



# Managing Sprawl in Microsoft 365

How content sprawl happens, why it matters,  
and steps every IT leader should take to avoid it

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## What is Content Sprawl?

Imagine, if you will, the housing sector in much of North America. As the economy grows and thrives, communities spring up and homes are built in every direction as land developers build as quickly as possible, preferring virgin land and densely-zoned lots over reclaimed land that often includes tearing down old structures, rezoning, and higher initial costs. While these developers may initially build within a broader master plan, their goal is to maximize profits through speed and volume.

The result of this kind of rapid growth is traffic gridlock, infrastructure issues, and an increasingly unhappy populace. As many city and county administrators well understand, fixing these infrastructure issues later, after populations have increased and problems have compounded, is far more expensive than had they been considered during initial planning and zoning.

Now let's take that scenario to the IT world, and specifically collaboration or knowledge management platforms, that are often been cobbled together over time. Even within tightly managed environments with strict governance policies and procedures in place, employees create sites, generate documents, and compile lists and charts and artifacts that do not always fit within predefined templates, content types, or information architectures. **The result is content sprawl.**

Why does this happen, and can it be avoided? Technology has become increasingly user-friendly and easy to deploy, which leads to broader adoption, more usage, and greater volumes of content generated. In an effort to increase adoption and engagement, organizations often prioritize open collaboration over governance. In other words, if policy and procedure makes collaboration more difficult, many organizations reduce barriers to collaboration by streamlining the provisioning process, simplifying permissions structures, and allowing individuals and teams to use whatever tools they feel will make them the most productive – all of which can increase the volume of content sprawl.

Additionally, many companies evolve their collaboration environments without fully understanding what the technology can do, how it aligns with company culture, or how to best maintain and administer it. Furthermore, once the technology has been unleashed, few organizations understand how or where to employ sound governance policies and do not take decisive action until after damage has been done.

**The reality is that most governance initiatives are launched after the fact, once pain is felt, rather than at the start of a new technology deployment,** or when going through the process of business transformation.

The goal of this whitepaper is to help you better identify where content sprawl may be happening inside of your organization, and provide some community-hardened best practices for building your governance strategy.

# The Case for Content Governance

When your employees are using whichever tools and devices they want, having a sound governance strategy becomes essential – ensuring that your systems and data are secure. But when and where do you begin the governance planning process?

The time to begin is right now, and the first step is to assess your current content governance policies and procedures and identify what is, and what is not working. The goal of this whitepaper is to help you better identify where content sprawl may be happening inside of your organization, and provide some community-hardened best practices for building your governance strategy.

Some questions to consider:

- Do you have a documented governance model, and if so, how often are changes made to that model?
- Do documents and processes reflect the current standards governing your applications, or were they antiquated and irrelevant as soon as they were published?
- How are changes and updates to policies and procedures identified, much less implemented?

Most governance documentation comes with an expiration date due to changing business requirements and shifting legal and regulatory constraints. The fact is that governance is a living, breathing, ever-changing activity — however, lessons learned through project experiences are seldom reflected in governance documentation, causing teams to reinvent the wheel each time a new project demands a governance framework.

Even when your governance activities are well-managed, success is more often than not the result of one or two strong leaders within the organization who provide oversight and constant encouragement. Unfortunately, this kind of personality-driven success can be difficult to sustain once the leader departs the team or company. Long-term success comes by “codifying” those best practices into the company culture, creating “governance blueprints” or systems (or technology platforms) that imprint governance processes on existing organizational frameworks.



## Governance requires strong change management

Beyond capturing corporate and system requirements, governance activities necessitate a strong change management model. This is especially important if you have open policies about the tools and devices end users can adopt, as an increasing number of company's support. Part of any healthy change management methodology is having a clearly defined and communicated plan — which may include (and I strongly recommend) a logical diagram of your business requirements, systems constraints, and the policies and procedures to maintain each of them. Having this visual component makes it easier to communicate each individual aspect of your plan. As change happens, having this visual aid can also help you to better identify where changes need to be made when new tools or processes are introduced, or when your business requirements change. And believe me, they always change.

With an overarching view, your team can better understand where governance rules are, or should be, applied to your systems. A little bit of “systems thinking” can go a long way in governance planning. You will be better able to manage business-led changes to requirements, see the effects of system updates (which happen almost weekly on the Microsoft 365 platform), or the impacts of legal and regulatory changes. With a blueprint of your governance activities, you can more proactively monitor and manage your business systems and technology platforms.

