

SP Marketplace Converts Office 365 to a Full Intranet and Collaboration Structure

SP Marketplace Business Suite

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VENDOR SPOTLIGHT REPORT

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“Office 365 and SP Marketplace Business Suite represent the biggest transformational opportunity for SMBs in the history of IT. In one strategic decision an SMB CEO can consolidate and automate traditional business processes, empower employees for self service, and drive competitive advantage through collaboration.”

Darrell Trimble, SP Marketplace

Company and Product Background

Headquartered in Sacramento, California, and founded in 2012, SP Marketplace offers Microsoft Cloud (Office 365) applications for small- to medium-sized businesses (SMBs). Most specifically, SP Marketplace offers business and collaboration applications on top of SharePoint, either in the Office 365 cloud or on premise (with greater concentration on the former). Today the company has over 400 customers around the world, the large majority of which are SMBs (50–1000 employees), but also included are larger corporations like Walmart and Johnson & Johnson.

The vendor targets companies across all industries that are currently using Office 365 or SharePoint on premise. Most of these organizations are looking to set in place intranets, department sites, and employee portals, as well as automate some business processes, all in an effort to improve their operations. In fact, SP Marketplace prospects and new clients often have very little automation in place and often still rely on Excel spreadsheets and email for approvals and other types of workflows.

The SP Marketplace suite includes several modules—Intranet, Employee Self Service, HR, IT Help Desk, Facilities, Training, CRM, Project Tracker, Customer Service, and Forms Portal—that have been designed to support the core business needs of SMBs that want to move to the cloud.

The SP Business Suite provides the next level of capabilities for Office 365. The value proposition of SP Marketplace is its no-code application development model that is 100% customizable and worldwide coverage at a reasonable price that cannot be matched by the competition—i.e. consultants that oftentimes build custom solutions on top of SharePoint. The vendor’s central policy with respect to developing its applications is that it will not add any custom code if it can leverage capabilities that already exist in SharePoint.

SP Marketplace offers training services which include the formation of power users within each organization as a central go-to resource and contact point for each organization using the SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365. The training usually takes no more than three hours and is designed for individuals that have advanced knowledge of SharePoint from a business perspective and not necessarily from an admin perspective (i.e. setting up servers or doing .NET programming).

Although primarily a software company, SP Marketplace offers a service called Solution Provisioning which allows users to pick and choose templates that they want, and, further, use the vendor's Quick Start Services which installs these templates with permissions included. Additionally, customization services are available if clients do not have an in-house developer.

Cost effective branding services are also available by leveraging skin templates where the vendor has applied customer colors, logos, images, text, etc. Finally, the vendor helps companies with adding third party Web parts, embedded into the solution or bought from the Microsoft App Store (e.g. weather Web parts). These three services ultimately create a full blown solution providing the "right" solution for an organization from both a look and feel and a functionality perspective. As an organization grows the solution can grow and change with it.

SP Marketplace is also a reseller of application add-ins that SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 clients can purchase via an online marketplace. For example, Layer2 is a tool that allows integration between Office 365 and most back office systems. Or, Lansweeper is a network inventory application which IT can use to access servers or computers.

In the future, SP Marketplace plans to build strategies to tackle its recent rapid growth by putting more structured processes in place, and improving product packaging. From a product perspective, the Forms Portal offering will be promoted and enhanced. This is a [new product](#) which allows an organization to take existing forms (PDF, Excel, Word) and use them as a data capture vehicle for SharePoint list data and workflows. As a result, a user no longer has to be on SharePoint to submit data into it.

SP Marketplace packages its products under a perpetual license model with a renewal fee every year. The vendor offers various options (small, medium, large) or individual modules. Add-on third party tools can be added to these packages.

Being a vendor that provides a full suite of business solutions for Office 365 SharePoint Online for SMBs, SP Marketplace is seeking to establish SMB best practices for organizations running their businesses in the cloud. In so doing the vendor expects to educate the market, and drive more sales. Although the vendor typically advertises the breadth of the suite overall, it also packages vertical suites for interested prospects. The vendor also goes to market through its partner network, which counts over 30 partners, mostly Microsoft Cloud service partners around the world.

