

TECHNOLOGY AUDIT

VisibleThread v2.0









VisibleThread

OVUM BUTLER GROUP VIEW

ABSTRACT

VisibleThread's product helps organizations to improve the quality of their project documentation, primarily at the business level, by targeting multiple projects with its Program Management Office and IT Governance functions. The solution provides a holistic view of content gaps and inconsistencies in documents, identifying dependencies across multiple documents, and discovering structure and quality issues at an early stage before they can translate into project bottlenecks. Ovum is impressed with the product's ease of use and the fact that users are able to work in the familiar Microsoft Word environment. The web-based dashboard displays structure and quality metrics, as well as providing gap analysis using concept-frequency metrics, real-time visibility into project documents, and keeping track of user activities. In Ovum's opinion VisibleThread will prove useful for organizations looking to automate the process of document review. VisibleThread is an innovative product that addresses a critical business need where knowing a document exists, such as for project specifications, is not enough, and there is a need to go further to eliminate ambiguities and gain insight into content compliance.

KEY FINDINGS

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|  End users work directly within the Microsoft Word interface. |  Ability to discover most or least frequently used terms. |
|  Interactive dashboard provides real-time metrics on document structure and quality. |  Best-practice usage matrix provides a holistic view of existing best-practice adherence. |
|  Currently lacks support for Sharepoint as a content repository. |  Support currently limited to Microsoft Word 2003/2007 documents. |
|  Lightweight product that is easy and quick to deploy. |  Embedded NLP capabilities through the open-source Gate engine. |

Key:  Product Strength  Product Weakness  Point of Information

LOOK AHEAD

VisibleThread plans to integrate with Microsoft Excel in the next major release. The company is also planning to extend functionality to support Microsoft SharePoint as a content repository.

FUNCTIONALITY

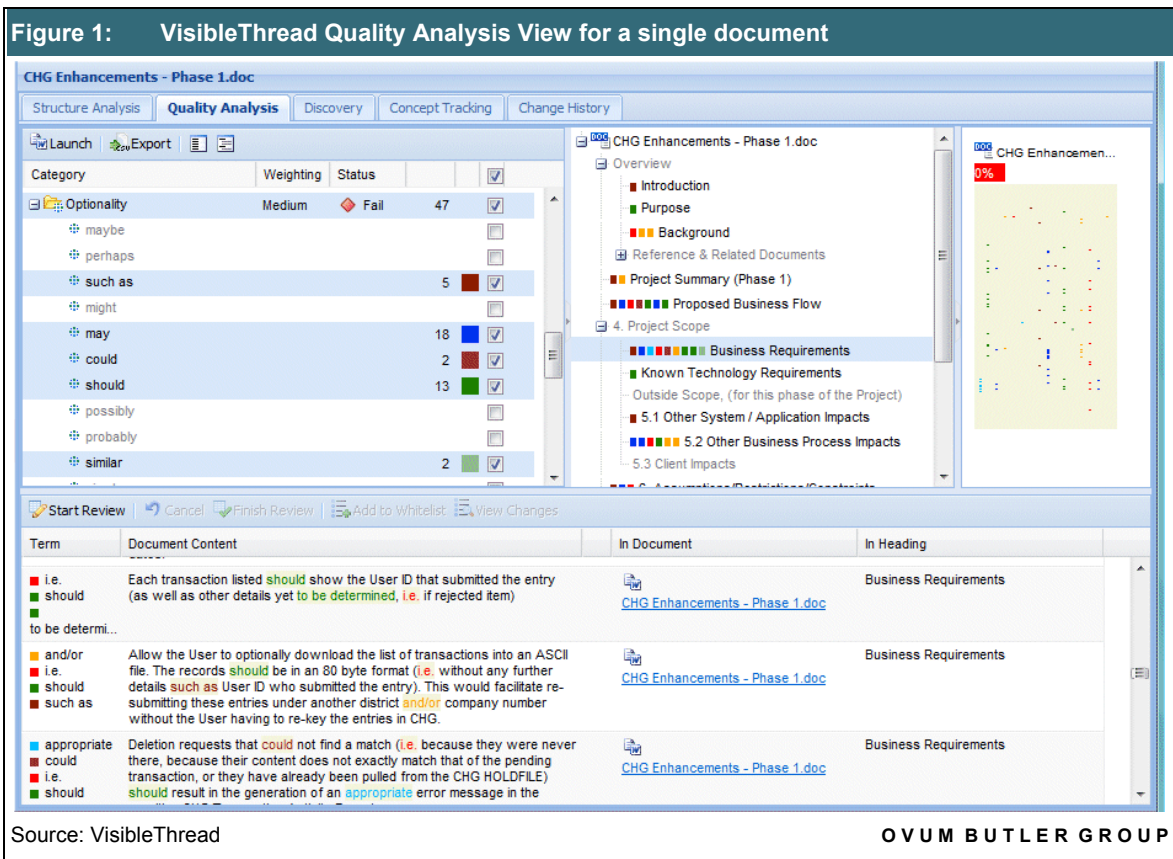
The project inception phase is a critical point when documents begin to be written to capture the business case, business-level requirements are identified, related materials are gathered such as compliance with company policies and regulatory requirements, and communications are received from experts in support of projects. These documents represent a body of material that is upstream to what will later become the concern of individual project managers. It is during this early phase where miscommunications and misunderstandings are cheapest to correct but can all too often filter down the lifecycle and result in expensive downstream correction.

