



Content Integration: Simplifying Your Environment

There are very few large organisations that start with a blank canvas when looking at Enterprise Content Management (ECM). Typically, business-critical content is dispersed throughout the enterprise in heterogeneous content management systems, databases, e-mail applications, and file systems. According to one analyst estimate, 43% of organisations store content in more than 5 repositories and 25% hold content in more than 15 repositories.

The challenge is compounded by the variety of documents and formats now used in day-to-day business operations. These include bills, statements, images, report output, scanned forms, e-mail, transactions, policies, correspondence, Web elements, audio, video and more. When an employee needs all the information about a transaction or when a customer wants access to all the information about her account, this complex infrastructure makes retrieval difficult and time consuming.

However companies got to where they are, be it mergers and acquisitions, departmental solutions, and/or home-grown applications, they now realise that content must be managed as a strategic asset. Replacing existing products with a new ECM suite is not only impractical but also very costly and disruptive. What is needed is the development of an integrated content infrastructure that consolidates content repositories. By doing so, organisations will reduce IT and business unit costs, improve customer service, and accelerate decision making and time to market.

Content Integration Models:

There are two fundamental ways of integrating content. The first approach utilises a single, integrated content repository.

The second provides a consolidated view of content in multiple, disparate repositories. The best method for a given enterprise is dependent on the number of repositories currently in use, the willingness to undertake conversions, and the importance of speed in effecting a solution.

Integrated Repository:

An integrated repository must be scalable, secure, searchable and, most important; it must handle an abundant variety of content types from application output and desktop-generated documents to rich media and Web elements. A robust content repository also provides multi-key, multi-level indexing to facilitate search and retrieval and is built on a distributed architecture, enabling multi-platform implementation.

Integrating all content in a single system will significantly reduce IT infrastructure costs by consolidating servers and eliminating software that the enterprise licenses and maintenance. It will also simplify the environment for users who now need to learn and log on to only one system to retrieve the content they need.

But vendor choices will be limited, as most content management vendors do not offer a single, integrated repository for all content types. And converting content from legacy content management systems may be time consuming and/or impractical, putting the ultimate objective of consolidated content either beyond reach or well off in the future.

An Integrated View of Multiple Repositories

The alternative is a solution that provides a consolidated view of content in multiple, disparate repositories. This approach provides flexibility in selecting, or retaining, different vendors for different applications,

leverages existing investments, and speeds implementation. In selecting a solution, there are several key attributes that will maximise value and ensure rapid, cost-effective implementation.

- An open architecture based on standard Web services to ensure interoperability across applications and computing platforms and to make content available to customers, partners and other applications outside the firewall.

- Out-of-the-box adapters to various content management systems will eliminate the need for custom coding. These adapters understand how the various content repositories are structured and translate the user's search criteria for each source. A robust solution will have adapters to major databases and popular search engines as well.

- An easy-to-use "intelligent dictionary" that maps fields across disparate repositories and content sources. This is crucial to normalise the names of data items (e.g., "policy-num" vs. "pol_no") and formats (e.g., "10/12/03" vs. "10-12-2003").

Additional important features include automatic transformation of content to browser-friendly formats, multiple presentment options, flexible security options with single-sign on capabilities, and interfaces into the major databases, search engines, and e-mail applications, as well as popular ERP/CRM systems.

The most effective approaches take this line, providing integrated access to multiple repositories and creating an environment in which the user does not have to know where or how the content is stored. This type of solution will also reduce total cost of ownership and simplify IT environments.

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