Of course, it is difficult and time-consuming to build out visual maps of your systems and infrastructure and map out your governance policies against them. Few organizations recognize the value of the exercise but doing so makes it easy for teams to capture supporting documentation and artifacts and correlate that data with their related policies and procedures. It also helps your organization to develop a shared understanding of the governance methodology (sort of like a governance baseline against which you can measure your progress) and capture best practices as they are surfaced.

With a baseline in place, and a system for capturing your collective learning, employees are better able to learn from the experiences of others, and understand the impacts of a change by quickly showing which related policies and procedures are impacted.

Simply put, policies are easier to comply with when information workers can readily locate the policies that pertain to their business systems and tools — and when they have a shared understanding of the overall governance model.

Gone are the days when governance was something that resided in a binder — on a shelf, forgotten and gathering dust. To be effective and successful, governance must be an active and transparent part of the organization. End users need to know where to go find the latest policies and procedures, they need to have a voice in the changes and automations made to the business systems that they own, and they also need to see the telemetry captured before and after these changes. The more you involve the end users in the governance process, the more they will support the process – and look for additional opportunities to improve.

What is important to understand is that while the definitions may vary depending on your company culture, industry, or technical/management role, the intent is to put in place guiding principles to help you achieve business outcomes.



Have poorly defined business goals, and the governance principles you employ are meaningless. Have solid business goals and poorly defined governance principles, and you'll have a difficult time achieving those goals.

# The History of Governance Inside Microsoft 365

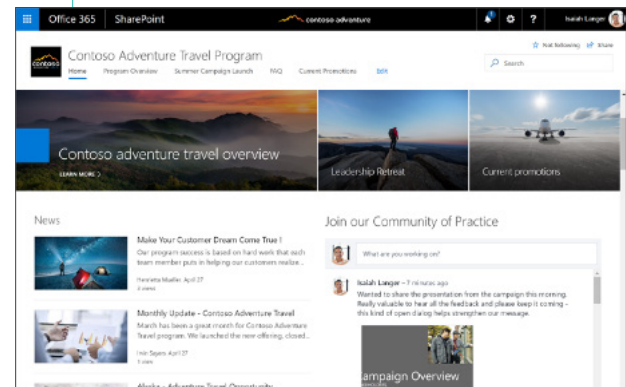
Installing a free version of SharePoint when it was in its infancy was simple. Once in place, it would quickly catch on and spread across a single team, then expand between teams, and soon could be seen throughout the entire organization. In those early waves of growth, few paid much attention to the growing sprawl of sites and content. The focus was on allowing people to quickly and easily collaborate – and the administrative impacts of many of these early decisions was rarely considered. As a result, we saw SharePoint “sprawl” across the organization.

## What does sprawl look like in Microsoft 365?

Content sprawl is not unique to Microsoft products and services, of course, but it is important to understand what it looks like within each workload – and develop strategies for managing the sprawl based on their use within your own organization:

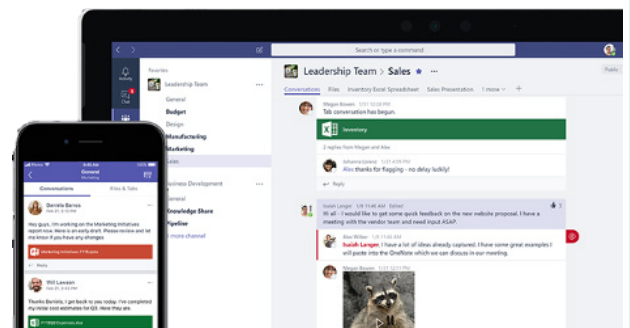
### SharePoint

Microsoft’s market-leading content collaboration platform, SharePoint is a popular solution for building portals, intranets, and extranets – and is infamous for enabling sprawl. By default, anyone can create Team Sites, with many lists and libraries (and sub-sites), and then fill them with structured and unstructured content. Without strict adherence to a formal information architecture (data classification, tagging, structure), the volume of content that is duplicated or abandoned (orphaned) can quickly get out of control.



