

Research Report

# Information Workplace Platforms: Oracle vs. Microsoft

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by Tony White



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# Introduction

There are business scenarios in which technology-selection decisions should be based on vendor platforms and there are other cases in which such decisions should focus on discrete applications. While the term “platform” has no precise, universally-accepted definition, there certainly does exist a spectrum of complexity among software applications that ranges from simple, quick solutions to small-scale (often departmental), tactical problems to highly complex, long-term, mission-critical (usually enterprise-wide) solutions to strategic problems. We will use “point solution” to refer to the simpler extreme within this spectrum and “platform” to refer to the more complex extreme.

Generally speaking, platform decisions pertain to medium-sized or large enterprises considering long-term information management strategies or building information technology environments upon which they want to standardize and grow. On the other hand, it is more appropriate to assess options for individual applications and point solutions either when strategic platform decisions have already been made or when departmental solutions to a small-scale, and perhaps isolated, business problem are sought. In both cases, however, the strategic underlying IT platform must offer open integration with a variety of tactical point solutions in order to provide the kind of flexibility and extensibility required by today’s heterogeneous technology environments.

In today’s information-driven workplace, businesses need efficient access to information throughout a wide range of stages in the information lifecycle – from content recently added to a corporate website, to data from a third-party ERP system,

to archived images of transactions that happened ten years ago. And if finding and using the information proves mission-critical, so does the ability for workers today to create and repurpose it – authoring content for corporate intranets or public-facing internet sites, scanning documents, and extracting information among and between various enterprise applications, to name a few.

Furthermore, the information must be secure in order to ensure compliance with an ever-more demanding regulatory business environment. The critical nature of these business drivers is self-evident. That is, the health of the enterprise clearly depends on the ability of its information workers to create, access, and use information easily and productively regardless of its form or location. While discrete pieces of this overall process may be successfully handled by point solutions, the complexity and importance of the entire process requires a platform, specifically one that delivers true “information lifecycle management” (ILM), a term we use to refer to the essential strategies required to make the most effective use of information from the time it is created onwards. In addition to the features and functions referenced above, successful ILM strategies require policies both for the ongoing prioritization of information and for optimally cost-effective information creation, storage, retrieval, integration, and archiving.

Consequently, in these diverse environments – that is, in situations where multiple discrete point solutions already exist in-house and additional applications are being considered – businesses should see the wisdom of consolidating them into tightly-integrated, unified, services-oriented architectures that only a true enterprise platform can support. In this paper, we will examine the topics of point- and platform solutions by discussing scenarios in which each would be the best option. We will focus specifically on Oracle’s Information Lifecycle Management versus Microsoft’s Team Workspaces as information-workplace platforms, the components of which include – among others – federated search, portal, content management, records management,

document management, rights management, retention management, imaging, Web 2.0, e-discovery, and workflow. As a part of the discussion, we will identify situations in which discrete applications represent the customer's best option as well as discuss synergies that can accrue from the integration of point solutions into a cohesive information lifecycle management platform. We will take into account the time and cost savings of unified IT environments, the need for leveraging open development standards (such as pre-built connectors), skill-set requirements across the range of Information Workplace applications, and the importance of alignment between a vendor's vision and the long-term goals of the customer.

Finally, we will provide our perspective on some of the differences between Oracle's Fusion Middleware products (a key component of its Information Workplace solution) and comparative Microsoft applications, including SharePoint and related products, by highlighting their respective strengths and weaknesses. In the process we will validate the degree of these difference by sharing the experiences both of customers who have chosen Oracle over Microsoft and of customers who have chosen both vendors to co-exist in their IT environments.