Documents are typically written using Microsoft Word and Excel, and although the use of desktop-productivity tools provides flexibility in information gathering, the tools themselves do not offer any insight into the structure and quality of the output. Organizations have to rely on manual review processes to ensure that project documentation meets structural, quality, and organizational policy requirements. While alternatives to Microsoft Office exist, they involve substantial investment in proprietary software, and force behavior change on practitioners and project stakeholders. In Ovum's view, organizations need a solution that enables project teams to use existing desktop-productivity tools such as Microsoft Word to capture the business case and business requirements, and create project documentation that provides insight into document structure, content, quality, and policy compliance. This will enable organizations to automate document-review processes, enhance document quality, and ensure policy compliance across the software-development lifecycle.

Product Analysis

VisibleThread, an independent software vendor founded in June 2008, aims to address business analysis and associated miscommunication pitfalls through its document-intelligence offering VisibleThread v2.0. The first version of the product was released in October 2009, and the company has already deployed it in more than 35 organizations. VisibleThread's solution is simple: it has a small deployment footprint and user-friendly interfaces that do not involve a learning curve. For the most part, users get to work within the familiar Microsoft Word environment.

Ovum believes that the benefits associated with the product are twofold: increased efficiency as a result of automation of the document review-and-inspection process, and prevention of problems downstream in the project lifecycle. It helps organizations avoid behavior-change pitfalls because it does not force a change away from MS Office. It also automates the process of document review, helps improve documentation quality, and enables centralized management of documentation best practices. VisibleThread provides insight on four counts: document structure, document quality, discovery analysis using frequency-of-concept occurrence in documents, and change analysis identifying change over time for specific documents. It checks for completeness based on a reference template for documents in the same category and calculates a structural compliance score expressed as a percentage value. By viewing the VisibleThread dashboard, users can gauge the state of their project documentation. The quality checks are more detailed and include checks for ambiguity, lack of detail, and terms whose usage is not aligned with organizational policy. This functionality is provided through the use of an embedded natural-language processing (NLP) engine.



For further analysis, users can export the structure and quality statistics to a comma-delimited file (.csv format) that can be opened in Microsoft Excel. VisibleThread also allows users to “white-list” phrases or words across the whole document set to reduce the number of false positives in the issues list. The discovery and frequency analysis enables gaps to be easily identified. So, for instance, in a trading system, occurrence of “trade”, “dealer”, “account” would be expected with certain patterns across related documents. VisibleThread highlights this by graphically pinpointing gaps. Discovery is augmented by the new ‘Concept Tracking’ capability offered in version 2.0. The system automatically scans for sets of pre-configured domain concepts as defined by the user in a concept list. Absence of specific concepts across documents highlights risk of incompleteness. Change history is useful to understand how much change is occurring in a specific area of the document set at any given point.