The Business Need for SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365

Office 365 is oftentimes a good choice to meet small business requirements for automation and for companies interested in moving to the cloud to better achieve business operations and goals. Companies that are already on Office 365 usually want to leverage and further their potential, especially as they grow over time without an IT model. SP Marketplace is reacting to business needs rather than doing a stand back strategy around how to deploy or integrate various systems together.

When a company is in an expansion phase it adds new departments like IT or HR to better manage its operations. These departments typically grow to have their own technological needs and seek to buy different systems such as IT helpdesk, HR self service, while continuing to use some Excel and email. As a result, a company accumulates so many systems that its technological infrastructure becomes chaotic and therefore expensive to maintain cost- and time-wise.

Companies who move to Office 365 seek to create a cloud platform to better streamline their processes. However often what ends up happening is that once they have achieved certain immediate goals, such as eliminating the Exchange server for email and setting up SharePoint for document management, companies tend to stop there. As a result, they are not maximizing the full potential of Office 365. SP Marketplace can come into the picture to take the product to the next level and add business process and collaboration capabilities.

Furthermore, SP Marketplace leverages the Office 365 platform—especially SharePoint—to allow employees to have a central point or an intranet portal where they can access news, information, and collaboration. Also, beyond that, the vendor offers a module that employees can use to reach out to departments such as IT or HR.

An Intranet Solution Structure

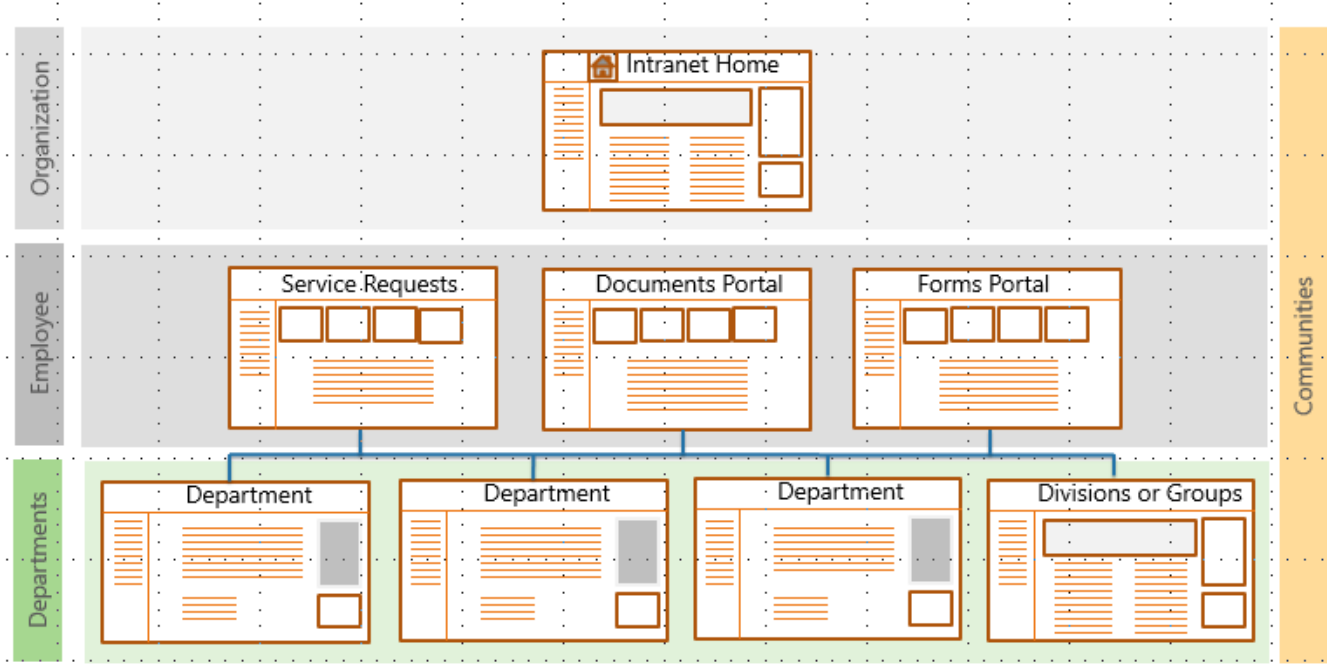


Figure 1. SP Marketplace intranet structure

SP Marketplace puts in place a structure that is intuitive to use and adapted to the context of each organization. At the top level the vendor delivers an Internet portal for communication, followed by employee self-service capability, whereby employees can submit requests, view policies, access documents, track projects, use forms, etc. In other words, there is a sub-service for employees, which enables them to easily do business within the organization.