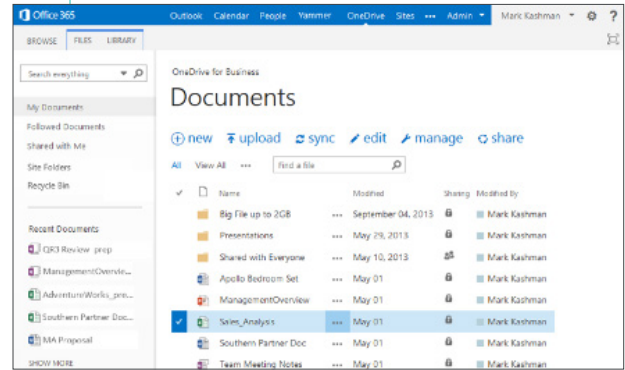
### Microsoft Teams

Now the fastest-growing product in Microsoft’s history, Teams is also becoming the leading culprit for content sprawl. Teams is not a content management platform. It utilizes both SharePoint and Exchange workloads for content and communication (respectively), and requires careful consideration of your content management requirements before rolling out to your entire company. As with SharePoint, by default anyone can create Teams and Channels and begin uploading content to its underlying SharePoint infrastructure. The chats and threaded discussions (within Channels) are captured and stored within the Exchange workload, and meeting recordings within Stream. Additionally, creation of a new Team automatically creates an Office 365 Group, which is an Azure Active Directory security group, and includes the automatic provisioning of several digital assets, such as a SharePoint team site and an Exchange shared calendar. Whether or not these assets are used, they are created and available – and can rapidly expand the volume of content sprawl.



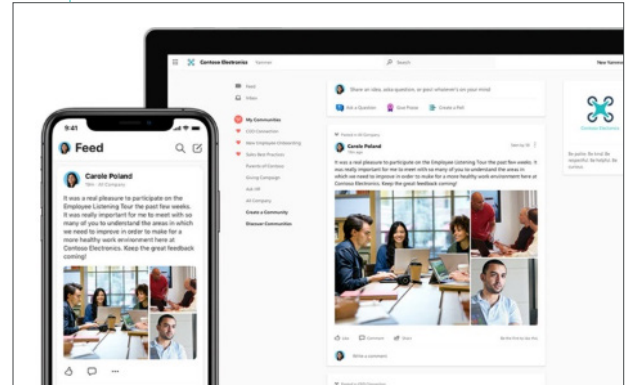
## OneDrive

OneDrive is Microsoft's cloud-based storage service. It has the ability to sync content between the desktop and the cloud. Within Microsoft 365, OneDrive for Business is essentially personal storage on the underlying SharePoint infrastructure, and contains mostly unstructured content.



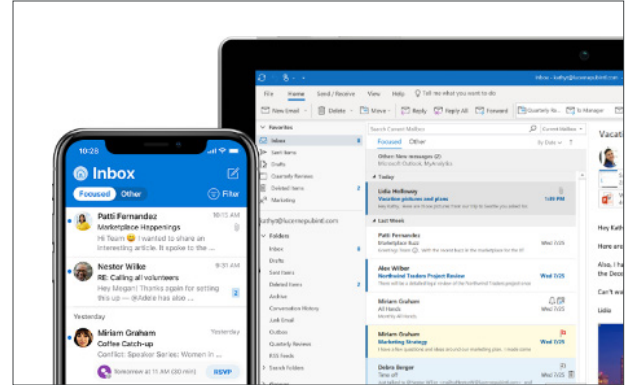
## Yammer

Yammer is Microsoft's enterprise social platform. Where SharePoint is primarily focused on intranets, and Microsoft Teams is focused on project-based collaboration, Yammer is used for broader communication and community-based activities, and utilizes the same SharePoint infrastructure for capturing and storing unstructured content, with new web parts and Microsoft Graph integrations to more tightly align Yammer with both Teams and SharePoint.



## Outlook

While the rise of collaboration and social technologies has reduced the overall volume, email remains a popular and important enterprise collaboration tool. Organizations have the ability to automate Outlook to work in concert with Teams and SharePoint (via workflow, or Power Automate), and end users can change the default setting to send links instead of attachments, reducing duplicates and encouraging cloud-based collaboration. Few organizations take the time to build these integrations or enforce cultural change, and email remains a massive source of content sprawl.



## Microsoft Office

The popular productivity applications (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote, Sway) have also evolved over the years, providing native co-editing and collaboration capabilities, and tighter alignment with SharePoint, Teams, OneDrive and Yammer. The simplicity of the Office productivity suite to generate and share content has resulted in rapid and continued growth of structured and unstructured content across all of the Microsoft 365 workloads.



