Best Practices for SharePoint Governance

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Introduction

SharePoint offers a comprehensive portal and information management platform which has over the years expanded to become a complete information management platform. When SharePoint is deployed with a mature project management process, clear governance, and a commitment to on-going excellence, it becomes a productive tool to solve the problems faced by information workers. It offers a simple method to find, manage, and gather information across multiple sources. When combined with other Microsoft technology offerings, SharePoint becomes the modern workplace's best information management platform.

However, many companies do not achieve the business objectives or ROI they expected to receive from SharePoint. The reasons for this are many, but one of the primary causes of failure is the lack of established and formal governance program. Like any other large IT initiative, SharePoint installation requires a group of responsible stakeholders whose roles are clearly identified in the process. It is also likely that clarity in ownership of the deployment process can cause challenges. Stakeholders may believe that this is the responsibility of the IT team, however, the IT department may not be empowered to engage the rest of the organization to adopt. Thus, to summarize, lack of governance can be the single biggest factor that could cause the whole process to be a failure. Combine this with resistance from users due to ignorance, fear of change and lack of a good process and every single step can be set up for failure.

So, what is 'governance'?

IT departments are uncomfortable with ambiguous terminology and unfortunately 'governance' may mean a range of things to different people - though the word's purpose itself is to create a clear process or set of processes to achieve business goals. Wikipedia suggests that IT governance exists to "assure the investments in IT generate business value and mitigate the risks that are associated with IT to encourage desirable behavior". This complex definition is one of many.

Gartner, for example, defines IT governance (ITG) as the processes that ensure the effective and efficient use of IT in enabling an organization to achieve its goals.

CIO.com defines governance as 'Putting structure around how organizations align IT strategy with business strategy, ensuring that companies stay on track to achieve their strategies and goals and implementing good ways to measure IT's performance'.

And Microsoft, the makers of SharePoint define governance as: "The set of policies, roles, responsibilities, and processes that guides, directs, and controls how an organization's business divisions and IT teams cooperate to achieve business goals."

Thus while there are several published definitions, the underlying meaning of governance is that it provides direction and guidance on how a solution or service should be used to improve the current state of a business. It creates a situation where the business and IT must work together to achieve the common goals of the business.

Governance on a general scale encompasses four important pillars of any business, i.e. **people, policy, technology, and process.** When all the four work in harmony, then the organization has established its foundation for efficiency, return on investment and long-term achievement of business goals.

SharePoint governance, to summarize, is a well-defined program which clearly articulates the objectives of SharePoint deployment, along with identified stakeholders. Governance helps to meet business needs even as it remains agile to evolve as the business grows. It is the set of roles, policies, processes & responsibilities that guides controls & directs how an organization's business divisions & IT teams cooperate and collaborate to achieve business goals.

SharePoint Governance - Why and How

With increased adoption, the velocity, variety and volume of information and content generated within SharePoint are always a big challenge. Rapid and widespread adoption also necessitates that governance must be automated. Because of its complexity, establishing governance for SharePoint is challenging and raises the question as to whether it is really necessary. However, SharePoint is a complex solution, unlike many other products in the market and it delivers on diverse needs such as portal, collaboration, document management, search etc. The more complex or comprehensive is an organization's use of SharePoint, the higher the need for governance.

SharePoint is a complex solution and governance will help to ensure its effective usage. It has the capability to deliver on diverse business needs and, therefore assumes more complexity. This is one of the key reasons why there needs to be a SharePoint governance process in place. The SharePoint governance can itself be simple or complex depending on how deep the usage will be. For example, most people may use basic features like document management and group/team sites. For such simple usages, the governance may also be fairly simple. However, the decision to deploy SharePoint at the organizational level is to improve efficiency and achieve business goals. This requires a change in user behavior. The problem with many organizations are, they go by the simple analogy – "build it and they will come".

SharePoint Governance is like a guide which provides direction on usage which minimizes risk while enhancing productivity.

The content flow should have a structured life cycle, i.e. managing expanding number of sites, storage, and overall content. Most organizations struggle with a proliferation of content, much of it redundant. But where does one actually keep this content? Who exactly knows its lifespan? SharePoint offers the technology to manage these challenges but only with governance can this content on SharePoint be managed efficiently.

Data quality is another factor which can be addressed only by governance. SharePoint can store data but who is ultimately responsible for data accuracy. Governance helps to assign owners and this is key to optimizing SharePoint.

In a survey conducted by aim.org, user adoption, expansion and governance rank high on the ongoing issues with SharePoint within organizations.