## **Which Platform to Choose and Why: Customer Examples**

In speaking with companies that had considered both Microsoft and Oracle platforms to address their Information Workplace requirements, we have found that there are recurring themes that cause customers either to choose one over the other or to opt for co-existence. The highest-level pattern centered on the breadth of the customers' requirements. When there was a combination of a specific requirement for team collaboration and rapid deployment within the context of a departmental or intranet-focus initiative, we found that clients often opted for Microsoft's SharePoint. When the need broadens to include other Information Workplace components such as enterprise search, records management, content management, imaging, or workflow, companies invariably opt for the Oracle platform – even when they continue to use SharePoint for collaboration.

In the case of a large energy supplier, the customer needed a way for departmental teams to collaborate via a solution that was easy to set up and which effectively removed IT involvement in the collaboration process. Furthermore, they sought a solution that nearly mimicked Microsoft desktop applications. They found SharePoint to be good match with their requirements in that enabled non-technical users to create templates and to share content on the corporate intranet without any IT involvement. Based on the primary decision criteria of “convenience, simplicity, low cost, and getting IT out of the loop,” the customer reports being very happy with their decision.

On a more strategic level – beyond departmental collaboration – this same customer had requirements for enterprise search, records management, document management, and regulatory compliance. Being in a highly regulated industry, the customer had

demanding requirements for content security at a number of levels. First, information “had to be locked down at the most granular level.” That is, content had to be secure in and of itself at the object level without having to rely upon the security mechanisms of an overarching application or architecture. Secondly, information had to be shared between applications such as document management and records management, requiring tight integration between collaborative tools and these enterprise systems. Again, there were rigorous regulatory demands on how that information could be passed back and forth.

While there were many other factors that alone would have required moving beyond SharePoint to satisfy the customer’s requirements, the issue of information security at multiple levels and the need to integrate content tightly and safely between enterprise systems including content management, document management, and records management caused them to standardize at the corporate level on Oracle’s Universal Content Management (UCM) and Fusion Middleware solutions. In short, the customer is and may remain happy with SharePoint, but it had strategic needs beyond team collaboration. They cite the necessity of Oracle as the unified, underlying, strategic platform and state that, as time goes by, the ease of controlling integrated content lifecycles within SharePoint through Oracle connectors and accessing the Oracle repository through a SharePoint webpart will promote the usage of all of these products for their respective purposes. SharePoint will be used strictly for collaboration, and Oracle products will be used for the range of Information Workplace requirements beyond collaboration, including the management of content lifecycles within SharePoint.

In the case of an international financial services corporation, the customer selected SharePoint with hopes that it would provide robust enterprise content management functionality. The customer said it was aware that extensive consulting services would



be required to achieve this. After purchasing the product, however, the company discovered through further investigation that robust content management could not be achieved with SharePoint.

Reflecting further on its requirements, this financial services corporation discovered that it had substantial needs for workflow, federated search, security, information rights management, and high scalability. While collaboration and content management were clearly important parts of the company's information workplace needs, it discovered that these components were only a part of the overall need for management of information throughout its entire lifecycle. On looking more closely at individual requirements, the customer stated that the inability to do full text searches within SharePoint was an unacceptable limitation. Federated search within Oracle UCM, on the other hand, was perceived as a significant benefit.

Similarly, the limited team-based workflow in SharePoint versus Oracle's multi-application workflow proved too confining. And while the customer had originally thought that the ability to share content at the group level would suffice for collaboration, it discovered that enterprise scalability – even when speaking only of collaboration – was more of a requirement than it had originally thought. Finally, reflecting on all of these considerations, the customer realized that the ability to manage usage rights associated with all types of information would be extremely important strategically. The combination of all of the above eventually led the chief marketing officer to mandate the acquisition and implementation of a content management solution with best-in-class due to his preference toward Oracle's usability, collaboration, workflow, and enterprise search – all supported by a scalable platform capable of delivering on the corporate vision. They chose Oracle Universal Content Management based on the Oracle Fusion Middleware foundation.