# Why Organizations Tolerate **Sprawl**

Within many organizations, employees have forced IT teams to take a reactive approach to technology. They demand IT provide flexible options for collaboration, many times at the expense of structured collaboration and sound governance principles. Most employees just want to get their work done, and the thought of slowing down and submitting to bureaucratic red tape seems counterproductive.

Why is it that “fast and flexible” is viewed as mutually exclusive of “stable and scalable” when it comes to systems and repeatable processes?

Consider this example: An externally-facing corporate portal is open to customers, maintained by IT, with content owned by the Marketing organization. Nothing inherently wrong with this scenario. But when several major customers contact a VP late Sunday night because a page link is broken or content is wrong,

who gets the call? Not anyone on the Marketing team. No, it’s the people in IT Operations. Who is ultimately responsible for content and the portal? Marketing wants the ability to build sites and edit on the fly, and IT wants to ensure environments and features work before pushing them out in front of the customer.

Employees and managers want the flexibility and autonomy to serve their customers without having to jump through hoops. Sometimes all it takes is a one-day delay to lose a customer, so companies need to be responsive to win business and to support their customers. The vast majority of IT organizations want nothing more than to deliver that flexibility and control to responsible end users – but they are also tasked with supporting the underlying infrastructure, whether they maintain that infrastructure on premises or manage one or more hosted services on their end user’s behalf.

## How Egnyte Tackles Content Protection and Governance

The Egnyte platform was architected to place security closest to the source of risk: enterprise content and the humans that interact with it. For companies tired of managing the complexity of M365, Egnyte provides quick time to value for compliance and data security essentials.

### **Provides visibility into content in all repositories**

IT admins have the ability to monitor files containing personal data across multiple data repositories. Whether it’s Egnyte, Windows File Servers, SharePoint, SharePoint Online and/or OneDrive for Business, you have real-time risk assessment and alerts to help you take corrective action before your business is impacted.

### **Limits the exposure of your business data**

Egnyte applies machine learning to the task of identifying and safeguarding critical content by detecting insider/outside threats, compliance violations, and other risk scenarios. The use of AI adds automated mitigation for these threats across the Microsoft ecosystem, including data in Azure.

### **Delivers compliance coverage of GDPR and other regulatory requirements**

With pre-defined classification templates, Egnyte admins are able to locate and help control data regulated in various jurisdictions and industries. This ensures that all content repositories — those in the cloud, on-premises, or even in multi-cloud and hybrid environments — can operate in accordance with standards like PCI-DSS, HIPAA, GLBA, GDPR, and others.

Read more at <https://www.egnyte.com/blog/2020/08/how-egnyte-and-microsoft-tackle-content-governance-for-teams/>



## Governance is a cultural skill

Managing content sprawl is as much about changing your company culture as it is about refining your processes. Mention the word “governance,” and people automatically assume that power is somehow being taken away from them. But there is shared ownership in a healthy governance strategy – and understanding that shared ownership is more of a cultural issue than a matter of documenting policies and procedures.

The problem here is not control of the content management system or the overall quality assurance process, but healthy communication between IT and end users, and a shared understanding of what is to be accomplished – both from an employee perspective (fast provisioning, autonomy, service-level agreements with IT) and an IT perspective (defined policies and procedures, agreed upon response times, change management model).

Good collaboration is definitely a cultural skill. The organizations who are best at collaboration are often those with mature cultures that have clearly defined change management models that facilitate understanding and execution.

The first step to every solution is always to sit down and discuss the requirements and come to a shared understanding — before any solution is proposed. After all, until you have a clear picture of the problem space, how can you be sure you’re solving the right problem?

### Sprawl is to be expected (don’t be afraid of it)

In many ways, sprawl is a natural byproduct of collaboration. As people collaborate, they often generate sites and lists and documents as part of the creative process – some of which may evolve and remain within your systems of record (requirements documents, research data, project plans, meeting notes, etc.), while other artifacts may have a short lifespan.

