sign-offs. In many areas like financial service professionals, legal practices, education, real-estate and in construction, the combination of regulation, paper forms and document to-ing and fro-ing create a strong driver for all-electronic document management. In addition, any business that presents its customers with signed agreements, complaints procedures, contract terms, or statutory statements would benefit from a greater degree of electronic document exchange to save costs and improve service. This might include healthcare practices, car sales or rental, property agents, insurance and loan brokers, mobile phone suppliers, gas and power utilities, and a host of other paper-intensive businesses and services.

Why would I want my documents in the Cloud?

Just like a library, it’s much easier to share things if you put them somewhere that other participants can access easily. Putting documents in a cloud system, setting who can access it, and sending them a link is much easier than trying to give them access into your network and your servers, or sending back-and-forth copies by email. It may also be that the cloud “librarian” is more experienced and more accountable than your own IT staff, and that the electronic “library building” (or cloud data-center) is actually a safer and more secure place to store important documents than your own premises. It is certainly the case that the very act of placing documents in this cloud library will focus the mind on how it should be classified or tagged in order to find it again, and who should have access rights. It is also the case that most libraries will take care to store only one copy of each book, as the shelf space for multiple-copies is bulky and expensive. The same is true of electronic documents - and you will only have “one version of the truth”.

It’s also much quicker to get a content store up and running in the cloud, with no need to worry about servers, operating systems and back-up. If you have remote, field-based or travelling staff, it’s also much easier to connect to a cloud system from a smartphone or tablet.

Unlike a library, where writing comments in a book, or even adding new chapters is somewhat frowned upon, a cloud content store can be much more interactive – if you so choose – allowing multiple participants to collaborate on document creation and refinement. Having multiple commenters work on a single copy is much easier than exchanging multiple marked-up copies by email, and you will always have a record of each version created.

Can I trust cloud security?

Much like managing your bank account online, you need to take security threats to your cloud content seriously and follow sensible steps on passwords, secure connections, encryption, etc. In many ways, this is simpler than configuring the firewalls and anti-viruses that protect your on-premise network. Enabling access from mobile devices uses the same security mechanisms as from the office, so is simpler and potentially more reliable than punching VPN holes through your firewall.

Just as you would not trust your money to an online bank with no history and no reputation, you need to be sure you know who you are dealing with when it comes to entrusting your data to an online storage provider. Do not be put off by stories of hacked data and system outages: many on-premise systems are just as vulnerable, especially from internal employees and out-sourced IT support staff. Breaches of in-house systems are much more likely to go un-reported.

According to AIIM surveys¹, employees in most businesses are already making use of consumer-style cloud file-stores and file shares like Dropbox, Evernote and YouSendIt in an uncontrolled way, and with very basic security, particularly at the “free” end of their offerings. Consolidating and managing cloud services proactively within an approved business-strength system will allow you to prohibit use of these unmanaged “squirrel stores”.

In some regions, or in certain sectors such as government or healthcare, compliance requirements may come into play for holding sensitive information in offshore data centers. If this applies to you consult the cloud service provider as most have mechanisms for reassurance in these cases.

Why Cloud?

- *Connects other sites or branch offices*
- *Accessible from home or on the move*
- *Safe document sharing with stakeholders, partners and clients*
- *Quick and simple to set up*
- *Ideal for joint projects*
- *Encourages collaboration and feedback*
- *No extra load on IT*

What would I use it for?

Internal network file-shares (the “X-Drive” or “G-Drive”) work fine as long as:

- You have a well-disciplined filing plan and people stick to it
- You don’t need to make some of it accessible, some of the time, to people who don’t have a log-in on your network
- Nobody accidentally deletes or more likely moves a folder
- You don’t run out of space on the server
- You don’t need to search *across* the file hierarchy rather than down into it
- Your back-up works every time
- You don’t need to make certain types of document confidential to certain groups.
- You don’t need an audit trail of who has viewed, edited and deleted files

A document management system in the cloud will solve all of these problems. Set up a shared area for your clients or customers to submit their materials, or create a handover-folder at the end of a project. Use a secure cloud-store for your highly confidential Board reports, set up a restricted area for a sensitive acquisition, a re-structuring or a legal project, and cut out all that photocopying of résumés when you are recruiting. You can even set up your scanner or MFP to scan direct to a cloud folder and cut out tedious process steps.

For smaller businesses who rely on access to single sites and servers, disaster recovery can involve expensive stand-by systems and off-site facilities. We all know that we should do it, but it is so often overlooked – until the next big snowstorm or flood. However, the ability to access the most important business documents from anywhere, and the reduced reliance on paper files held in on-site office cabinets is a good starting point for a disaster recovery plan. Of course, your cloud provider will be backing your data up in multiple data centers.

How will it save me money?

Many of the financial benefits of cloud content storage relate to making staff more effective, improving project coordination, reducing time spent searching for or duplicating information, and improving the quality of decision making. However, there can also be benefits from improvements to the process flow - speeding up document routing, shortening cycle-times, preventing delays, discontinuities and errors, and improving customer satisfaction. This is particularly true where paper forms and associated documents are part of the process flow. Dealing with any claim, bid-process, approval or customer on-boarding through the postal system is time-consuming and frustrating.

Most high-end document management systems include workflow and business process modules, which are generally very effective, but can also be complex and inflexible. Although very useful in larger businesses, these are not the only way to achieve process efficiencies and cost savings. The simplest of electronic document “in-folder” to “out-folder” workflow can still be hugely more efficient and less error-prone than paper-based processes, and it doesn’t need customized and hard-to-maintain interfaces to existing finance, order-processing and HR systems.

