

Introduction

This is a discussion paper about Infocouncil and the cloud. We acknowledge the inevitability of the cloud and the imperative for us to operate successfully in it.

Some key questions arise as soon as we contemplate the prospect of placing Infocouncil in the cloud:

- Which of the following will councils put in the cloud; file serving, database serving, application serving, desktop applications?
- Will EDRMS be operated in the cloud?
- Will councils have their own cloud or use a vendor's?

The answers to these questions may have a bearing on how we proceed.

Word Online

Word Online is a mere shadow of the desktop version.

Compare the paragraph options between the two versions.

Font options are very limited.

Word Online has basic table functionality compared to the powerful desktop version.

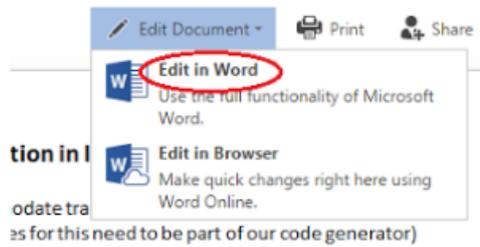
There are no Design, References or Mailings tabs in the online ribbon.

You can't work with table of contents, bookmarks, fields, watermarks, variables, properties, and the list goes on.

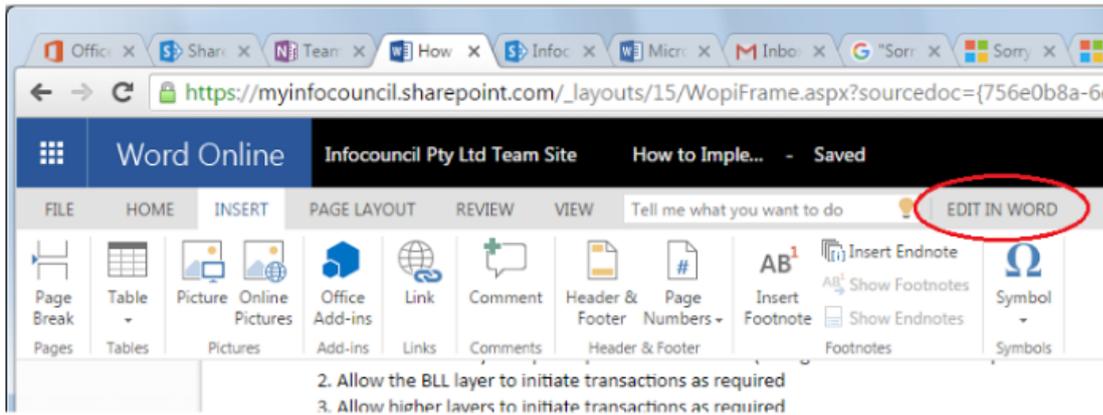
When you use Word Online you are often asked whether you want to continue in desktop Word. Microsoft is not pretending Word Online is a replacement for the desktop yet. Have a look at the screenshots overleaf for some examples of this.

Heads in the Cloud

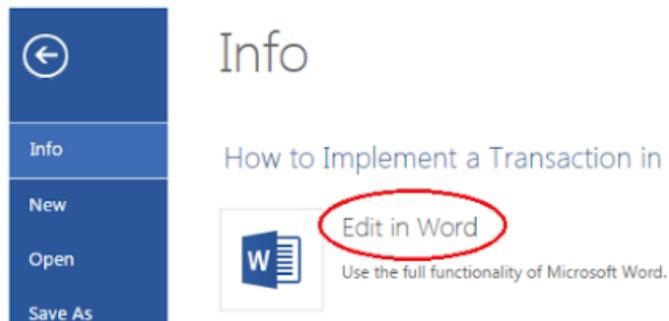
Opening a document for edit



Whist in a document



Looking at a document Info



However, for all that, Word Online is a superb offering; it is free for all to use and it is gradually getting better. It will only grow in importance from here onwards.

Word Online Add-ins

Last year, for the first time, basic add-ins could be incorporated with Word Online. Only a few months ago Microsoft released the ability for an add-in to be able to customise the ribbon. At the same time they also released the ability for programmers to start to control some aspects of a Word document beyond just simple getting and setting text.

Infocouncil is an add-in. It makes extensive use of the richness of functionality offered by the desktop application. This is a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because it has enabled us to make Infocouncil what it is today; the undisputed leader in Australia and New Zealand for agenda management software. No competitor can match our ability to deliver the documents you want in the formats you want. It is a curse because Word Online is too far behind for us to simply make Infocouncil work, as is, in the cloud.

All is not lost however. We know that councils want workforce mobility. We know that councils want to cut the costs of their IT infrastructure. We know that cloud computing is becoming the new normal. Therefore, we are developing a strategy for achieving a cloud version of Infocouncil.

First Step

One day all of the functionality of Infocouncil will be operable from the cloud. But initially our focus is on the following:

- Locating Infocouncil documents in the cloud, whether stored inside or outside an EDRMS, but access them from inside the organisation's firewall,
- Locating Infocouncil documents on a file server in the cloud and the Infocouncil database on a database server in the cloud, and accessing them from inside or outside the organisation's firewall from a Windows device that has Word desktop and Infocouncil installed.

These are our first priorities. At this point we will be starting to achieve workforce mobility. We will also be starting to reduce infrastructure costs. And more importantly we are not preventing councils from using the cloud for their file serving. The Infocouncil application still needs to be managed on internal devices and also now on external devices.