One constant in corporate life is organizational change. At any given time, there may be several teams being merged or divided, or customer projects or company initiatives launched, combined, or completed. All of this change can generate new content, evolving technology requirements, duplicate documents, and the need for additional training which even the most prepared governance body would have a difficult time keeping

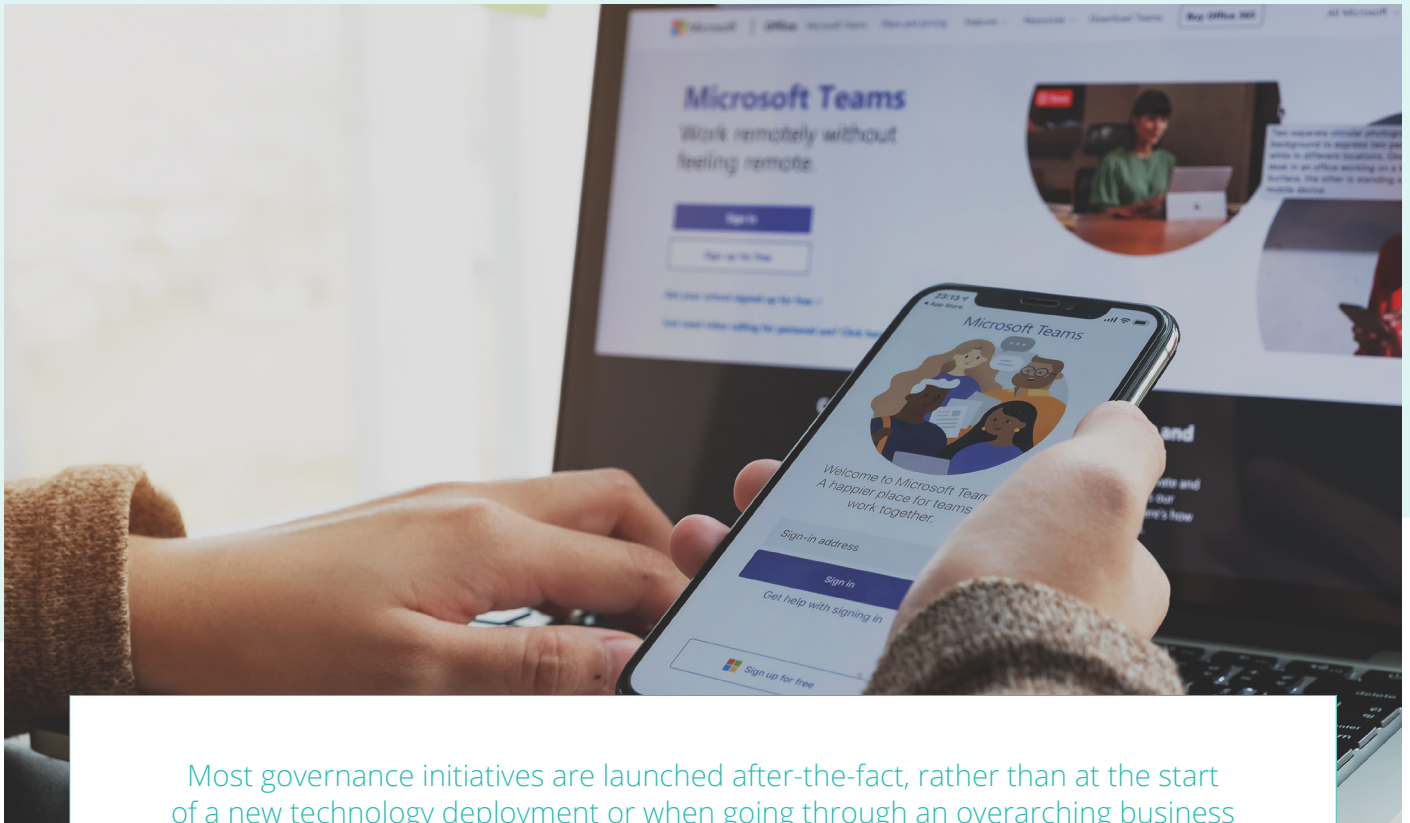


Employees and managers want the flexibility and autonomy to serve their customers without having to jump through hoops.

up with. While there is much you can do to reduce the volume and provide governance oversight, some degree of sprawl is inevitable.

