

## Spinning the Results-Centered Web

It was a dark and stormy day.... (But what did you expect? The condition was as much climatic as ambient. It was late autumn 1996 in Redmond, Washington, and almost every day was dark and stormy.) Office 97 had just gone “code complete” and the senior management team for Microsoft Office was starting to clarify the vision for the next version, mysteriously enough code named Office9. What was that vision? That, of course, is what this chapter is all about. As we’ll see, the principles contained in the vision are by and large manifest in the product.

Ask most developers or program managers about the vision or mission statement for the project they’re currently working on, and after they stare at you blankly, you’ll probably hear some vague reference to an outdated and largely ignored document they could dig up if you absolutely insist. Not so with the Office9 team. The vision document looms large in the minds of program managers and programmers alike. It’s been used to guide decision-making and set priorities throughout the project. What makes this one different? The answers can be found in Office’s position in its life cycle and in its market share, as well as in the team’s hard core determination to continually enhance the development process while they advance the technology and usefulness of their product. The buzz on the vision statement among the team and others is that it’s a great guide, and a very apt strategic response to the opportunities and challenges the product faces. And so, the vision starts with an assessment of the environment into which Office9 arrives.

### Reinventing With Consistency

Early in the planning process for Office9, it became evident that several industry-wide as well as Office-specific factors would provide the opportunity, and the imperative to reinvent Microsoft Office. There are several ways to think about what Office is, but at its core Office is a set of tools that some 60 million people use to get their everyday work done, to create the deliverables for which they get paid. And one interesting factor is the extent to which everyday work has come to mean publishing, collaborating, and communicating. Thus, the essence of Office is making it easier to accomplish those tasks than by any alternative means. And the Office team is always looking for ways to increase the efficiency of those tasks, mostly in increments, but occasionally by a quantum leap.

The widespread and rapid growth of corporate intranets is another extremely important factor. It took about seven years starting in the mid-1980s, each predicted to be the “Year of the LAN” before corporate networks were more popular and effective than sneaker-nets and fax machines. By contrast, after just two short years, it was hard to find a company of any size that hasn’t implemented intranets to some degree.

And it has become increasingly clear that intranets and web technology have the potential to totally change the industry landscape. As Andrew Kwatinetz, Director of Program Management for Microsoft Office tells it, “One thing that influenced us a lot: Steven Sinofsky, Microsoft Office General Manager, read Andy Grove’s book “Only the Paranoid Survive” and bought us all copies. In a lot of ways, as a company, we realized

that the web had the potential to be one of the strategic inflection points in the industry that Grove talks about. At such points, there's a ten times change where everyone needs to reconsider their business. Certainly we were all excited about the web. We could see user acceptance, and that this was something that was taking off. So we wanted Office to be a survivor of this inflection point, and beyond that to help lead users through the transition."

The design response to these factors would be tricky enough for someone starting with a clean slate. But those 60 million people have invested a lot in learning how to use the product as it exists. So Office has a case of the classic installed base "problem." As Andrew Kwatinetz puts it, "It's always fun to think about starting over. Sometimes people say: 'Oh, the Office design team must have such problems. You have all that backwards compatibility, all that file format stuff, all that TCO stuff. Boy, it must be hard to design.' And my answer is always, Yeah, I've got 60 million people using my product. Boy, that's a problem. That's a problem you want to have. I think the true test of a designer is overcoming constraints. Compare it to an architect who builds homes. Any architect can take a brand new plot of land and a million dollars and come up with an attractive home. But do a remodel on an existing home with a tight budget and tight schedule, and have that turn out good. That's a good designer. So a clear part of the vision is to not leave our users behind. The installed base is a product of our success. Our vision used to be: the way to get the customers is to aim high. Now, we have to be more concerned with keeping our customers because upgrading is actually a much larger percentage of our potential."

That attitude is pervasive throughout the team, and it serves Office well. One reason the vision has been successful lies in its ability to take what seems at first like a burden or a handicap and, almost in Aikido fashion, turning it around into a strength. For example, its not intuitive to think of Office as an HTML editor, but if it is made to create sophisticated and fully formatted HTML, it leverages the installed base and automatically there are 60 million web authors who know how to create HTML.

Of course, several other conditions impacted the design, as well:

### **“We Have Met the Competition and They Is Us”**

Office is at a turning point (some would say a sea change) in its evolution and life cycle. Largely a result of the product's dominant market share and high customer satisfaction ratings, the biggest potential roadblock to success for Office9 is that customers of earlier versions are satisfied with what they have. Granted, Office program managers concocted worst case scenarios wherein some new market entrants with totally different feature sets and positioning might compete successfully ("only the paranoid survive!"), and in some geographies Office faces strong traditional competitors, but in the largest view, Microsoft Office is in the unusual, enviable, and somewhat vexing position of being its own strongest competition. Customers are most likely to consider whether or not to upgrade from previous versions of Office, rather than whether to deploy a competitor's product. As Heikki Kanerva, a long-time Office program manager now leading the Office TCO development team, put it, "The bad news is that we're facing the strongest competitor

ever in the form of our previous version; the good news is that we know very well how that competitor works.”

The implications of that position are important to the development of Office9. First, it means that the bar is set high for Office9 to be a compelling purchase decision. Office is no longer competing on the basis of feature lists; a few new features in each application won't be sufficient motivation to upgrade. Rather the value proposition is the determinant: What can users do with the product that they couldn't do before? Thus, the importance of creating compelling functionality was raised up several notches. Heikki Kanerva again: “Lots of people were saying that Office is pretty much at the end of its life cycle. ‘Once you have a monolithic app that does everything you can think of, how much better can it get? What new can you add?’ But the vision statement was based on the opinion of Office management that we were just beginning to express what Office could become and how useful and essential it could become to businesses of all sizes as well as individuals.”

Some would argue that the web represents a new platform, and the best tool for the new platform will win. Some new tool could be the best web editing tool. But the planning team felt there's no reason why it can't be Office. While Office may have to lug around a lot of old code and change a lot of old code, any new tool would have to add code to provide some kind of transition. The old world and way of doing things doesn't just go away. People will still be doing a lot of printing, crunching a lot of numbers, manipulating databases, and making a lot of presentations. So Office's great advantage is that it can perform in both traditional and new ways at the same time. The same Word document that a user writes to print a copy and send in an envelope or hand out at a meeting, can be e-mailed to some people, and also posted to a web site. And the document is exactly the same and looks exactly the same in each of those delivery mechanisms, without requiring conversion document. And someone receiving it in e-mail, or pulling it down from a web site, can edit it as they would any other Word document, because it still contains all the Word features.

While Office may have some disadvantages on this new platform, it also has some real advantages that derive from the product's maturity: It's been optimized for a long time. For example, some of the pure HTML editors are really good—better than Office—at managing tags. But they may not copy and paste or spell check as fast as Office. And people copy and paste more than they do anything else. On the other hand, its binary file formats are partially based on the that the most important thing was the speed of loading and saving Word and Excel documents. But for an increasing number of people, that's no longer the most important thing. So the challenge for the vision is to distinguish among those features optimized for the current experience, and find the proper balance between current and future benefits to the users.

Given the much stronger role IT departments are playing in the buying decision process, the position also means that barriers to implementation or administration are absolutely unacceptable. If deploying or maintaining the product requires any extraordinary efforts, the game's over; upgrading won't even be considered.

