



Inside Track Research Note

In association with



Tackling End User Content Sprawl

The emerging role of
digital hubs

February 2016

Information today is more fragmented and difficult to find than ever.

Sadly, many have come to accept day-to-day information access challenges as a fact of life.

The impact of the information access challenge is becoming greater against the backdrop of faster-moving and rapidly changing markets.

Now is not a good time for your people to be relying on patchy, ambiguous, conflicting or out-of-date information.

In a nutshell

The problem of content sprawl has been around since the early days of personal computing. It started as soon as users discovered they could save data to local disks. Over the years, file servers, collaboration systems, and nowadays cloud storage services have led to a progressive escalation of the challenge, and information today is more fragmented and difficult to find than ever. Meanwhile, changing working practices, evolving customer behaviour and the generally accelerating pace of markets and business change conspire to increase the need for rapid and convenient access to key information. Against this background, digital hubs and content curation could both alleviate some of the pain, and create significant competitive advantage.

Poor information access might be widely tolerated, but it can't continue

Ask a range of business people how well their information needs are being served and a number of complaints will almost certainly be raised:

- It's too hard to find what I am looking for
- Even when I find it, I can't be sure it's current and complete
- When there are multiple versions, it's hard to know which one to use
- Sometimes I never see important information, because I don't know it exists
- It's often too late to act on information by the time I get it

Do any of these sound familiar? If you are anything like your peers in other organisations the chances are at least two or three of them will.

Furthermore, if you had polled your employees a decade ago, the sentiment would not have been that different. Sadly, many have come to accept day-to-day information access challenges as a fact of life. They can't remember a time when it wasn't like this, and they gave up expecting it to get any better a long time ago. But, when you're trying to find something while up against a deadline, or have to make a decision based on inadequate or incorrect information, it can still be very frustrating.

Beyond individual feelings, however, problems like the ones we have mentioned clearly constrain the business as a whole, and the impact of the information access challenge is becoming greater against the backdrop of faster-moving and rapidly changing markets. Digital techniques are speeding up the pace of business and allowing smart competitors to disrupt the status quo much more easily, often with minimal investment. Customers, meanwhile, are nowadays highly informed and opinionated through their access to the web, mobile and social media.

In short, now is not a good time for your people to be relying on patchy, ambiguous, conflicting or out-of-date information, and the pressure to deal with the challenges we have highlighted will only grow.

But surely if there were ways to make things better, IT teams would have adopted them by now given how long the issues have been with us? In order to appreciate why the problem has been so persistent, let's take a closer look at its nature, and how we might redefine the objectives and approach to increase our chances of success.

Information naturally replicates and fragments as teams work with it in a business environment.

Even the transaction data held in your core business applications is not immune.

Eradicating all information fragmentation is not sensible or realistic in the vast majority of business environments.

Efforts to deal with fragmentation have generally run into problems because they have focused on the production part of the information lifecycle.

The enemy is information fragmentation, but it can't be fully defeated

Information naturally replicates and fragments as teams work with it in a business environment. As a result, any given document can exist in various forms and states and in many different places at any one moment in time.

Through various stages of drafting, review, approval, publication, and subsequent revision, you may accumulate tens of versions of any given Word file, Excel spreadsheet or PowerPoint presentation, for example. From a storage perspective, these may be spread across various network file shares, your email system (think of all those attachments), your collaboration environment (e.g. SharePoint or Domino), and cloud stores (such as DropBox, OneDrive, Google Drive, iCloud, etc), not to mention all of those local hard disks, removable drives, USB sticks, and mobile devices.

Even the transaction data held in your core business applications is not immune. Exports from accounting, ERP, CRM and other systems get loaded into office documents or reporting tools, then combined, transformed, adjusted and distributed independently of the original source. With each person tweaking to suit their own needs, it's not just derivatives that accumulate, but derivatives of derivatives. Then, of course, there are the people who produce their own versions of the same information from scratch because they had no idea someone else had already done it.

The result is information sprawl, inconsistency and confusion. This is what makes finding the information you need when you need it so difficult in many situations. Beyond individual frustration and the general impairment of business efficiency and effectiveness, security and compliance issues also arise, as it's so hard to track where everything is and control access to it.

