

Using SharePoint 2007 in Higher Education: What Will Happen in Your Project?

By Janus Boye & Dorthe R. Jespersen, authors of the recently published *Best Practices for Using SharePoint for Public Websites – A Business Person's Guide*

Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 has been tremendously successful for collaboration and intranets, and its dominant position means that the product has now emerged as an obvious; some would say almost unavoidable choice as the next generation portal. While there are good reasons for the popularity of SharePoint, it is certainly not as safe and risk-free as many like to think.

What Happens in a Typical SharePoint Project?

As SharePoint 2007 is still quite new (released Oct 06), many are still gathering experience. A serious lack of product understanding among buyers and integrators alike is leading to complications in many SharePoint projects. Both parties have tended to underestimate the complexity of the platform and very few have delivered on time and on budget. Migration from SPS 2003 is one task that has proven especially difficult.

SharePoint projects are often initiated by IT departments, as they have a better understanding of the technology. As the initial driver, IT has a significant impact on the scope of the projects. However, remember that without a business-level understanding of the product, you will have difficulties making the best usage of SharePoint's strengths. In particular,

you will face challenges in areas such as microsities, user rights, and templates, as the tool offers tremendous freedom for users – potentially more than you would like to offer.

As there are no established best practices for how to make best use of SharePoint, you easily end up with a system integrator who has not implemented most of your requirements. Consequently, without a business-level vision for SharePoint you are very much at the mercy of what your partner decides to do. Moreover, even the largest institutions will have trouble getting direct support from Microsoft. As the prices to the higher education sector are usually highly discounted, there is no room for Microsoft to provide support activities, including information on the product roadmap. Without this information you may end up spending resources on developing functionality, which may be introduced in the next upgrade.

Keeping Your Project on Track: Develop Your Own Skills and Learn from Others

Building your own skills will enable you to make better use of the product and ensure the quality of the implementation. We recommend setting up a strong and experienced project team from the beginning. SharePoint calls for governance, a challenge in the distributed

editor and/or IT organisation common in higher education institutions. Be aware that Microsoft partners so far have very little experience with SharePoint in higher education institutions. Getting the right help can prove difficult when partners have a waiting list of corporate clients, who are not under the same economic and administrative constraints as universities. Factor into the project that the unique requirements of higher education institutions such as integration with third-party services like e-learning or user administration and the ability to tailor the user interface to different user audiences do not come out-of-the-box with SharePoint.

Even if involving Microsoft directly proves impossible, we recommend that you insistently request roadmap information from Microsoft, so that you can build it into your project planning. We also highly recommend that you actively encourage practitioners at all levels in the organisation to stay in touch with the community, and learn from the experiences of other organisations implementing SharePoint. If you really want to benefit from this communication, you need to be open and willing to share own mistakes and lessons learned.

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