Finally, the departments themselves that provide services (IT, HR, etc.) can each have their own department portals, with department-specific services, process automation, and employee self-service. The main business benefit that ensues is a consistent approach across the organization for the provision of employee services and information, in addition to sharing and collaboration capabilities.

If a client requires the setting up of another department aside from the ones included by SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 out of the box (HR, IT, facilities, projects, customer service, CRM), a department template offers built-in service requests for processing, portals, libraries, and dashboards which the company can choose to populate if they have a need for these capabilities.

The SP marketplace “best practices” Intranet structure design has been carefully put together to ensure effective communication and collaboration as well as facilitate the successful tracking and completion of tasks at hand by employees that support internal services within an organization.

SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365: The Experience

An intranet provides users with access to employee services, communities, and department portals. From a navigation perspective, the intranet portal can be accessed via the Office 365 site link. Out of the box the intranet portal has a section for company news and announcements, embedded blogs, the company Tweeter feed, and industry news from RSS feeds. From here users have links to other systems or external Web sites.

The portal also includes Web parts which can be interchangeable. SP Marketplace resells a series of Web parts such as Point8020 which features online on-demand help tutorials for Office 365, including a “show me” button that users can press to view the required steps to execute actions (e.g. upload a document).

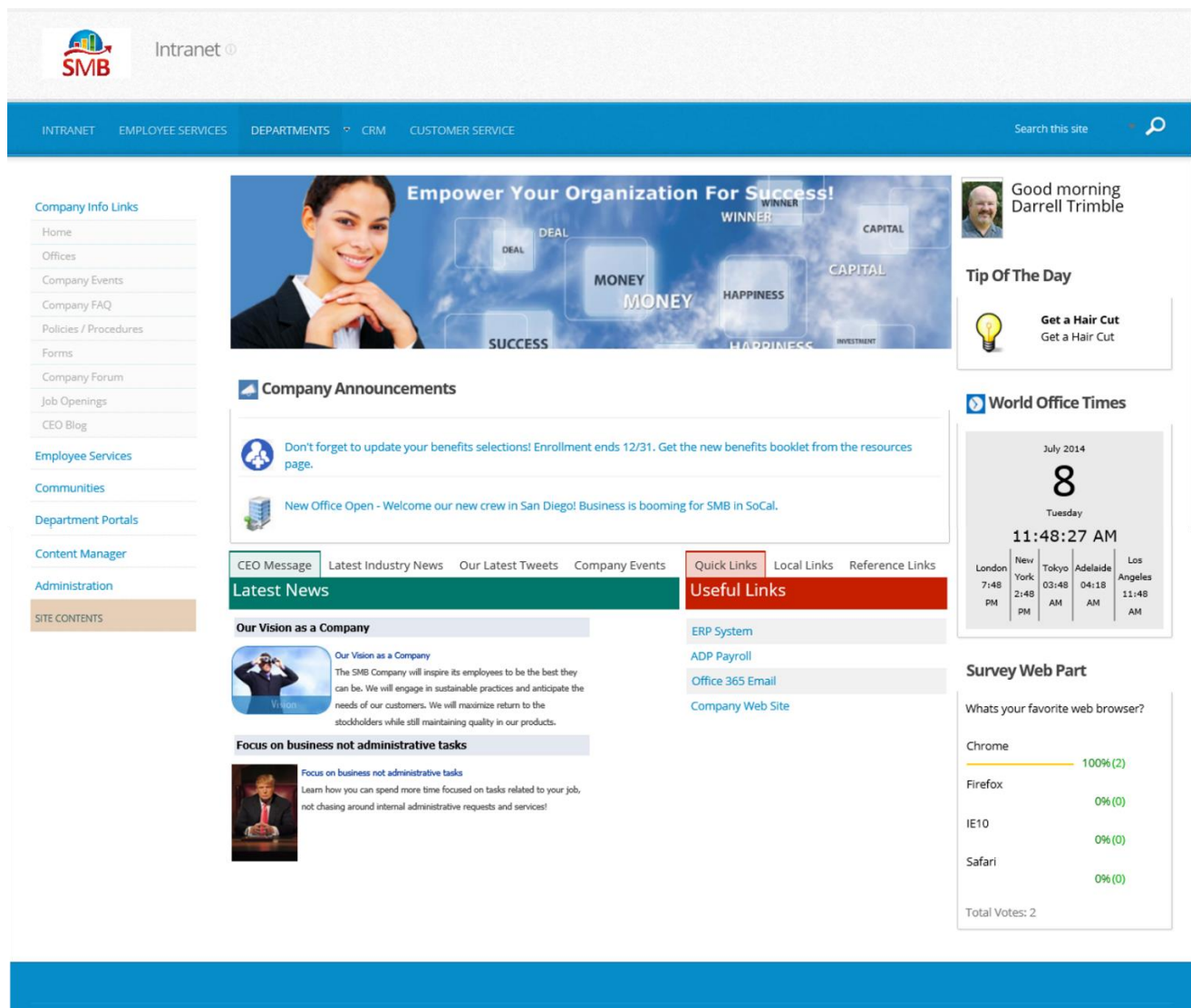


Figure 2. Intranet home page

The drill-down menu allows users to have one-click access to navigate to other pages such as company offices, a company forum, blogs, etc. For companies that have distributed employees in many locations and who cannot always chase down administrative and support staff, an FAQ page and online access to forms are particularly important.

The intranet configuration can be changed via a content manager module where users with the right permissions can make changes to any section of the portal, including links, policies, forms, offices, events, announcements, etc. If new sections are added they automatically appear in the content manager panel. If the structure of the page requires modification, the standard SharePoint page editor can be accessed directly from the intranet, thus avoiding any HTML coding.

SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 has the ability to create an employee directory by integrating with Windows Active Directory or by leveraging its import tool and transferring user/employee data from Office 365. If some employees are not on Office 365 (e.g. factory workers) they can still be added manually. The employee directory can be visualized in the form of a list to which users can add columns via standard SharePoint functions.

