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# Public Folders in Exchange Server 2010: What You Should Know

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## Introduction

In the early days of the beta version of what became known as Exchange 2007, the internet was littered with rumors and speculation about the demise of Exchange Public Folders. The implementation of Public Folders in the initial release to market instance of that product did little to convince us that Microsoft was going to support them for long. All administration of Public Folders had to be performed from the Exchange Management Shell, and that was a difficult pill for many Exchange admins to swallow. Furthermore, there was a lack of support for Public Folders in Outlook Web Access (OWA).

Things cleared up with Exchange 2007 SP1, when the Public Folder Management Console (PFMC) made its debut. While still lacking the ability to assign permissions, the PFMC allowed us to perform many tasks in a familiar-looking GUI environment, and the OWA issue was resolved. More importantly, Microsoft provided us with guidance about the future of Public Folders and the circumstances where we can and should use them.

In this white paper we will examine Exchange Public Folders and consider where they fit in our plans for a messaging infrastructure. Our examination will take us through:

1. What Public Folders Are
2. Moving From Exchange 2003 to Exchange 2010
3. Moving From Exchange 2007 to Exchange 2010
4. Moving From Other Messaging Infrastructures to Exchange 2010
5. Leaving Public Folders Behind
6. What the Future May Hold

By the time you have finished reading this white paper, you may see some sunlight poking through the clouds of this issue.

## What Are Public Folders?

With apologies to the seasoned Exchange admins out there, here is a thumbnail view of Exchange Public Folders. They are used bring together information that we wish to share with other members of our organization. Our Public Folders are often mail-enabled and are, therefore, the direct recipients of e-mail. They can also be used as a repository of information for collaborating users. As a result, in some Exchange organizations, the Public Folder infrastructure became quite extensive.

The replication of Public Folder content and structure can be performed extensively, but the toll on network and server resources has forced large organizations to scale back on their desire to make multiple replicas of the databases available, although without a highly accessible structure, the value of Public Folders diminishes greatly.

Historically, Public Folders were also used to disseminate free and busy information to aid in scheduling and to provide access to offline address books (OAB). The System Public Folders that performed the free/busy and OAB tasks were relegated to legacy status with the advent of Exchange 2007, Outlook 2007, and the Client Access Server role, which made them no longer necessary for those system tasks.

## Moving from Exchange 2003 to Exchange 2010

For an enterprise moving from Exchange Server 2003 to Exchange Server 2010, there are several questions that you must ask.

1. What version of Outlook is being used?
2. How much are Public Folders being used in the organization?
3. How are Public Folders being administered in the organization?
4. How much change can be tolerated in the migration?

### What version of Outlook is being used?

Unless Outlook 2007 or later is deployed, the System Public Folders are still heavily used for the free/busy and OAB information. Those of you who have already installed Exchange 2010 (or 2007, for that matter) have noticed that during the wizard-based installation, a question about the Outlook version is raised. Unless the installing administrator answers that there are pre- 2007 Outlook clients in the environment, no Public Folder databases are created. While an error responding to that question can be corrected, it is best to make certain of your choice before the query is made.

### How much are Public Folders being used in the organization?

There are some organizations that have Exchange structures that date back to the four or five versions of the product that have hardly used the collaborative features of the Public Folder. Sure, the system information was used, but that was under the covers. Of course, there are other organizations where Public Folders contain all files that are used in the enterprise. Most structures lie somewhere between the two extremes.

For those who are barely using Public Folders, the choice is easy - do nothing. As long as Outlook 2007 or 2010 will be used, do not even set up a Public Folder Database. Lest I forget to mention it, we can only have one Public Folder Database in our Exchange 2010 environment.

It's the heavy users that present the problem. Public Folder replication will still be a necessary administrative evil. The coolest new feature of Exchange 2010, the Database Availability Group (DAG) is, alas, unavailable for the Public Folder Database. Then, there is the inevitability of the demise of the Public Folder, however distant that it may appear.