The product includes a plug-in for Microsoft Word at the client side that assesses a document’s structural and quality compliance while it is being authored or edited, and provides guidance and suggestions in the Word interface. This feature should not be confused with the Office Assistant feature available in Word. The VisibleThread plug-in uses industry-standard, custom, or organizational best-practice frameworks such as CMMI or vertical-industry practices, to provide real-time guidance to document authors and/or editors. A document could be a business case, a business-level-requirements definition document, a test plan, a requirements specification, or any other document in which ambiguity might arise. The VisibleThread plug-in also collects statistics in real time from individual documents, a summarized view of which is available to users through the solution’s dashboard. VisibleThread continuously measures the level of adherence to the policies set by the user. It helps identify content gaps and inconsistencies in documents, identifies dependencies across multiple documents, and helps resolve structure and quality issues at an early stage before they can translate into project bottlenecks.

Ovum likes the solution's Discovery feature that, with the help of an NLP engine, helps find the most frequently or least frequently occurring terms. For example, project stakeholders can check whether a given term has been used inappropriately across multiple documents or has been used out of context across the project documentation. At the project or departmental level, the Discovery feature enables managers to get a bird's-eye view of terms' contextual usage, and any inappropriate or incorrect reference can be flagged from within the same interface. The new Concept Tracking capability in version 2 is a natural complement to discovery in that it allows certain concepts to be explicitly tracked. In larger program initiatives, specifications are often at odds with internal business rules for key concepts such as 'account'. In Ovum's opinion the 'Concept Lists' capability is particularly relevant in addressing this challenge.

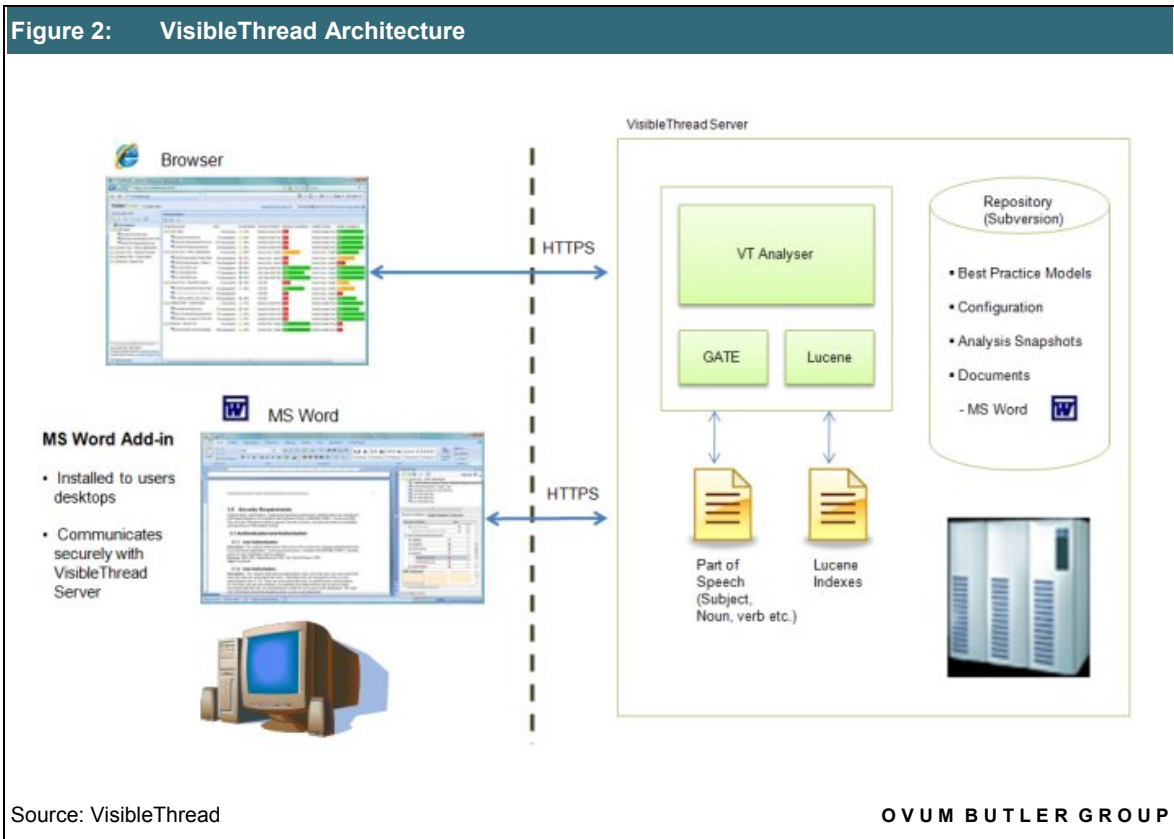
Line-of-business managers can use best practices from existing projects and apply them to new projects. As projects get closer to sign-off, stakeholders will be able to ensure that the project documentation meets organizational or industry standards. One interesting feature is that it offers a best-practice usage matrix, which provides a summary view of all structure/quality best practices and associated documents or document sets or projects. Using the matrix, users can quickly identify projects that do not conform to the appropriate best practice. At the same time, by spotting gaps in the matrix they can identify best practices that remain unassociated.

