Introduction: The Value of Human Workflow

Businesses depend on business processes. While those processes often involve software, the most important processes in many organizations depend on people. Automating interactions among the people who participate in a process can improve how that process functions, increasing its efficiency and lowering its error rate. Using software that supports this kind of human workflow can make organizations more effective.

Many kinds of processes in many different kinds of organizations can benefit from automated support for human workflow. Examples include:

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| • | Approval: A common aspect of human-oriented business processes is the need to get approval from multiple participants. What’s being approved can vary widely, ranging from a Word document containing next year’s marketing plan to an expense report from a trip to a conference. In every case, some number of people must review the information, perhaps appending comments, then indicate approval or rejection. |
| • | Coordinating group efforts: Whether it’s preparing a response to an RFP, managing the translation of a document into one or more languages, or something else, many processes require people to work together in an organized way. By defining the steps of the process in an automated workflow, the group’s work can be made more efficient and the process itself more predictable. |
| • | Issue tracking: Many business processes generate a list of outstanding issues. An automated workflow can be used to maintain that list, assign issues to the people capable of resolving them, and track the status of that resolution. |

To support these kinds of automated business processes, Microsoft Windows SharePoint Services 3.0 can run human workflow applications. Based on Windows Workflow Foundation, these applications interact with people through a Web browser and, if necessary, with other software as well. To create workflow applications, developers use WF’s Workflow Designer and Microsoft Visual Studio 2005, while information workers use the new Microsoft Office SharePoint Designer 2007.

Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007, part of the 2007 Microsoft Office system, adds more capability to workflow applications built on Windows SharePoint Services. Using this product, workflows can use custom forms created with Microsoft Office InfoPath 2007 to interact with users through Office applications such as Microsoft Office Word 2007 and Microsoft Office Outlook 2007. Office SharePoint Server also includes several predefined workflows, letting information workers create automated business processes for approval and other common situations.

Both Windows Workflow Foundation and Windows SharePoint Services 3.0 will be standard parts of Windows, while Office SharePoint Server is a separately licensed product. All of these technologies, together with the tools for creating workflows that use them, are scheduled to be released early in 2007. This paper introduces these tools and technologies, describing what they do and how they do it. The goal is to provide a big-picture view of Microsoft’s support for human workflow in Windows SharePoint Services and the 2007 Office system.