However, eradicating all information fragmentation is not sensible or realistic in the vast majority of business environments. Users generally need a good amount of freedom when authoring, reviewing and working together around content production. You might take steps to do things in a more organised way through collaboration and workflow solutions, but there's a limit to how far you can go without undermining productivity and morale, and/or inciting users to operate 'outside of the system' (which puts you back where you started). Many have tried to take on the 'information problem' in its entirety in the past, but few have succeeded.

So what steps can you take?

The key is to distinguish between information production and consumption

If you stand back and consider the bigger picture, efforts to deal with fragmentation have generally run into problems because they have focused on the production part of the information lifecycle. Centralising and controlling work in progress is hard to achieve for the reasons discussed. Everything is too volatile.

The information people often need to find and access quickly, however, is typically relatively stable. We can think here about product specs, marketing collateral, price lists, sales tools, performance reports, market intelligence, training material, policy

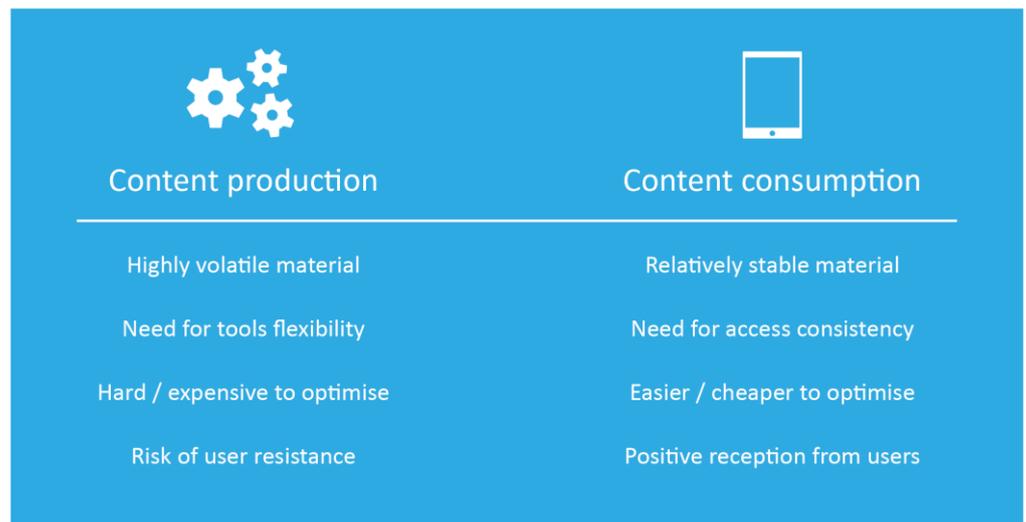
Regardless of what you do in relation to the production or acquisition of such assets, there's huge business benefit in optimising the way they are 'consumed'.

documents, standard operating procedures, safety protocols, forms, templates and all manner of other documents. It's not that these things are totally static, but at any moment in time there is probably a current or latest version that it's important to be able to identify and get to conveniently and with confidence. You could even include customer and supplier contracts and other reference material in this list.

Once you start thinking in this way in the context of your own business, a range of digital assets will undoubtedly come to mind that fall into this 'stable and important' category. Regardless of what you do in relation to the production or acquisition of such assets, there's huge business benefit in optimising the way they are 'consumed', more specifically how users find and access them, and are notified, if relevant, whenever they become available or change (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Focusing on optimisation of the consumption side of the equation can lead to quick returns and longer-term sustainable benefits



A new class of technology-based offering has appeared recently to help address the consumption optimisation need.

A new class of technology-based offering has appeared recently to help address the consumption optimisation need. Solutions in this space are referred to as 'digital stores' or 'digital hubs'. We will use the second of these terms in the remainder of this paper.

The emerging role of digital hub solutions

In some respects, digital hubs deliver on the promise of convenient and secure access to company information that traditional intranets and extranets have never been able to live up to. Designed from the ground up to enable digital asset discovery and consumption in today's mobile and highly connected business environment, digital hubs are more likely to be tuned to the way you work, and can therefore deliver more value than previous generations of access technology.

The idea is to provide a single place for users to go for any type of digital asset, whether they want access from their desktop, laptop or mobile device. In doing this, much of the pain associated with information fragmentation is addressed head on.