In Ovum's opinion VisibleThread is a superior offering that addresses a critical business need and will prove useful for organizations looking to automate the process of document review and improve documentation quality. VisibleThread's automation supports document review to ensure high quality and compliance, and is innovative with few rivals to be found in the IT sphere. The solution should be considered by all organizations that use documents as part of their processes.

VisibleThread is aware of the potential to take the product beyond IT projects and into other reaches of the business and recognizes future opportunities in verticals such as healthcare, legal and pharmaceuticals. The positioning of the product as a tool that creates business intelligence is important because it is at the business level where the most benefit from using it will be derived to maintain consistency and clarity across multiple projects.

Product Operation

VisibleThread has a server-based architecture comprising two client modules: the VisibleThread Dashboard and the VisibleThread Microsoft Word Add-in. The dashboard is a hosted web-based interface to the VisibleThread server that shows key statistics such as size, status, structure, and quality compliance at the document-set level as well as at the individual document level. The product can be deployed on-premise as well as accessed over the Web in a hosted on-demand subscription model.



The VisibleThread Server contains the solution repository, which is implemented in the Subversion open-source version-control system, and the business-logic module VisibleThread Analyser. The server also contains the open-source Lucene library that provides full-text searching and indexing capabilities as well as the open-source NLP engine General Architecture for Text Engineering (Gate). The VisibleThread solution repository centrally stores the documents and document sets that have been added via the dashboard. It also stores other elements such as best-practice models and analysis snapshots. VisibleThread is planning to integrate with Microsoft SharePoint server through a web-services interface so that it can directly access and work on documents stored in the customer's SharePoint environment without having to store duplicate copies in the VisibleThread solution repository. It also plans to provide support for Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and PDF documents.

The VisibleThread Microsoft Word Add-in operates in the Word environment and communicates directly with the VisibleThread server. The add-in displays structure and quality information for an open document and allows document editors to make changes. It updates the changes to the server in real time. Users can also work offline and update the edits back to the server once a network connection is available. VisibleThread supports multiple concurrent users, and if another user has adjusted elements of a document set, the local copy can be refreshed from the server by a single click.

Once uploaded to the VisibleThread server via the dashboard, the structure and quality statistics for documents or sets of documents can be viewed and compared with the associated structure and quality best practices. VisibleThread ensures that every document adheres to the relevant best-practice guidelines. The solution can use built-in best practices or create custom best practices from existing document templates. In addition, documents can be converted to support industry best-practice standards such as IIBA BABOK and ISO 9126. Users can also associate multiple best practices with a single document.

The Best Practice Usage Matrix gives an overview of the structure and quality practices in various documents and projects. It enables users to centrally manage best practices, and associate or disassociate and edit best practices at the document or document-set levels. Best practices can also be imported or exported from this interface in XML format, but only previously exported best practices can be imported back into the system from a URI or network location. Users can also view the change history of a particular document or document set, such as edits in Word, adjustments made to associated structure or quality best practice, or change of associated best practice.

Product Emphasis

The key focus of the solution is on providing automated support in document reviews to improve quality and raise business intelligence. Not only does it free up analyst time for tasks that directly add greater value, but also provides real-time metrics and therefore insight into the early stages of the development lifecycle. Issues discovered early help ensure that IT projects stay on schedule and on budget, but the review process at this stage is often manual, error-prone, and inefficient. VisibleThread therefore has an impact on quality downstream in the lifecycle. Moreover, the solution enables IT practitioners to work with Microsoft Word, and the addition of the PDF format will be an important next step. Ovum believes that VisibleThread has been successful in bringing to market a document-governance solution that does not seek to alter the way teams work, while also addressing a critical business need.