Employees can take advantage of a service portal where they can perform frequent tasks such as time sheet submission, time off approvals, etc. Users can open documents such as expense reports directly with Excel or other MS Office applications and then attach them to their expense approval requests. In the future, the PDF file format will also be supported. In this instance SP Marketplace takes the many forms that SMBs usually already have in place and uses them as is or translates them into SharePoint format, as opposed to creating new ones from scratch. The solution also has a form processor that enhances existing SharePoint forms.

HR help desk is another feature that employees can benefit from whenever they have a new request for HR—for instance, if an employee needs to renew his or her work papers by a certain time he or she can submit a request which the system routes to HR. The HR help desk system also sends notifications to HR team members in charge of the process.

Manager services are accessible for employees with manager status. In this case, managers can monitor and submit approvals and view department and executive reports. An overall company and department time off calendar facilitates the role of managers in deciding whether it is appropriate to approve or reject certain time off requests. Rooms and resources can also be scheduled based on availabilities. Similarly, finance managers can have access to an overall picture of expenses via groups with functions in SharePoint.

SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365: Product Highlights

SP Marketplace is taking a different approach to business applications with the SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365, as the vendor has built these tools on top of a communication and collaboration platform that employees are already using by leveraging the SharePoint user interface.

An important aspect of SP Marketplace is that it supports all SharePoint editions of Office 365—hence its other aforementioned benefit: almost zero custom code. This puts SP Marketplace in a good position within the Microsoft Office 365 landscape, as the vendor does not make major changes to the SharePoint application but rather merges its own suite of applications seamlessly for a better user experience, including access to the system from any device and any place at any time.

Additionally, the solution integrates with the rest of the Office suite, so if users want to get in touch, create documents, set tasks, etc. these actions are readily available in the SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365. The various modules of the suite maintain the same user interface, which drives adoption, as it offers an easy way for employees to navigate from one department portal to another.

The SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 tracks activities and expertise of different lines of business within an organization. For example, HR tracks employees so that HR managers can see all documents, activities, and correspondence related to every employee. To that end, the system is cross-referencing other systems that may be used by an HR department, such as a human resources information system (HRIS).