In line with our discussion so far, information in the form of electronic documents is a big part of this discussion. A digital hub can provide a single point of storage for finished work, reference material, and other non-volatile assets to enable physical consolidation of content. This is useful if you currently have a lot of material spread across different storage types and locations in a relatively unmanaged manner.

The idea is to provide a single place for users to go for any type of digital asset, whether they want access from their desktop, laptop, or mobile device.

Beyond electronic documents, digital hubs are also designed to optimise the consumption of multimedia content.

Mobile apps may also be handled by a digital hub.

A digital hub, however, respects the fact that some of the information you may want to make available to the user through the same centralised access mechanism is already suitably stored and managed. In such cases, the digital hub is simply populated with links and metadata to enable the same level of optimised discovery and access. When a document is selected, it is then pulled through from the source system.

Beyond electronic documents, digital hubs are also designed to optimise the consumption of multimedia content. Once again, the content could be physically stored in the hub’s own repository, or pulled through via links back to the original content stored elsewhere. Importantly, particularly in the case of multimedia, ‘elsewhere’ could even mean the public internet or material hosted by a third party provider. Think, for example, about video or audio training content, multimedia product overviews from suppliers, and so on.

Lastly, turning to an increasingly important form of digital content, mobile apps may also be handled by a digital hub, whether internally produced or pulled in from a public app store. In this case, ‘access’ is less about viewing or downloading the content for reading or watching, and more about software installation. In line with this, a good digital hub will make it easy for users to discover the apps that are most relevant to them in their role.

Put it all together, and the overall picture looks something like this (Figure 2).

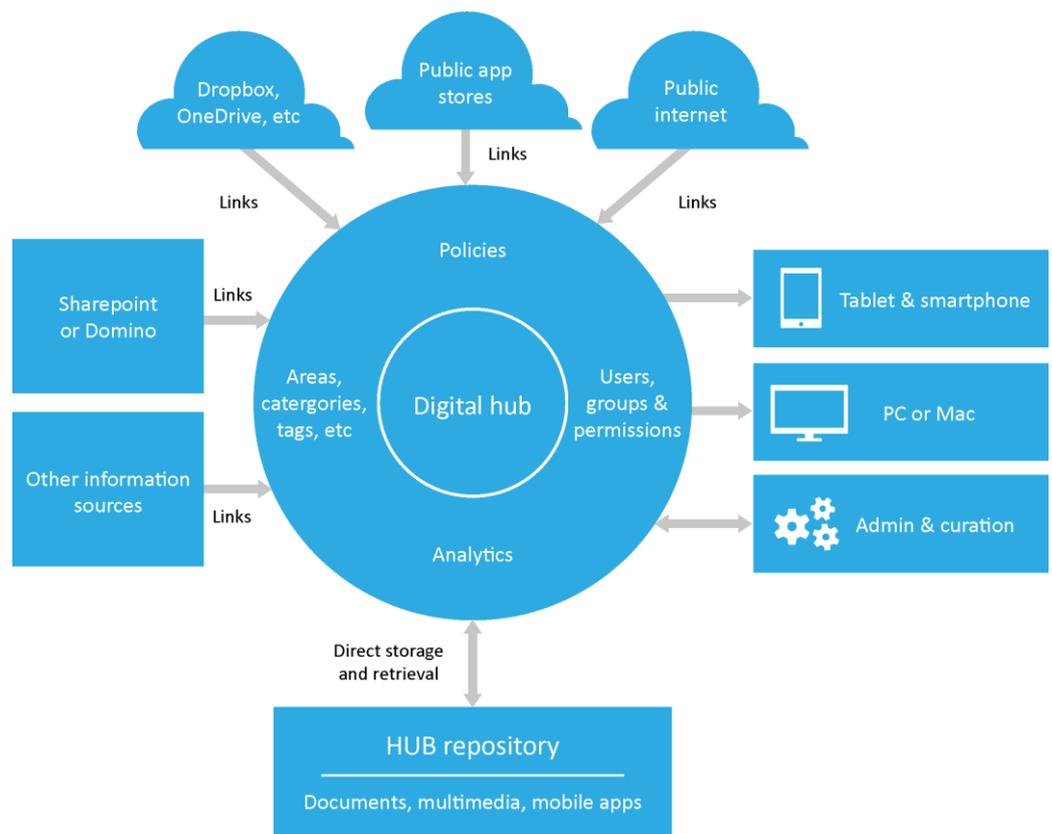


Figure 2
A digital hub provides a single point of access for digital assets, wherever they reside

One of the elements you’ll have noticed on this graphic relates to ‘Admin and Curation’. This leads us into the question of how content and links find their way into the hub, and how they, and access to them, are subsequently administered.