The primary culprits of sprawl include:

- **Ease-of-use.** As previously mentioned, the leading driver of content sprawl is the user-friendliness and easy deployment of the technology. Software providers have made their tools intuitive and easy to learn, allowing employees to start creating and collaborating without fully understanding the downstream effects of poor content/data management.
- **Lack of feature awareness.** Companies more-often-than-not build out new technology without piloting, and fail to fully understand what the technology can actually do, how it aligns (or doesn't align) with company culture, or how to optimize the technology against the unique needs of the business.
- **Habits.** People use the tools and business practices that they know and are familiar with. If new technology forces people outside of their comfort zones and requires any kind of learning curve, people will default back to the tools and processes (the bad habits) of their prior project, team, or company. This often includes using outside tools and services, which may not meet company security, compliance, and governance standards – and may introduce intellectual property risk.
- **Lack of governance.** Within even the most healthy, collaborative organizations there are usually few rules into how the technology is used, or how it complies with security, compliance, and governance standards – largely because organizations often fail to accurately document, much less defend (and communicate) those standards.



Most governance initiatives are launched after-the-fact, rather than at the start of a new technology deployment or when going through an overarching business transformation.

### Understanding the impacts (be careful, as it can bite)

One of the more dangerous aspects of sprawl is that organizations do not fully understand the business impacts. So...what are the impacts of sprawl?

- **Poor productivity.** By definition, sprawl means that your data (your intellectual property) is spread across various sites and data silos. When data is not optimized, classified, and organized, it cannot be used effectively. When data is not used effectively, it impacts (reduces) discovery, collaboration, and innovation.
- **Security risk.** You cannot manage what you cannot properly track and measure. Sprawl makes it difficult, if not impossible, for administrators to enforce company policies and procedures, opening up the organization to security and compliance risks. Mistakes in IP management (much less intentional mishandling) are often not found until after-the-fact, which is not a sustainable management model.

- **Decreased business value.** Data that cannot be found in a timely manner, or found at all, loses its value over time. One of the major problems with sprawl is that data goes in easily enough, but cannot be surfaced, as needed, affecting the overall value of your collaboration platform, as well. What good is a system if you cannot find the right data at the right time?

Unfortunately, few organizations begin their planning process with sound governance policies. Instead, they are most likely to take actions once damage has been done. In my personal experience, most governance initiatives are launched after-the-fact, rather than at the start of a new technology deployment or when going through an overarching business transformation. Governance is cast aside in the name of “saving time” and reducing bureaucracy.

# Managing Sprawl in Microsoft 365

Sprawl happens when anyone and everyone can create a site or team, usually without oversight, planning, or any kind of formal training, resulting in dozens/hundreds of rarely used or abandoned sites and teams, a poorly-performing search experience, and your intellectual property (content and conversations) spread across multiple locations each with a maze of chats, files, and channels.

Sprawl can impact the user experience, make search difficult, and exasperate company content lifecycle plans, as well as security and compliance requirements.

In the examples above, I shared some of the causes and effects of content or data sprawl within any collaboration platform. These are common cycles experienced within every collaboration or information management platform. With the explosive growth of Microsoft 365, and specifically with SharePoint, OneDrive, and Microsoft Teams, many organizations without a history in knowledge and information management technology may be experiencing content sprawl for the first time.

## Identifying the Sprawl

When deploying SharePoint, Microsoft Teams, and OneDrive, many organizations elect to leave the platforms wide open, allowing anyone to create Team Sites (SharePoint), or Teams and Channels (Microsoft Teams). Without specific guidance and training, there tends to be poor adherence to any formal information architecture (data classification, tagging, labeling, navigation).

Modern collaboration includes both structured data (with clearly defined data types) and unstructured data (audio, video, chat, images), with the volume of unstructured data growing at an exponential rate as collaboration moves toward video and chat-based tools, such as Microsoft Teams, making governance and information architecture essential to achieving business value from this content.

Another aspect of modern collaboration using Microsoft 365 that impacts sprawl is Office 365 Groups. Office 365 Groups are Azure Active Directory (AAD) security groups that are created when a new SharePoint team site, Microsoft Teams team, or Yammer community are created. Along with these primary containers, a number of digital assets are provisioned. For example, when creating a new Microsoft Team, you are provisioning the following

- A new Microsoft Teams team
- A new SharePoint Online team site
- A new Outlook group and calendar
- A new Power BI workspace
- A new Planner plan



Whether you're looking to deploy SharePoint, Microsoft Teams, or OneDrive – or the entire Microsoft 365 stack, your best bet for controlling sprawl and getting more out of the platform is consistent use of security, compliance, and governance best practices. While there are certainly features and tools that can solve tactical issues within your overall governance strategy, sustained success requires a more holistic approach, including three key components: prevention, proactive administration, and ongoing management.



