An End User's Perspective of Central Administration

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Relevant to SharePoint 2013

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# What is Central Administration?

As an end user, you are on the receiving end of changes that effect the various SharePoint sites that you either own or collaborate in on a day to day basis. Some of these changes might be related to features or options that have been instated by the site owner or the site collection administrator. These changes vary in their effect. For example a site owner switching on a site feature will only effect the current site. Site collection administrators can enable site collection features that effect all sites within that site collection.

In other cases, certain settings need to be applied to much larger areas of SharePoint. To govern the highest selection of settings in a SharePoint environment, an experienced member of staff will utilise Central Administration. Often the settings configured at this level are well beyond the reach of the majority of SharePoint users. Because of this, it is typical that the majority of users are unsure what can be achieved in the Central Administration site.

This white paper will capture a selection of options are worth being aware of as they will affect the way SharePoint is presented and what functionality is available. Please note this is not a guide on how to configure these options. That should always be left to a SharePoint farm administrator.

SharePoint Farm Structures
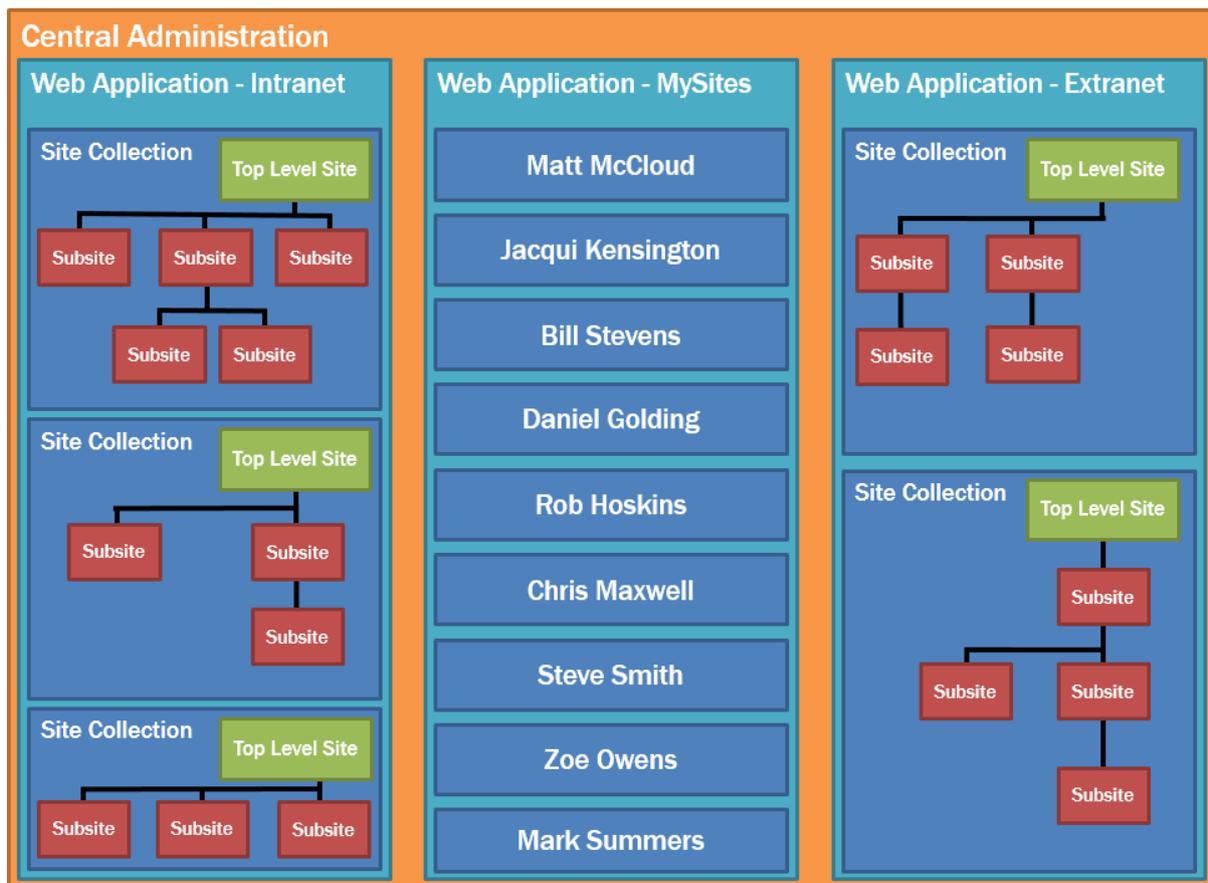
To better understand the scope what you can do in SharePoint, it is helpful to consider the diagram above:

- Visitor – A typical user that is entitled to browse specific sites
- Collaborator – Has the right to add, edit and delete content in specific sites
- Site Owner – Has full control of one or more top level or sub sites and typically have ownership over subsites beneath those
- Site Collection Administrator – Has full access and control over every site in a site collection and can enable features that impact all mentioned sites too
- Farm Administrator – Can configure global settings through Central Administration that can be applied to all sites or just certain Web Applications that contain site collection

Areas of Central Administration

Central Administration as a web site is split into several general areas which are to be explained in the upcoming topics. These include:

- Application Management
- System Settings
- Security
- Upgrade and Migration

- Monitoring
- Backup and Restore
- General Application Settings
- Apps

Application Management

Application management is broken down into a variety of tools used to manage and create Web applications, Site collections, Service applications and Databases.

Web Applications

Name	URL	Port
Intranet	http://intranet.trainsbydave.com/	80
MySites	http://mysites.trainsbydave.com/	80
SP13 host	http://sp01/	80
SharePoint Central Administration v4	http://sp01:45678/	45678

Web application settings are an important option for SharePoint end users as settings defined here impact every site collection in the web application. They have their own specified resources to consume known as application pools and each web application can be restarted individually if needed. Below are a selection of web application options that can directly impact an end user:

- Site quota, maximum upload size and blocked file types
- Allowance of alerts, RSS, SMS and workflows
- Limiting available permissions and web part connections
- Recycle bin retention and availability
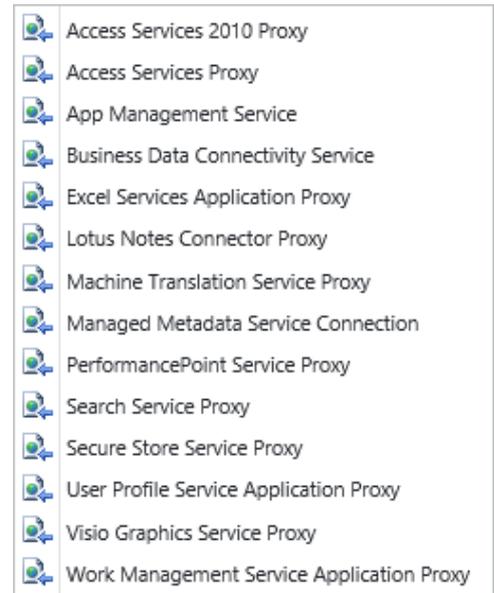- Access to SharePoint Designer

Site Collections

Another one of the core areas we use on a day to day basis are the site collections that our sites reside in. These were originally created from within Central Administration. When a site collection is created, elements such as managed paths and quotas come into play here to define the logic of the site collection as well as new elements like the site collection template. This specifies which features, apps and styles are available in your new site collection by default. When a new site collection is created, a primary and secondary site collection administrator is declared, allowing these users to continue to support and update the site collection. Site collections can also be deleted from both the farm level but also by the site collection administrator from the top level site. This does not require all of the subsites to be deleted first, they can all be removed in one operation but this isn't an act that should be made in haste.

