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Column: Better Technology for Better Clients

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At a recent Customer Group Meeting, our Microsoft Small Business Specialist asked attendees at one session: "Who has heard of SharePoint?" When no one raised a hand, he said he was not surprised. The incredible functionality of SharePoint Services is yet to be discovered by the majority of the business world. And for all those businesses that aren't taking advantage of this tool, that's a lot of missed opportunity.

SharePoint is another piece of the powerful Microsoft Small Business Server (SBS) I wrote about last month. In last month's column, I discussed the value of SBS's Shared Fax Services, which let you send and receive faxes right at your desktop. We had set it up for one of our medical practice clients who needed to access faxes regardless of which of their five offices received the fax. The Shared Fax Service turned faxes into electronic files so physicians in any of their practice locations could review them at any time.

The patients, of course, loved the higher level of customer service. The medical practice, however, found that improvements in other processes would also be necessary in order to maintain that level of service. This was more fully realized recently when a group of their physicians found that they had wasted a lot of time adding edits to a medical report that had already been rewritten.

It was a patient with a complicated medical history, and it was necessary for several doctors in the practice to add their diagnoses and recommendations to a combined report. It's a common scenario. Each participant gets a copy of the document and adds their information. In this case, the internist put her edited copy on the server,

but the radiologist, not realizing it had been updated, ended up writing over it with

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practice so the internist always knows when the patient report has been edited by the radiologist. The other beauty of the system is that anyone can read or review the document at any time, but it can't be edited unless it is checked out. The bottom line: It will end the stress of managing documents that require participation from many people. Another nice feature is document versioning, which allows document changes to be tracked by assigning different version numbers. That's helpful for both auditing and rollback.

The solutions from Microsoft, as reflected in SBS, are answering the call that businesses today need tools that are strategic. SharePoint Services, even using just the basic out-of-the-box functionality, support these needs with enormous growth potential.

Take into account a furniture manufacturer that has teams of individuals that need to work together on new products to roll out. This involves critical input from designers, engineers, production, sales and others. The company has been successful, and they attribute much of that success to the ability to keep their pulse on the needs of the client. They have achieved this with cross-team collaboration. That team approach has recently been put at risk with the expansion of the business because the teams are no longer all located in the same building.

They, too, found a solution in SharePoint Services, particularly with the fact that it operates in a web-based environment where every team member can access it through the Internet. When they worked on the same floor, it was easy to pop in to each other's offices when they had completed a stage of their work and wanted someone else to see it. Now, they get much of that same feedback – sometimes even quicker – utilizing the built-in alert capabilities of SharePoint. The alerts are sent out to users when a change is made to the shared documents. That e-mail alert is their “personal” signal indicating that it is their turn to do their part. Being in separate

buildings means they may still miss “seeing” each other, but they all acknowledge

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higher employee satisfaction as well as a high level of team collaboration that was the backbone of the company’s success.

The price is right for SharePoint Services and SBS 2003, and that means the return on investment is quick. To learn more about these great tools, go to www.microsoft.com/sharepoint and www.microsoft.com/sbs. Take your collaboration to the next level!

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