One of the most important principles behind a content hub is that it is first and foremost a solution for business units to take control.

A key objective is to get away from an ongoing reliance on technical skills.

Another fundamental principle behind a digital hub is the encouragement of continuous optimisation to make sure your business is getting the most it can from the digital assets available to it.

Digital hubs potentially plug an important gap between traditional ECM and user driven file sharing systems.

Curation is the new content management

One of the most important principles behind a content hub is that it is first and foremost a solution for business units to take control of the digital assets that are important to them. In this respect, it sits somewhere between full enterprise content management (ECM) solutions that typically require a lot of specialist technical expertise to implement and administer, and cloud-based file sharing services that put the bulk of the control into the hands of individual end users.

In specific terms, in the digital hub world, it's less about management in the traditional sense and more about 'curation'. What's the difference? Well content managers or administrators are usually people who sit outside of the business unit and manage both the physical and logical integrity of a content repository. Curators, on the other hand, of which you may have any number, sit within business units and are responsible for harvesting, collating and publishing digital assets (either directly or through links) for consumption by colleagues and peers. Their primary concern is delivering business value and convenience. The mind-set is proactive and positive.

Of course that's not to say that controls are forgotten – they certainly aren't. It's more that a digital hub provides a framework within which non-technical staff handle most of what's required to pull together and publish content safely and effectively. There may be some IT involvement (either in house or via professional services) involved up front, but a key objective is to get away from an ongoing reliance on technical skills.

Focus on continuous optimisation

One more important function of a digital hub is the reporting and analytics capability. This provides visibility into which digital assets are being accessed and how frequently. Such insights can be invaluable for making sure assets are being discovered and exploited by the users they were designed to benefit. If a document or some other piece of content is published, and its uptake has not been as expected, it could be that it has missed the mark, in which case a revision may be in order, or that the target audience doesn't know about it, which could point to the need for an awareness campaign.

Of course, it could be that an asset exceeds expectations in terms of access, or is being viewed or downloaded by an audience you didn't anticipate. This could highlight an opportunity to produce more of the same, or produce something more tailored to other constituencies.

Either way, another fundamental principle behind a digital hub is the encouragement of continuous optimisation to make sure your business is getting the most it can from the digital assets available to it.

The bottom line

Digital hubs, which are appearing on the market in the form of both on premise solutions and hosted services, are beginning to fulfil an important requirement for simple, optimised, business-driven access to documents, multimedia content and mobile apps. In today's fast-moving and highly connected business environment, digital hubs potentially plug an important gap between traditional ECM and user driven file sharing systems.

Further Reading

The following documents are available for free download from the Freeform Dynamics or 5app websites.

Building a Curated Digital Hub

What are your options and how do they compare?

User-Centric Mobile Security

Don't let the human factor unravel your efforts

Mobile Working without the Tears

The need for a user-centric approach to mobile security

About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is an IT industry analyst firm. Through our research and insights, we aim to help busy IT and business professionals get up to speed on the latest technology developments, and make better informed investment decisions.

For more information, and access to our library of free research, please visit www.freeformdynamics.com.

About 5app

5app make it easy for mobile users to gain access to essential work applications and content when and where they need it, on any device.

The 5app Digital Hub service enables organisations of all sizes to rapidly empower mobile users through self-service, creating effective workforces without burdening already busy IT teams.

For more information, please see www.5app.com.

Terms of Use

This document is Copyright 2016 Freeform Dynamics Ltd. It may be freely duplicated and distributed in its entirety on an individual one to one basis, either electronically or in hard copy form. It may not, however, be disassembled or modified in any way as part of the duplication process. Hosting of the entire report for download and/or mass distribution by any means is prohibited unless express permission is obtained from Freeform Dynamics Ltd or 5app. The contents contained herein are provided for your general information and use only, and neither Freeform Dynamics Ltd nor any third party provide any warranty or guarantee as to its suitability for any particular purpose.