Here are more compelling reasons for implementing SharePoint Governance:

Manage Growth
Failure to have policies defining storage boundaries can lead to undesired growth of data and can soon cause the platform to perform at slower speeds leading to reduced efficiency.

Manage User Adoption
Governance helps address the adoption problem by providing clear guidance on how and by whom SharePoint should be used. By resolving the component of people, you manage the adoption rate. A better way is to deploy SharePoint in an organization for a small team, then to business units, then for the entire organization.

Provide Structure to Content Lifecycle
Without a governance strategy for content, data propagation can cause performance and storage issues. File servers will grow in an uncontrollable manner. Hence, it is important that at the very beginning we have governance around the content lifecycle established.

It Sets Standards for Content Quality
Data stewards are not only responsible for managing the content, they also ensure the quality of the content. As more assets flow into SharePoint, it can quickly become the standard for organizational knowledge. People rely on it to perform daily tasks and make key decisions. If SharePoint contains a high degree of out-of-date, inaccurate, or inappropriate content, its perceived value diminishes. Perhaps worse, this creates mistrust and subsequently destroys user adoption. A vicious cycle now exists, one that is very difficult to break.

Governance plan ensures that data stewards/information providers have the standards and tools necessary to maintain quality content in their SharePoint deployment. For example, if a sales executive goes to her dashboard in SharePoint and notices that certain charts are based on outdated or inaccurate numbers, who does she contact to resolve this problem? She may stop using the system, or perhaps worse, she may have colleagues making decisions on outdated information.

It Sets Standards for customizations

SharePoint governance policy should define what features in SharePoint are available to developers. This includes features such as Performance Point, Excel Services, InfoPath Form Services, SQL Server Reporting Services, and other Service Applications. The supported services should be communicated to developers and operational team.

In the event, that a developer or vendor requires a potential feature that is not available. The governance policy shall determine the process for evaluating, approving, and deploying the addition of the new feature.

Components of SharePoint Governance

Before moving on, an important point to be remembered is, governance cannot be isolated or work in silos. Its ability and potential lies in its ability to encompass the entire organization and that is a key success factor.

Applying the same principle of people, policies, processes and technology, SharePoint's governance can be better established and understood. By going through them, we can better understand how to evolve SharePoint governance policy.

People, for example, are the nucleus of the organization. People work together, collaborate and contribute to the success of a business. Their role is integral to the success of any organization. SharePoint's key value proposition is its ability to let people find, collaborate and exchange ideas and information.

It is important to accept the fact that many organizations which have adopted SharePoint will have users who claim to be using SharePoint efficiently. However, on digging deeper it will emerge that many see SharePoint as a 'file dump' or a storage area. They may not have the guidance or knowledge to use the system in a way that improves their day-to-day efficiency which can directly impact the business in a positive way.

This brings us to the next important contributor, i.e. **Policy.** Policies are most often related to legal or

regulatory requirements. Nonconformance can attract penalties which can damage the business itself. SharePoint ensures that these policies are documented, up-to-date and available when required.

A business **process** consists of steps taken to achieve a business goal. The output is usually a product or service. Every organization has business processes, whether formally defined or not. You likely have business processes for paying invoices, onboarding new employees, or producing TPS (Testing Procedure Specification) reports. SharePoint often introduces new processes in an organization while retiring others. In many cases, SharePoint asks users to work differently, to change their habits in ways that improve the current state of an organization.

One of the primary reasons that a SharePoint project can fail is because it is deployed before reaching a consensus on how the business will use the system and what steps people must take to achieve stated goals of the system. It is important to note that users, when left to themselves, will not simply "figure out how to use SharePoint". They may be capable of opening files and modifying tasks, but will they use the system in a way that improves their day-to-day effectiveness and does that improve the current state of the business? Sadly, for many organizations, SharePoint becomes little more than a content dump for files. Users need guidance – be sure that your governance plan provides just that to ensure your solution delivers value beyond a file repository.

Technology is the next important component. As SharePoint expert Dan Holme writes, "You must understand the technology that you are trying to govern; you can't ask it to do something that it cannot do."

