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Understanding Microsoft SharePoint in a Web 2.0 World

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[Microsoft's](#) answer to Web 2.0 — technologies such as wikis, blogs and social networks — can be found in SharePoint, the software platform tied to the [Microsoft Office](#) suite that the vendor hopes will become the one-stop destination application for enterprise collaboration.

While analysts say the social software in SharePoint lacks the functionality and usability of competitor products, its tight integration with existing Microsoft systems such as Exchange and Office makes it an attractive buy for IT departments looking to [capitalize on the Web 2.0 movement](#) while still utilizing the technology tools they already have inside their companies.

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For its part, Microsoft boasts a [staggering rate of adoption](#) for SharePoint. According to Rob Curry, director of SharePoint, Microsoft has sold around 100 million licenses of the product. But it's hard to know what percentage of those licenses include the use of social software like wikis, blogs and social networks. While Curry said he couldn't specify that adoption rate, he noted these functions are central to the company's view: "We see social computing as an important piece of SharePoint [and have] since its inception."

This vision sounds great, but analysts say the story about SharePoint and Web 2.0 isn't so simple. SharePoint itself was not originally constructed as a Web 2.0 offering. In fact, the bulk of SharePoint is still largely what it started as back in 2003: a document management system predicated on the idea that workers will spend most of their day working on their desktop with installed software, which for Microsoft means the Office applications suite.

It wasn't until the 2007 version, known as [Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007](#), that Microsoft released true social software features on top of it.

Though users access SharePoint through a Web-browser, the application differs from social software in the Web 2.0 space, where many vendors host their applications as a SaaS (software as a service) offering. While Microsoft announced plans for a hosted version in March, SharePoint is mainly hosted on-premise.

How well this works, for Microsoft and customers looking to adopt online collaboration tools, remains to be seen. Though it's in Microsoft's interest to keep people working in Office, installed software isn't generally what powers Web 2.0 technologies. Instead, the ability to author content, edit it, and share it with peers tends to work better with an online model, a place analysts say Microsoft still needs to work on with its SharePoint offering.

But Rob Koplowitz, a Forrester analyst, says the company's heavy clout with IT departments and its reputation as a trusted partner brings Microsoft squarely into the Web 2.0 conversation.

"Their [Web 2.0] products are a little less mature than some of the other vendors out there," he says. "But SharePoint works well with existing infrastructures, and Microsoft understands how to integrate well with those systems."

[IBM, Others in the Enterprise 2.0 Game](#)

Microsoft entered a crowded social software market last year when it made the social software

add-ons to SharePoint. Some of the usual suspects, such as IBM, had just arrived with its [Lotus Connections social software suite](#), which Big Blue touts as that company's fastest-selling software product and includes blogs, shared bookmarking, and social networking profiles.

While both IBM and Microsoft representatives talk — with some passion — about their experiences working with their own Web 2.0 tools for years before unveiling products, both companies were late to the market.

"Pure play" vendors — companies that started with a technology such as a blog or wiki and made it enterprise worthy — had been around for some time as far as technology years go. [Socialtext](#) (wikis), SixApart (blogs), and Jive (wikis and blogs) tie their origins to 2003 or earlier. According to Yankee Group's Edwards, those companies, coupled with pressure from Google, whose [Google Apps](#) has provided a lightweight, Web-centric alternative to Office, created enough pressure on Microsoft to create software that encourages horizontal collaboration. But they won't concede a Web 2.0 world without Office just yet. "They don't want to rush the market to get there," Edwards says. "They're dragging their feet a little because they want to squeeze the cash cow of Office software as long as they can."

How SharePoint Got Social

SharePoint started off as a way to create collaborative workspaces where people would work in Office files and check them in-and-out so colleagues could work on them, too. Although that capability remains, Microsoft, in its 2007 release of SharePoint — known officially as the mouthful inducing [Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007](#) — added blogs, wikis and social networking websites (called MySites).

The only problem, analysts say, is that these new tools weren't very intuitive or user-friendly, especially compared to the Socialtext wiki or the blogs from Jive. The SharePoint wiki, for instance, doesn't track version history as comprehensively as the pure play offerings, says Edwards of Yankee group.

Microsoft has addressed this problem by [partnering with wiki maker](#) Atlassian and newsfeed vendor NewsGator, which provides enterprise RSS (Real Simple Syndication). In addition, knowing they can't turn their back on the heavy market penetration of SharePoint, vendors who didn't enter a formal partnership like Socialtext and Jive have made their products compatible with SharePoint.

Microsoft's Curry says this is all part of the company's plan to improve SharePoint's capabilities. "Our partner ecosystems are critical success of the platform," Curry says. "These social computing pure plays are developing and augmenting the capabilities of SharePoint."

In addition, while companies have been [adopting corporate social networking at a sluggish pace](#), the use of SharePoint's MySites, social networking for the enterprise, has begun catching on as well, says Forrester's Koplowitz. MySites allows users to see what areas their colleagues specialize in and find areas of expertise where they can collaborate on key projects.

Imperative Integration

Integration with existing systems, such as Microsoft Exchange or a database holding HR information, is an especially important issue for enterprise Web 2.0 tools and their success. This is especially true for social networks because businesses can't necessarily rely on users to feed a baseline of data into them like they do in the consumer space, says Forrester's Koplowitz.

"We are all more passionate about stuff in our personal lives," Koplowitz says. "So the fact SharePoint has a tight integration [with those existing systems] helps make their [social networks] more useful."

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