For example, handling inbound invoices (paper or PDF) can work with a “scan-to” folder, a “matched-and-ready-for-approval” folder, an “approved” folder and a “paid” folder. Arrival of an invoice in any of these process queues will trigger an alert to the appropriate employee or employees. Equipping the invoice-processing clerk with two screens, one for the scanned invoice and one for the finance application will allow simple cut-and-paste to be the integration mechanism between the two systems. Accounts payable enquiries will involve a simple search across the folders to show up the current status. More importantly, managers can approve the invoice wherever in the world they happen to be as long as they have access to the cloud. For better or worse, the excuse of the “lost invoice” will be less likely to be genuine.

As an extension, trusted suppliers can place their own PDF invoices into the ready-for matching folder, and the auditor can be given access to the paid folder. And with no photocopies to file, print costs are saved and office space is freed up. As a further extension, goods inward can scan delivery notes into a sub-folder – along with any installer instructions or safety notes. Inspection reports or returned goods correspondence can be filed alongside, giving the purchasing clerk, and anyone else who needs to know, a full picture of the transaction history in one place.

It’s not difficult to sketch out how a similar process would work for accounts receivable, for staff expenses, for the HR recruitment process, for staff performance reviews, for proposal submissions, for engineering changes, and so on.

Cost Savings

- *Reduced printing and photocopying*
- *Less postage and stationery*
- *Frees up cabinet floor space*
- *Find things faster*
- *Avoid temp costs for filing and shredding*
- *Faster and cheaper audits*
- *Lower server and back-up costs*
- *More efficient processes*
- *Better decision making*

What should I look out for?

For most of these applications to work for you, you need to be certain that they are not only secure, but even more secure than your on-premise servers and infrastructure. So look for strong security, but also security that is straightforward to set up – mistakes in setup generally leave more gaps than generic failings. If you are setting up a system yourself, without IT help, you’ll need to make sure that connecting to scanners and printers is simple. Of course, you’ll need to trust your provider, and you’ll probably be looking for some history of providing comprehensive on-premise document and records management systems, and for someone who is going to be around in the future.

Version control is important in some applications, particularly manufacturing and construction. A level of workflow would also be useful, but as we said before, don’t be wooed by complicated invoice capture or business process management functions. Collaboration and social functions can also be attractive, but stay focused on the core requirement, which is a totally secure, trustworthy and easy-to-use place to store and share files and documents.

Just as you would not chose your surgeon for a heart operation on the basis of price, be just as wary of low cost or free models for the cloud-storage of your most important documents. Ask yourself just how much trust you can put in any service-level agreement that involves no payments. You’ll also be looking for a system that can grow with you in a pay-as-you-grow way as your needs become more ambitious.

How much will it cost?

Ask more “how much will I save?!” The more you can keep paper documents out of the business the more you save – less paper, less printer ink, lower click-charges, fewer stationary supplies, lower mailroom costs and no need to give up precious office or warehouse space for filing cabinets. And when it comes to electronic documents, AIIM survey² results suggest that half your server disk space could be saved if you only store one copy of each document.

A cloud-based content management system will be charged just like your broadband connection – a fixed rate per month, per user (generally), up to a given storage limit. The cost of that storage includes backup, anti-virus, adding the latest security fixes, and replacing worn-out discs and servers.

Obviously, you need to be aware that compared to most on-premise software, these costs will appear as operational expenses rather than capital expenditure, but by avoiding the four-year cycle of server upgrades and migration costs, most businesses would welcome this difference.

Conclusion

Cloud-based document storage and sharing has become very popular both in the consumer area and within business (although it's not always used “officially” within businesses – AIIM research¹ shows that rogue usage of free online file-sharing software is prevalent). However, sharing in a business context also needs a degree of management – who can share and edit which document types, on what topics, and with whom. Over and above that, the filing plan needs to be appropriate and intuitive if everyone is to know where to store things, and indexing is needed so that content can be easily found in the future.

Putting these document management concepts in place greatly enhances the efficiency of any business, but utilizing the cloud provides particular benefits. It can be quickly deployed, and will be readily accessible by project partners, business agencies, customers, or clients, including those who are out-and-about with a mobile device. In many cases, a management, HR, or line-of-business controlled cloud document system will be safer and more secure than one provided by local IT resources. It can be difficult to acquire security skills and keep them up-to-date, and perhaps your IT staff should not be included in your sensitive document distributions – indeed, they may be an outsourced service.

Recommendations

- As an exercise, suspend your current perception of cloud security and consider a number of “what if” scenarios of using a cloud-based document management facility. When you have seen the potential benefits, re-consider the security risks, and how you might reduce them by an appropriate choice of cloud service.
- Consider where your most important business documents are stored at the moment, and how easy it is to access them, both for those who shouldn't have access, and those who need access from wherever they are working. If they are held as paper copies they are likely to be even more difficult to access, as well as taking up useful floor space.
- Think how useful it would be if you could quickly and easily set up a shared document area accessible only by trusted internal staff and also by external partners, project members, customers, or professional agencies.
- Consider whether there are new business models or customer services you could offer by providing electronic submission to you of documents via a shared but secure area in the cloud, or how you might deliver documentation sets to others via a shared space.
- Look at a number of basic document-centric processes in your business and see how eliminating paper and defining a simple electronic workflow could improve productivity, speed up the end-to-end process, and reduce print costs and paper-storage space.
- Look out for unofficial use of file-sharing and cloud storage applications, explore why they are considered useful and productive, then aim to provide a business-strength system as a safer and more controlled alternative.

References

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