Another benefit of the suite is that its components work tightly together. For instance, if HR has a new policy that it is working on, the team can publish it and collect feedback on it. Or, if a position requisition is approved by a manager, then the available job becomes public on the intranet. Similarly, for IT, if an employee encounters problems with her computer she can easily submit a request for it to be looked at. While modules can be purchased individually, if bought together they help ensure better flow between departments.

Detailed Use Case—SharePoint HR

The HR employee portal of SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 is like an intranet homepage with specific tasks that are usually administered by HR staff. An employee can view onboarding tasks, news and announcements, his/her employee profile, performance review tasks, learning tasks, etc. HR staff members accessing the HR page will have access to a separate view where they can edit service requests, create news, assign tasks, etc.

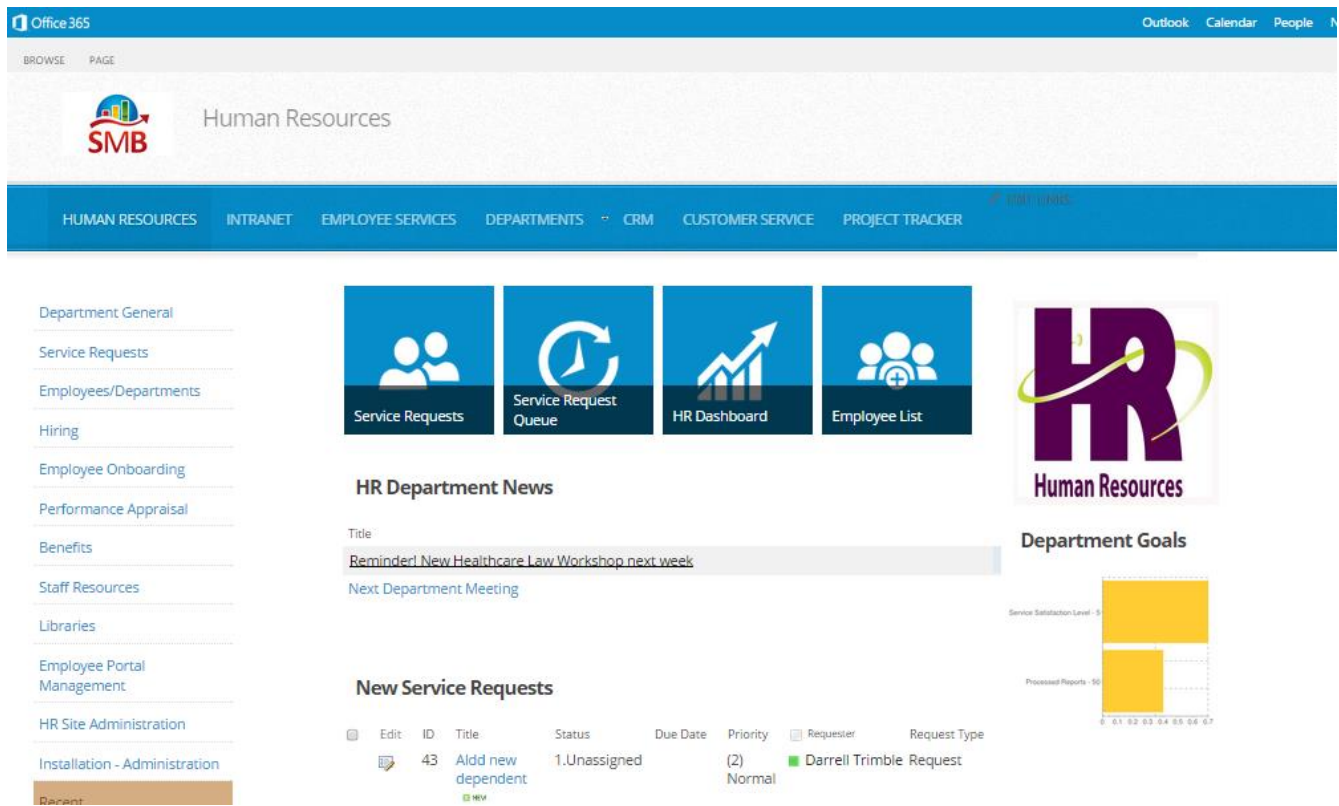


Figure 3. HR department site

Each service request cross references information that is needed for that service request to be examined and executed or approved. For instance, a request for a work visa references the immigration status of the worker as well as the expiry date of the visa.