DEPLOYMENT

The average implementation time for the VisibleThread solution is only two days, with an additional one hour per user required to install the Word Add-in when the product is deployed on premise. In the on-demand hosted model, the solution can be rolled out to end users within a day. Client-side resources required for deployment include one or two IT services personnel, depending on the scope of deployment. For enterprise and department-level implementations, involvement of the client's IT team is required to assist in determining the best practices and quality requirements of project documents. The solution implementation and roll-out involves the tailoring of document best practices, and uploading reference documents, all of which can be completed within a couple of hours. The time-consuming aspect here is the installation of Microsoft Word Add-in on user desktops. The VisibleThread solution is available in on-premise, managed-on-premise, and SaaS models.

The VisibleThread add-in runs within MS Word 2003 or MS Word 2007 on Windows XP, Windows Vista, and Windows 7 desktop operating systems. The recommended browsers for the web interface are Internet Explorer 6 and above, and Firefox 3.0 and above.

VisibleThread provides technical support via phone, email, and the Web. While web-based support is free for all customers, phone and email support are charged at 20% of the license list price. The vendor offers phone support during normal business hours in the customer's geography.

VisibleThread's Microsoft Word Add-in is dependent on the usage of Word 2003 or 2007. The VisibleThread server also includes packaged third-party solutions such as Apache web server (for web hosting), Postgres database (for user management), and Subversion (for version control).

In one deployment scenario, VisibleThread enabled a client to align its SDLC process documents with that of a recently merged entity, facilitating the organization's adherence to required mandatory regulations. In another deployment, the VisibleThread solution was deployed enterprise-wide, spanning multiple geographies to enable a global enterprise customer manage a project's documentation aspects remotely while the project was being executed in a different geographic location.

PRODUCT STRATEGY

VisibleThread has focused its marketing and sales efforts on medium to large organizations in the financial services, healthcare, and retail industries. The product is also targeted at federal, state, and local governments.

VisibleThread sells directly as well as indirectly by referral through service-provider partners. Approximately 80% of the company's revenues come through direct sales efforts, with the remaining 20% from partner-driven sales. VisibleThread's business partners customize the offering to suit specific customer project styles, such as Agile/iterative or data-warehouse project, and project sizes (large/medium-size projects). The company's business partners include Strata Software (UK) and Eqnox (Canada).

The VisibleThread on-premise offering is available via perpetual as well as subscription-based licenses using a named-user licensing option. A perpetual license is available at \$3,500 per named user for on-premise deployments, while subscription licenses for on-demand usage cost \$160 per user per month. Support and maintenance costs for the product are 20% of the license fee. The average initial deal size is approximately \$85,000 for twenty users, which includes first-year maintenance fees. Software license costs account for 90% of the value, with deployment services constituting the remaining 10% for on-premise deals.

VisibleThread has a quarterly release cycle that excludes minor and patch releases. In the next major release due late Q3 2010 the company plans to integrate with Microsoft Excel and provide a document view directly in the dashboard. In future releases the company is also planning to extend functionality to support Microsoft SharePoint as a content repository, in addition to the current subversion based approach. A PDF document-reviewing capability is also in the pipeline.

COMPANY PROFILE

VisibleThread is a Dublin, Ireland-based company, with commercial headquarters in Baltimore, US. Founded in June 2008, it has secured venture-capital funding from AIB Seed Capital Fund and Enterprise Ireland. The executive team comprises Fergal McGovern and Jason O'Connell who are the creators of OptimalTrace (SteelTrace).

The company launched an early-adopter program in November 2008 in which more than 35 US and EMEA-based companies participated. It formally launched VisibleThread 1.0 in October 2009 and has pilot projects running in over 20 organizations most of which are in the financial-services sector. It released version 2.0 of the product in May 2010.

SUMMARY

Organizations are under increasing pressure to meet compliance and regulatory requirements, and this coupled with the need for better financial oversight and quality control is driving demand for VisibleThread. Organizations need to control multiple ongoing projects, enhance quality throughout the development lifecycle, and ensure that projects are delivered on schedule. VisibleThread finds that business-level project-management bodies such as PMO and IT governance have the closest appreciation of how the product can improve quality. This is not a tool for managing project requirements, but by automating the review process and providing insight into document structure and quality upstream in the lifecycle, businesses can gain significant ROI from reducing errors downstream. Ovum considers VisibleThread to be a key value-add for use at the business-IT boundary and is suitable for many business project scenarios.

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