Service Applications

There are many services that complement a SharePoint environment. A farm administrator can set up, start, stop and manage these services. Some examples might be the Managed Metadata Service providing a central repository of structured keywords for all web applications which also supports the content type hub. Other services include Access, Excel and Visio services that bring features of the described products into SharePoint.

As a SharePoint user you may want the ability to display a chart on your home page to display key performance indicators. This data resides in an Excel spreadsheet in a library which is updated by the responsible team. A farm administrator can enable Excel services to allow the Excel Web Access web part to display content from your spreadsheet.

Access Services 2010 Proxy
Access Services Proxy
App Management Service
Business Data Connectivity Service
Excel Services Application Proxy
Lotus Notes Connector Proxy
Machine Translation Service Proxy
Managed Metadata Service Connection
PerformancePoint Service Proxy
Search Service Proxy
Secure Store Service Proxy
User Profile Service Application Proxy
Visio Graphics Service Proxy
Work Management Service Application Proxy

System Settings

The system settings interface focuses on the management of the servers that make up the SharePoint farm. Typically, based on the size of your organisation, there may be one or more servers running your SharePoint environment. This can assist with the speed of the system as your requests are handled by the server which is least busy. This is known as load balancing. Additionally, SharePoint should be set up with a level of redundancy so that if the SharePoint service to your business is degraded, the responsible team can switch the company over to the redundant SharePoint server whilst the live server is fixed. System settings also allows you to switch on or off the services we discussed earlier such as Visio, MMS, Excel and others.

System settings also includes areas for controlling incoming and outgoing email settings. Some of these settings may affect you as an end user. Sites can be configured to allow them to receive emails and even allocate an email address to certain lists. For example, a document library could be configured by a site owner to have an email address allowing users to email their documents to this library which can be useful if they're working remotely.

There are also farm management options such as farm features that allow you to deploy new and customised functionality to your SharePoint farm. An example might be a custom workflow product that you wish to then deploy to specific web applications.

Servers
Manage servers in this farm | Manage services on server

E-Mail and Text Messages (SMS)
Configure outgoing e-mail settings |
Configure incoming e-mail settings | Configure mobile account

Farm Management
Configure alternate access mappings | Manage farm features |
Manage farm solutions | Manage user solutions |
Configure privacy options | Configure cross-firewall access zone

Monitoring

The monitoring interface helps a farm administrator identify any issues that might relate to the security, configuration, availability or storage of the SharePoint farm.

Also available are the jobs that occur on a schedule known as timer jobs and their definitions. Events like Search Indexing can be customised to run more or less frequently. If this job runs more frequently, content that you add or change in SharePoint will be searchable sooner. If your search indexing job runs less frequently, it might be a day or more before you are able to search for your information.

There are also a selection of administrative and diagnostic reports that can be configured from the Monitoring category. This can give a perspective on recurring issues, health and usage of the SharePoint environment from the top level.

Health Analyzer
Review problems and solutions | Review rule definitions

Timer Jobs
Review job definitions | Check job status

Reporting
View administrative reports | Configure diagnostic logging |
Configure usage and health data collection | View health reports

Backup and Restore

The details behind backup and restore are not an end users remit however, having the confidence that your data is recoverable in the event of disaster recovery can be very reassuring. As end users, content recovery is typically provided from your own site recycle bin and if escalated, the site collection recycle bin. But in the case of flooding, server damage, virus incidents, etc. information will not be recoverable from the recycle bin until the service is restored. If the repository for SharePoint's information is damaged the information may not be recoverable which is why a backup mechanism is configured either with existing or third party tools to duplicate the data on site or better yet to a remote site to recover from. The flexibility of this solution directly impacts how soon you can restore your service and how up to date the information is. For example if the last backup was 12:00 am and the incident occurred at 6:30 pm the business may lose a whole days' worth of data.

