

# Critical Mission

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FEATURED ARTICLE

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## SharePoint Online for Quick-n-Easy Extranets

*Today's fast-paced business climate requires secure, efficient and effective communication and collaboration with the world outside the confines of your corporate network. Leverage the cloud with SharePoint Online for instant extranets!*

### Can an Extranet be Quick and Easy?

A corporate extranet that allows customers, partners, suppliers, contractors or others to collaborate with you and your staff sounds like a complex, expensive and risky venture. **Not so!**

Leverage the cloud with SharePoint Online – you can create an extranet portal in a matter of minutes, hosted securely in a Microsoft data center and accessible via the Internet by anyone to whom you permit access.

Your new SharePoint Online portal has all the same features and benefits of an on-premise, internal SharePoint portal, including shared document libraries, calendars, task lists, searching, versioning, workflows and more. The SharePoint security model makes it possible to completely control which users have what kind of access to information.

### Customer-Specific Views

Don't think of an extranet portal the same way you view your internal portal. Your internal portal is

probably pretty loose about what users can see and do. After all, you're all employees of one big happy family.

Your extranet portal is very different, with information that is unique to a single customer, supplier, contractor or other entity. You don't want everyone to see everything, or even be aware that there *are* "others" out there.

SharePoint's security model handles this nicely, and only shows a user the information to which they've been granted access. ACME Corp can't see AJAX Inc's information and vice versa.

If you have information that you consider common to everyone, simply assign access to all.

You can even go so far as having a unique "landing page" for each entity, customized for the specifics of their relationship with your company. Not all customers, suppliers, etc are the same and you can customize their experience to match their needs.

### Case Study: Client Document Libraries

An Alto customer serves as an excellent case study in the power and utility and an extranet portal.

This customer is a large law firm who needed to securely share documents, videos and other information with clients via the web. SharePoint Online is perfect for this challenge.

One part of Alto's comprehensive extranet portal solution involves a "Share With Client" button available in the internal client document libraries. Clicking the button launches an Approval workflow to ensure that the right version of the right document is being shared. Approved documents are copied to the extranet portal and secured such that only authorized users see the documents.

Law firm clients have secure, 24 x 7 access to critical documents from any device, anywhere in the world. A click of a button is all it takes to share information.

## **Workflows for Routine Handling**

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A particularly intriguing use of extranet portals involves attaching workflows to lists. If your staff takes the same action when confronted with the same information, it's a good sign that a workflow could help reduce or even eliminate the drudgery. A workflow encapsulates the best practices you define and applies them accurately, every time. This frees up your staff to invest time and effort into tasks that require their unique skills and abilities and actually **add value to the process**.

For example, you have a contractor extranet portal with a task list for each contractor. The contractor marks a task as completed and enters time and materials costs. Rather than wasting staff resources to monitor routine budgets and deadlines, a workflow does the monitoring and alerts managers to unusual costs, missed deadlines or other concerns.

This cuts down on the numerous phone calls and email messages that are typically associated with coordinating activities. The data collected by the extranet portal makes the entire process **measurable and more transparent**.

## **Internal versus External Data**

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The biggest challenge in an extranet scenario is bridging the gap between data and documents that are presently internal to your organization but need to be shared with external users.

You've got **many options for sharing** and will probably use a combination of several in your extranet portal.

For small numbers of documents or data that changes infrequently you can simply manually upload documents or manually update lists. For example, a customer-specific price list that changes only once or twice a year, or delivery dates in a calendar that rarely change.

For rapidly changing information you can leverage Business Connectivity Services to perform queries against your internal data sources. The source of the data remains internal to your organization, while the extranet portal shows selected subsets to the people who need to see it.

Or, you can go with a custom, hybrid solution (as described in the case study, above) where internal users can easily share information with the extranet.

## **Summary**

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It's time to consider an extranet portal based on SharePoint Online. Your customers, suppliers, contractors and others will benefit from tighter, streamlined integration with you and your staff.

If you're curious about using SharePoint Online as an extranet and want to learn more, Alto offers a consulting and other education opportunities designed to get you up to speed, fast on the concepts and address all your questions and concerns.

[www.altoconsulting.com](http://www.altoconsulting.com)

Contact Alto if you'd like a demonstration of any of the products or techniques discussed in this article. Our next webinar is devoted to these concepts.