## How are Public Folders being administered in the organization?

In Exchange 2003, administrators could control all management of Public Folders in the console. End-users with the appropriate permissions could manage Public Folders through Outlook. If that latter approach is employed throughout an organization, there should be an easier transition. For those enterprises that really wish to stick with the console to fully manipulate Public Folders, it is possible to retain Exchange 2003 for that purpose alone.

## How much change can be tolerated in the migration?

It's about time that I mention the 800-pound collaboration gorilla in the Microsoft zoo. It is called SharePoint, and it continues to be the best method that Microsoft has to share information. While not as mature as Exchange, it is about to enter its fourth iteration with the SharePoint Foundation 2010 and SharePoint Server 2010, and solidly provides sharing and search in ways that the Public Folder cannot.

It is hard to imagine that an organization would be excited about a move that included a new messaging system along with a new collaboration structure. Yet, for some, that may make the most sense.

## Moving from Exchange 2007 to Exchange 2010

For the forward-thinking messaging organization that implemented Exchange 2007 and now is choosing to take advantage of the enhancements of Exchange 2010, similar questions might be raised, but I expect that the answers may be different. My guess would be that Outlook 2003 would not be involved here. Therefore, Public Folders are truly optional in this environment. If Public Folders are still being successfully used in a pure 2007 environment, there is no immediate need to move away from them. If there have been issues, perhaps migration time is the right time to consider SharePoint.

## Moving from Other Messaging Infrastructures to Exchange 2010

Just say no. Without the historical reliance on Public Folders, why start? Collaboration can be had in whatever manner it was done before. If it was SharePoint, fine. If it was something else, use that, or SharePoint, or something else. I simply would not begin to use a technology that is going to die even if it is going to be maintained in the current version.

## Leaving Public Folders Behind

For those of you who have decided to migrate to SharePoint, Microsoft has left you in the hands of their partners; that is, there is no free migration tool provided. A quick search on Bing (I verified it with Google) quickly disclosed products from Quest, Metalogix, Tsunmai, Casahl, and AvePoint, and since no one is paying me for an endorsement, I suggest a download of each of their trials followed by resultant sales calls. There is also an open source solution that can be found on the Codeplex site, but I have yet to wade into that morass.

Of course, the knowledge of how to administer an Exchange Public Folder infrastructure will not translate easily to administering a SharePoint site, let alone a SharePoint farm. But that knowledge will make you more marketable.

## What the Future May Hold

I am neither fortunate enough to possess a working crystal ball nor foolish enough to place complete reliance on the guidance provided by Microsoft. The most recent pronouncements from Redmond suggest full support of Public Folders for the next ten years in Exchange 2010. Reading between the lines, the guidance also indicates that the next version of Exchange (2014?) will not support Public Folders.

In the interim, the changes that we may see in information technology could make any effort to migrate away from Public Folders to SharePoint appear, in hindsight, an unnecessary waste of our time and effort. We should remember, however, that many organizations have been using Exchange for more than ten years, so we should probably take heed of the direction in which we are heading.

## Conclusion

There will come a time when we have a version of Exchange that will be incompatible with Public Folders. For those of you who are using them a lot, there should be a plan in place to move away from them. For those who have never used them, now would not be the time to start.

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## About the Author

Allan Jacobs is a trainer, consultant, and writer based in New York City. While technically an independent, Allan works almost exclusively for Global Knowledge and spends a good deal of his time traveling to client sites and training centers throughout the US. While his current interests are concentrated in the Unified Communications field, he continues to work with the Windows Server and Client Operating Systems, SharePoint, and the System-Center suite. He has served as a speaker at the MCT Virtual Summit for Office Communications Server 2007 R2, as an Expert at TechEd in Unified Communications, and Expert at the Launch of Exchange and SharePoint 2007. Allan was also co-author of the revision of the Microsoft Official Courseware for OCS 2007 R2. In his younger days, Allan practiced law, something that he has successfully avoided for the last ten years.