Department dashboards help visualize the overall routines of a department and the progress made on specific tasks. The suite also has a feature called “superview,” which allows HR to view all the information related to an employee, from profile, payroll, and performance information to learning activities. The system can hold documents, certification information, and certification due dates.

The HR module can also assist with the hiring process, from job opening to onboarding. It takes requisitions to approval and then allows the publishing of jobs on Web sites. Applicant data can be captured directly from Web page application forms, and resumes are stored in a resume library which can be searched. Applicants become candidates, with candidate profiles that store all applicant data as well as candidate feedback, resumes, requisitions of interest, and interview data and processes.

Once a candidate has been selected for a position, the system creates a new employee record and an onboarding requisition. Managers and HR can create sets of tasks and templates to assign to employees based on their job roles. Onboarding tasks can be assigned to multiple departments (IT, HR, training, etc.),

as new hires require certain things such as passwords, direct deposits, and training activities to be delivered to them.

Performance appraisals processes can also be handled with the HR module of SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365. Upcoming reviews can be accessed, and once active, a workflow is set in motion and employees and managers are invited to participate. Emails are sent to employees with links to reviews, and once completed the reviews are automatically submitted for approval.

The solution offers a benefits administration tool where employers can track the various benefit plans that they offer and the employees that are on them. This is particularly beneficial for companies with cross-state or country employees, as they usually have multiple plans for the different regions.

SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 also includes useful tools to administer HR staff resources, and document libraries for housing and organizing HR and other documents internally.

SP Marketplace Customer Success Story

Flexi-Van is a world-renowned marine chassis leasing company with about 200 employees that is based in New Jersey and operates out of over 300 locations across North America. The company provides leasing services on over 150,000 units to shipping companies across the continent.

Challenge

In an effort to reduce costs and increase efficiency, the company began investigating options to replace its former IT help desk solution, IssueTrak, tired of constantly paying a monthly fee for a service that did not meet all of the company's needs. Furthermore, IssueTrak did not allow the company to customize the software the way it wanted to. Flexi-Van was looking for a help desk that was easy to use, customizable, and inexpensive, and also contained all of the standard issue-tracking features.

Solution

Shortly after beginning the search, Flexi-Van's information technology manager Donna Donatacci found that there were an extensive number of IT help desk solutions to choose from and all of them had their own individual pros and cons. Flexi-Van preferred an application that would leverage its existing SharePoint platform. That way, the company's users were already familiar with the user interface and they would require no additional sign-ons. After evaluating around 20 different help desk services, Flexi-Van's management found the right balance of function, simplicity, and cost in SP Marketplace's SharePoint IT Support Application.

After watching the product demonstration, the managers at Flexi-Van were sold on the IT Support Application. They were impressed by the product's flexible customizability and intuitive user experience. These characteristics, combined with an unbeatable price, made it a great fit and Flexi-Van immediately decided to purchase the product.

The application was installed on the company's existing SharePoint 2010 and the IT Support Application was up and running almost immediately. "The training process was almost nothing," says Donatucci, and due to the application's intuitive design and standard layout there was "barely any transition." Flexi-Van's employees readily accepted the new help desk and have reported that the software is easy to use and that they have no complaints.

Flexi-Van is so satisfied with this first purchase from SP Marketplace that it has now acquired the new SharePoint Project Tracker Application. This application is designed, like all of the SharePoint Business Suite, to link with the IT Support Application. New projects can be linked to help desk tickets, change requests, and IT assets. Flexi-Van expects that having these applications work together will allow it to see when and where specific logistic issues arise. This will lead to making better planning forecasts, becoming more efficient and, ultimately, more profitable.

Conclusion

SP Marketplace has developed SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 to be a one stop shop for the SMB Office 365 users who want to maximize their utilization of the Microsoft cloud-based suite. SharePoint Business Suite for Office 365 stands out for its potential to be configured by business power users according to a company's requirements. The suite seamlessly integrates with Microsoft Outlook, Office, and Lync, thus driving adoption by end users that are accustomed to the Microsoft interface (desktop and mobile). In fact, SP Marketplace instantly turns SharePoint from a naked platform to a full intranet and collaboration structure.

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