In late 2005, a large healthcare customer conducted an internal needs assessment for the management of unstructured information across the organization. Because of the need for application-independent content accessibility, the customer took a holistic, information lifecycle-based approach to enterprise-wide data and information management. Consequently, they knew that they did not want point solutions for document management, content management, records management, imaging, or e-discovery. However, the customer had an extremely heterogeneous IT environment which they knew would necessitate multiple integration points. So the solution would have to be a scalable platform with an open integration orientation that allowed for integration of myriad third-party repositories, but which also aligned with the customer's vision of the unified information workplace.

The business drivers underlying this RFP process included strong requirements for DOD 5015.2 compliance, transparent content lifecycles within records management and retention management systems, strong federated search, and enterprise scalability. In assessing various products, the customer considered a variety of options, including Oracle's Universal Content Management, the Oracle Fusion Middleware platform, and Microsoft's SharePoint. In the end, the customer selected Oracle for strategic ILM and SharePoint for collaboration. They cited SharePoint's ease of use, support for team collaboration, and seamless integration with the Microsoft product family. But they also realized that SharePoint offered weak functionality for retention management, records management, DOD 5015.2, e-discovery, or enterprise content management.

In a recent interview, the customer stated that while it was happy with its technology choices, the most gratifying consequence of its decision has been Oracle's ongoing commitment to scaling the Oracle platform beyond just Oracle products. In particular, they cited the abilities to leverage Oracle's UCM beyond enterprise content management to include third-party business applications such as Siebel and to use

Oracle's application programming interfaces to access proprietary identity management and patient-record systems.

## Gilbane Opinion

With respect to the broad variety content types and business processes involved in the management of information across the enterprise, Oracle has done a commendable job of providing a robust content management application, Universal Content Management, as well as an underlying platform that integrates a broad range of other Oracle Fusion Middleware products and Oracle Business Applications. Because of the company's vision of delivering end-to-end information lifecycle management, evidence of such support for a range of content-centric and business-process-centric applications and services is not surprising. On the contrary, execution of the vision renders these mandatory.

Microsoft does not have the goal of delivering information lifecycle management. So it is not at all surprising that Microsoft does not offer an enterprise-scale content management platform or product. We have heard from some clients that they were expecting robust content management from the SharePoint product, but SharePoint was never intended to provide this. What it does provide is a set of collaboration services that can be leveraged within SharePoint to allow groups to use content interactively either through integration with Outlook or corporate intranets.

SharePoint also effectively removes IT from content authoring and publishing process, which clients report as a key reason they opt to use SharePoint. But these features, while highly useful in and of themselves, do not constitute enterprise content management, and they are not scalable beyond collaboration.

This difference in vision and feature-functionality naturally gives rise to instances of co-existence between Oracle UCM and Microsoft SharePoint. We have seen very effective use of SharePoint for team collaboration by clients who have standardized on Oracle

enterprise-wide for information lifecycle management. In such cases, SharePoint provides an excellent collaborative point solution while Oracle provides a platform for content management, federated search, e-discovery, document management, records management, and integration with enterprise applications such as CRM and ERP.

To be fair in this comparison between Oracle and Microsoft, we must point out that both have their strengths and weaknesses. We have defined the comparison as one that focuses on the applications, infrastructure, and services required for true ILM as defined above – that is for the ROI-positive creation, storage, retrieval, integration, and archiving of mission critical enterprise information over time. Within this bounded arena, Oracle has articulated and has begun to execute successfully on a comprehensive, long-term strategy for the management of information throughout its lifecycle. Microsoft has executed its strategy for SharePoint equally well, which is to provide a collaborative team-based application not founded on the central management of enterprise content, but rather on multiple local instances of SharePoint servers through the organization.

So it is fair to say that Oracle offers a platform that supports ILM (federated search, e-discovery, etc.) and that SharePoint does not. Clients that choose SharePoint Team Workspaces and Collaboration for its intended purpose are happy with it, but those that choose it in hopes that it will address technical and business requirements beyond collaboration are disappointed. Customers who require information lifecycle management and its key components – federated search, rights management, comprehensive workflow, and e-discovery -- should choose Oracle.