# How Egnyte Helps Companies Manage Content Sprawl

In today's knowledge economy, the most critical business asset is data. The challenge for IT leaders is that the most valuable type of data also happens to be the most sprawling and unstructured – content.

Content is data in “human readable” form. It represents the largest source of data growth for modern businesses, and the toughest to manage and control. Whether it's documents, images, videos, schematics, or 3-D renderings, humans, not machines, are the ultimate end users of all this content, and that creates enormous value - but also risk.

Further multiplying this data explosion problem, is that business content now resides in multiple storage and collaboration platforms spread across various geographies. And in legacy systems, that often have been assembled over time, through business growth and acquisition. It's not only harder, but also costlier for businesses to keep track of all their data and IP, exposing them to a greater risk of data breaches.

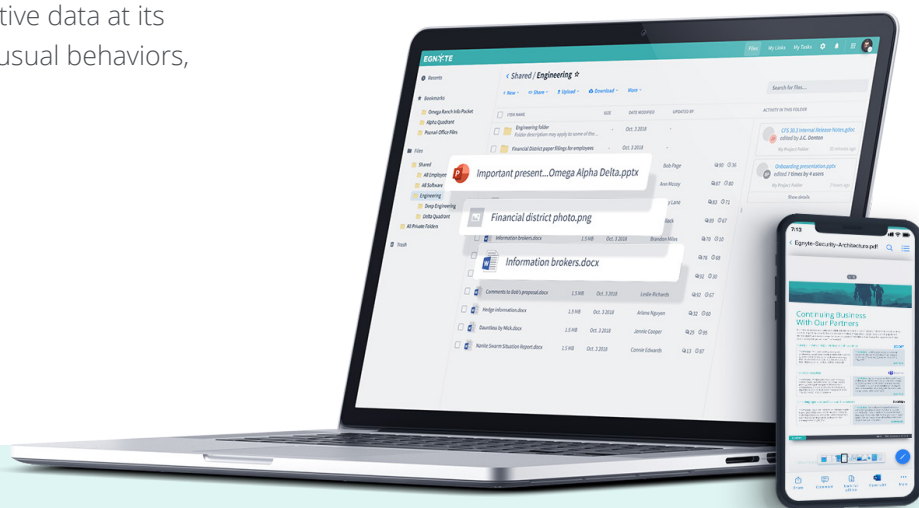
Egnyte believes that there is a better way: **smart content governance**. The Egnyte platform is powered by machine learning and AI, enabling our customers to deploy a streamlined data governance architecture based on content intelligence. IT can now confidently find and secure sensitive data at its source, and sense and respond to unusual behaviors, while answering four basic questions:

1. What data do I have?
2. Where is it located?
3. Who has access to it?
4. Where is the sensitive content?

As a new paradigm, smart content governance takes a proactive approach to securing data at the source. It resolves the content sprawl conflict by weaving visibility, data protection, and governance into every layer of digital file sharing and collaboration. This has big benefits for IT.

1. As a cloud-first solution, IT can take advantage of continuously updated tools, rapid time to value, and simpler administration, while giving users the intuitive functionality they need.
2. The platform is not confined to physical infrastructure, allowing security controls to travel with the data to distributed users and endpoints.
3. Continuous security monitoring and smart content management with built-in data lifecycle and minimization, allows IT to proactively administer and monitor with automated governance policies. Without committing to more complex tools that require larger IT staffs and a have negative impact on return on investment.

For more about Egnyte and smart content governance, visit: <https://www.egnyte.com/blog/2020/08/how-egnyte-and-microsoft-tackle-content-governance-for-teams/>



# Creating an Action Plan

One of the most common questions asked is “When is the right time to begin your governance planning?”

No matter where you are in the deployment cycle of Microsoft 365 – whether you have a newly-minted, greenfield deployment where you are able to layout your governance process before employees start using the system, or you have a mature, battle-worn environment that requires strong and immediate governance help – the right time to get started is now.

The fact is that most organizations fail to take action until pain is being felt – through a poor search and discovery experience, lackluster engagement levels, or, unfortunately, some kind of security breach or compliance failure. Regardless of where you are today, it’s never too late to get started with your planning process.

## Governance Best Practices

Few organizations have the luxury of starting their governance planning and getting a handle on content and data sprawl at the beginning of their Microsoft 365 journey. The reality for most of us is that we’ve been using a version of these tools for years, with a SharePoint intranet in place, most people using OneDrive (both the consumer and business versions), and one or two business units experimenting with Microsoft Teams. As you make plans to roll these tools out to the entire organization, or begin your business transformation planning to better utilize and support these tools going forward, there are definitely some best practices that you can follow.