Farm Backup and Restore
Perform a backup | Restore from a backup |
Configure backup settings | View backup and restore history |
Check backup and restore job status

Granular Backup
Perform a site collection backup | Export a site or list |
Recover data from an unattached content database |
Check granular backup job status

Security

With the farm level security, the focus again is less on end users and more relevant to the users and accounts used to manage the farm and its services. Defined here are the farm administrators group, the users that are entitled to access and configure the SharePoint farm through Central Administration. Also defined here are the managed accounts that are used to run services that are vital to the day to day motions of SharePoint.

One end user experience that you may or may not have in your SharePoint environment is Information Rights Management. This requires additional infrastructure to support the security on files that are taken outside of SharePoint. If configured options like restricting print screen and standard print options can be applied to files taken out of SharePoint (Microsoft Office files only). Also available is the option to request that the user authenticates on a chosen frequency to access the document. The security on the file can optionally be unlocked on a specific date if required when the information is no longer sensitive.

Users
Manage the farm administrators group |
Approve or reject distribution groups |
Specify web application user policy

General Security
Configure managed accounts | Configure service accounts |
Configure password change settings |
Specify authentication providers | Manage trust |
Manage antivirus settings | Define blocked file types |
Manage web part security | Configure self-service site creation

Information policy
Configure information rights management |
Configure Information Management Policy

Upgrade and Migration

This interface is used by farm administrators to perform continual improvement tasks. SharePoint has a variety of versions from foundation to standard to enterprise editions. Options here allow the modification of the licensing for the SharePoint product as well as escalate from the standard to the enterprise edition of the product. The versions new features can then be enabled on existing sites that would not have adopted the enterprise features. However, these features can be enabled by the site collection administrator if required.

Also there are options to identify if there are any outstanding product patches and if in progress, review the installation status. Typically your farm administrators will do this outside of business hours to minimize the system down time. If you are a global business requiring access over a 24 hour period, the farm administrators might send you a communication notifying you about SharePoint down time for essential maintenance.

Upgrade and Patch Management
Convert farm license type | Enable Enterprise Features |
Enable Features on Existing Sites |
Check product and patch installation status | Review database status |
Check upgrade status

General Application Settings

In the general application settings, similar to web applications, this menu justifies a more detailed breakdown. Many of the features in this category can greatly assist end users in a SharePoint site and other options are related to previous discussions.

External Service Connections

In this category are the options to configure 'send to' connections and setup document conversions. Firstly, send to locations can be used in document libraries to send files to another SharePoint site. The recipient SharePoint site must have the Content Organizer site feature enabled giving the farm administrator access to the URL of its web service. Using this URL a farm administrator can target that site with a send to option that can copy, move or move and leave a link when transferring the file.
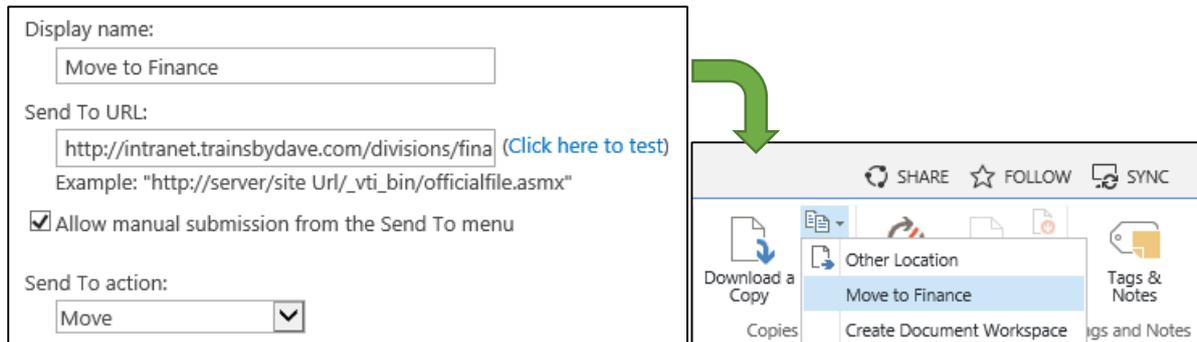
A useful way to use this would be to create a Records Centre and use its already established Content Organizer to create a Send To connection. This means that from anywhere in SharePoint, users can send content to the records centre.