The scope of an organization's SharePoint and/or Office 365 governance strategy should be tailored to not only provide the information listed previously but also clearly define the following granular areas:

- ❑ Branding and "look and feel"
- ❑ Monitoring and compliance policies and procedures
- ❑ Management of user requests (new sites and custom development requests)

SharePoint Governance Components

Infrastructure and Security Governance

- ❑ SharePoint and/or Office 365 Disaster Recovery Governance
- ❑ Defining SharePoint and/or Office 365 SLAs for System Architecture and the overall underlying architecture
- ❑ Defining SharePoint and/or Office 365 Maintenance
- ❑ SharePoint and/or Office 365 Security Governance
- ❑ Site Provisioning Governance
- ❑ Lync Server and OneDrive for Business Governance
- ❑ Defining compliance and regulatory governance

Custom Development Governance

- ❑ Development of organizational SharePoint Development Standards
- ❑ Creation of Deployment and Code Promotion Standards
- ❑ SharePoint and/or Office 365 Branding Governance
- ❑ Visual Studio 2012/2013 and Team Foundation Server policies and procedures

Content Governance

- ❑ Policies for Enterprise Content Management
- ❑ Policies for Storage (quotas, file upload limits, and so on)
- ❑ Policies for My Site and Social Computing
- ❑ Guidelines for Power User and Content Updating
- ❑ Policies for Executive and Legal Content
- ❑ Policies for Apps, Libraries, and List Configuration and Customization

Training and Administration Governance

- ❑ Guidelines for SharePoint and/or Office 365 Training
- ❑ Guidelines for SharePoint and/or Office 365 Communication Plan
- ❑ Policies for SharePoint Steering Committee
- ❑ Support Model for Enterprise SharePoint and/or Office 365
- ❑ Guidelines for Executive SharePoint/ Dashboard Reporting

SharePoint Governance Steps

Governance Board

A good SharePoint Governance plan must begin with a Governance board of cross-functional, i.e. IT and business people who will develop the high-level plan. The members should be those who are affected by the SharePoint solution. If legal information will be included, then members from the legal office should also be invited to join the group.

Since SharePoint is a business and technical solution, it should have a cross-functional board to develop the high-level overarching governance plan. Membership should include key departments that are affected by the SharePoint solution.

Governance Plan

The next step is to develop a governance plan. The plan will be driven by business requirements but will necessarily define time-lines, budget and resources that will work together to achieve the objective.

Critical steps and activities that organizations can leverage for greater benefit are listed below.
- ❑ Identify business objectives
- ❑ Prioritize and map objectives to technology solutions
- ❑ Develop technology roadmap and identify technical objectives
- ❑ Provide communication, incorporate feedback and engage users
- ❑ Provide tactical operation planning and coordination
- ❑ Provide tactical development planning and coordination
- ❑ Provide tactical support planning and coordination
- ❑ Repeat and review these steps

What follows is an extended outline of each of these governance steps which includes their supporting activities and some example artifacts that come from performing the activity.

One of the best practices for a SharePoint deployment also applies to governance plan, start small and grow it incrementally. For example, we wouldn't recommend on day one to turn on every SharePoint feature. With many capabilities of SharePoint, turning on every feature confuses users and makes governance planning impossible. Start by enabling a small subset of features to match only some of your business objectives. Perhaps start with social collaboration or enterprise search with just a subset of users, your pilot group.
- ❑ Define groups for controlling policies and standards for SharePoint
- ❑ Define how the SharePoint and/or Office 365 application is delivered
- ❑ Define how sites are provisioned

❑ Ensure that the appropriate access levels are provided to users to ensure that compliance is strictly enforced
❑ Define resolutions for conflicts and required support

Which brings us to the next point of defining objectives. Since SharePoint will exist to optimize operational efficiency, the key business objectives which will be affected by SharePoint need to be recorded.

Once the business priorities are identified, SharePoint features need to be mapped to the objectives. Along with this mapping, a technology roadmap needs to be defined and rolled out.

Summary

While SharePoint governance is not simple, understanding what it is, what's involved, and how to properly approach it will help make it less formidable. With the need to provide guidance to users, manage content lifecycle, adhere to compliance regulations, and define roles and responsibilities, governance is not just a nice-to-have, but a crucial part of a successful SharePoint story.

Remember, there are four key components to SharePoint governance: people, process, policy, and technology, all of which change as businesses evolve. Your governance needs to both provide guidance and make sense for users. Continuously monitor your SharePoint governance to ensure that it works with policies within other kinds of governance in the organization. Evaluate your processes against measurable standards and adjust as necessary so that it continues to work for your people. Incorporate choice technology to help facilitate the three other components to help maximize efficiency while adhering to your SharePoint and corporate governance.

SharePoint Governance should be an intrinsic part of your SharePoint deployment and operation. With the right people defining the right policies and processes, incorporating the right technology and being ready to adapt to changes, you can provide the guidance and structure necessary to promote continued organizational success.

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