### Prevention

Prevention is all about properly structuring environments at the start. This means defining and managing the provisioning process, including who can create a new site, what components they include (web parts, apps, tabs, etc.), and the templates used. It also means having a thoughtful information architecture, naming conventions, and communication strategy so that employees understand how to utilize these tools within the guidelines established by IT.

- Provisioning
- Templates
- Naming conventions
- Information architecture
- Training

### Proactive Administration

Proactive administration is about communication and community management, and is the key to creating a healthy collaboration environment. Your focus should be on adoption of the technology (people are using the technology) and employee engagement (people are working together), tracking and measuring activities and creating a dialog between leadership, management, IT, and employees about what is working – and what is not working within the environment. With these analytics and an

ongoing, healthy dialog between constituencies, proactive administration includes sharing best practices, constantly learning, and iterating your plans and governance strategies.

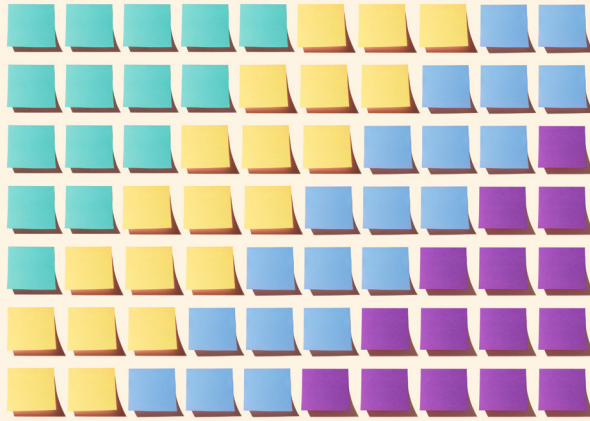
- Community management
- Focus on adoption and engagement
- Analytics
- Center of excellence

### Continuous Management

Continuous management is concerned with the mechanics of maintaining your security, compliance, and governance standards, including retention policies (archiving, deletion), feature updates (timing, training), site/team expiration policies, app/webpart approvals, and other business-critical oversight capabilities.

- Retention policies
- Data cleanup / minimization
- Feature updates
- Site expiration
- App review and approval
- Change management

Obviously, this is just a high-level overview of what should be included within your governance planning, but it should provide you with the framework you need to get started.



## Getting Started

There are three tactics that will have an immediate impact on your governance planning efforts:

### Create a governance board

Create a cross-functional body including management, IT, and your business users, with oversight from one or more executive sponsors. Establish a simple change management structure that allows for discussion and decisions, with the goal of creating a shared understanding of your business goals, your system constraints (security, compliance, regulatory rules that must be adhered to), and project management procedures.

### Improve communication

It is essential that the activities of the governance board, your prioritization of tasks, and your decision-making process be as transparent as possible to your stakeholders and employees.

The more visible the process, the more people will trust the process. Clear, concise, and consistent communication is the key to transparency. Make sure that everyone knows they have a voice, and that inputs are considered, prioritized, and actionable.

### Pilot, rinse, repeat

Your first plan will never be 100% correct. Iteration is key. The best path forward is to pilot first, take what you learn and iterate on your plan. Build upon your successes, and slowly expand your iterations rather than roll out to everyone at once...and turn it on. A rapid deployment is a sure path to failure. Take it slow, and seek to improve as you go.

Even the best-planned environments can still experience some degree of content and data sprawl, but with a holistic approach that includes prevention, proactive administration, and ongoing management, and with the three quick-start tactics outlined above, you have the necessary tools to jumpstart your governance planning – and better manage the growth of Microsoft 365 within your organization.



In a content critical age, EgnYTE fuels business growth by enabling content-rich business processes, while also providing organizations with visibility and control over their content assets. EgnYTE's cloud-native content services platform leverages the industry's leading content intelligence engine to deliver a simple, secure, and vendor-neutral foundation for managing enterprise content across business applications and storage repositories. More than 16,000 companies trust EgnYTE to enhance employee productivity, automate data management, and reduce file-sharing cost and complexity. Investors include Google Ventures, Kleiner Perkins, Caufield & Byers, and Goldman Sachs. **For more information, visit [www.egnyte.com](http://www.egnyte.com)**

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