The content organizer rules set up by the site owner then forward the received files to the correct library within the site.

Additional document conversion options are also available in this category to convert a variety of file types for example:

- From InfoPath Form to Web Page" (xml into html)
- From Word Document to Web Page" (docx into html)
- From Word Document with Macros to Web Page" (docm into html)
- From XML to Web Page" (xml into html)

InfoPath Forms Services

Farm administrators can view and contribute to the existing digital forms that are available in SharePoint. Typically these forms may be presented to users as a data collection interface during a workflow. InfoPath is visible to users that are working in lists as a way of bringing the rich selection of form features to your item data entry form. This does however, require that you have the InfoPath client installed on the computer you are accessing SharePoint from. InfoPath as of 2013 will no longer be updated as part of the Office suite and no new versions of the product will be created.

SharePoint Designer

SharePoint Designer is a client application used to customise SharePoint's branding, workflows, connections to external systems and customise lists and views. For a web application there are individual options for allowing SharePoint Designer. Note that site collection administrators can revoke the use of SharePoint Designer at the site collection level and a site owner can revoke the use of SharePoint designer at the site level. Also users must also have the correct permissions to be able to use SharePoint Designer and have the client installed.

Search 🔍

This section helps define the controls around SharePoint search. Available are options such as the frequency new information in SharePoint is added to the search results, the sources queried whether they be internal/external web sites or file shares, or to report on usage.

There are many ways to configure search but from an end users perspective, let's say that you use an application to draw up blueprints for a building. These blueprints can be in excess of 12GB. This single file is too large to upload in SharePoint but users need to be able to find the blueprints from SharePoint search. The files reside in a Site Operations folder on the local file share. SharePoint can be configured to index this location so that the content can be found in SharePoint search.

Usage reports can also be accessed to help the farm administrators improve your search. Understanding things like top queries and failed queries can help the farm administrator implement work around such as 'did you means' for misspelled keywords.

Third Party Tools

Some third party tools are deployed to SharePoint, not as Apps but as solution files. These allow farm administrators to distribute the third party tool to the required locations in SharePoint. An example of this are the Nintex software suite. After Nintex products are installed they are licensed and configured through Central Administration.

Sometimes you may have purchased a product based on what was advertised. Although your product is installed and it is working, not all the advertised features are available. This could be due to a number of reasons such as configuration or dependencies on other services. If this is the case, you can discuss this with your farm administrator.

As always if is important to fully understand these third party products in addition to SharePoint. With this knowledge you can confidently converse with your farm administrator over customising some of the global settings for these products.

Nintex Workflow Management
Manage allowed actions
Global settings
Manage workflow constants
Manage user defined actions
Manage reports
Administration reports

Nintex Forms Management
Licensing
Manage database
Manage form controls
Manage device layouts

Nintex Live Management
Connection settings
Health checks

Office 365

The discussion points so far were focused on a SharePoint service set up by your organisation on their own servers/infrastructure. This is known as an on premise SharePoint deployment. Microsoft also provide a SharePoint environment that they host for you alongside other Office services through Office 365. Because this solution is governed by Microsoft it is a more locked down environment from the perspective of administration and development.

Updates to your SharePoint environment are applied by Microsoft, removing the decision making and control of this process from the farm administrators. Based on this restrictive level of control, the options available to a farm administrator in an Office 365 environment vary greatly.

Although control over the SharePoint environment is limited, additional controls are available for managing other aspects of the Office 365 environment such as toolsets for Office 365, Exchange, Lync and SharePoint depending on which services your Office 365 plan offers.

The Office 365 Admin Center will be detailed in future white papers released by Combined Knowledge.

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