We will start on this after we deliver a 64 bit version of Infocouncil later in 2016.

Second Step

Our focus will then shift to the following scenario:

- Provide a cut down version of Infocouncil, locatable on an application server in the cloud, which will operate on any device with Word Online or Word desktop, inside or outside the organisation's firewall.

Heads in the Cloud

- This will allow staff to author reports on any device, authorise reports and papers and manage actions.

This is our next cloud priority. This achieves very good staff mobility with Infocouncil because the broadest user base is authors and authorisers. It eliminates the need for managing the Infocouncil application on external devices. It can also eliminate the need for managing the Infocouncil application on internal devices, for those members of staff that are authors only.

However, to achieve this we may have to offer restricted functionality, because we will be constrained by what Word Online supports.

Illustration of Second Step

Let's walk through what it might be like to use these early features of Infocouncil in the cloud. This is subject to change particularly with respect to how Word Online evolves.

The following screenshot is an impression of the Create Report function in the Infocouncil ribbon in the cloud.

The screenshot displays the Microsoft Word Online interface. At the top, the ribbon includes 'Word Online', 'Tim Farrelly', 'Document2 - Saved', and a 'Share' button. Below the ribbon, the 'INFOCOUNCIL' tab is active, showing a 'Tell me what you want to do' search bar and an 'EDIT IN WORD' button. The 'INFOCOUNCIL' ribbon contains icons for 'Create', 'Document', 'Actions', 'Report', and 'Menu'. A task pane titled 'INFOCOUNCIL - Create Report' is open on the left side of the document. This pane contains several input fields: 'Meeting' (a dropdown menu), 'Date' (a date picker), 'Authors' (a text input field), 'Authorisers' (a dropdown menu), and 'Report Type' (a dropdown menu). The main document area is currently blank. At the bottom of the window, the status bar shows 'PAGE 1 OF 1', '0 WORDS', and 'ENGLISH (U.S.)'.

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A task pane will appear with the same fields that you are familiar with but formatted differently. At the bottom of the task pane, clicking OK will send the field data – the metadata – from Word Online to Infocouncil. Behind the scenes Infocouncil will:

- Create a new report document based on the appropriate report template for your organisation,
- Customise the report based on the metadata,
- Save the document to the default location,
- Open the new report ready for editing.

The Document Menu button will give access to pre-existing Infocouncil documents. A pane will display allowing reports to be listed and opened much like the current desktop screen. The grid displaying the results will not be as fully featured as the one we enjoy today.

Entering report attachments and confidentiality is problematic with the current Word Online offering. Capturing the information is easy and will be handled by other panes. What is tricky is editing the report in the very, very rich way we currently do. One simple possibility is that we don't render the saved information in the report, but instead render it in the business paper. Another alternative is to restrict the rendering to a more basic and standard approach (i.e. all documents in the cloud would render in the same way).

These restrictions will compel councils to adapt their templates to a degree. By the time we have completed our first step, we may have more options. Either way we will come up with a workable solution.

Authorisations will present much like they do today, except you will be able to do them anywhere, anytime, on any smart device.

Clicking Actions in the cloud will open a new browser window, outside Word Online. Actions will be worked with independently of Word. We know some of our clients desire this ability today.

Online Minutes

Another item in our sights is to:

- Enhance the online version of Infocouncil to also allow the capture of minutes on any device, inside or outside the firewall.

Heads in the Cloud

Infocouncil currently includes a function for doing Remote Minutes. It enables a council to take minutes documents away from the office (and away from any network connection), capture the minutes of a meeting, and then return to the office to transfer the minutes document back into Infocouncil.

In the cloud, we will enable minute taking anywhere an internet connection is possible.

This enhancement will be more difficult than report authoring because the minutes tools need to edit the document upon immediate use. If you invoke the New Item tool, you expect to see the new item appear in your document. Should Word Online evolve to make this feasible, we will continue down that path. If not then we will look for an alternative approach.

EDRMS

We have every intention of continuing to integrate with those records management products that we currently do. Given that councils have succeeded in making Word Online communicate with their EDRMS, we anticipate no issue with this. We will continue to explore this area to understand the offerings in this space and how they might be applied to Infocouncil in the cloud.

Hosting

It is conceivable that the Infocouncil application could operate in a cloud owned by Infocouncil. Your databases would reside there along with your Infocouncil documents. In many ways this would be the simplest model for us, facilitating the currency of hosted applications and databases. It would also probably be the highest performing model because files, data and application would be in the same data centre.

We suspect that many councils will want to host their documents, including their Infocouncil documents, in a central repository in the cloud. If this is the case, councils will host their database and the Infocouncil application in their own cloud.

Cloud computing is still in its early days and we may see the situation arise whereby your files remain with you and the application and database reside with us. This would offer the best of both worlds.

Futures

Beyond this we will look to migrate the rest of Infocouncil to the cloud:

- Business paper creation is the most intensive process and it lends itself to being done in the background in the cloud. Ideally this process would run close to where the reports and database are stored to minimise bandwidth. This process could even speed up when in the cloud,
- Actions upload is less intensive but also lends itself to being done in the background in the cloud,
- Administrative functions in the cloud may end up being presented in a browser rather than in Word Online.

So these are our immediate thoughts on enabling Infocouncil in the cloud. Stay tuned as we start delivering on this plan.

July 2016