Best practice

File Comparison

The definitive guide.

What's inside

If you care about:

Workshare®
Change matters

File comparison – What's at stake?

When you compare high stakes documents – contracts, agreements, legal correspondence – every single change matters. Whether material changes to the content, small grammatical corrections or brand new additions, any change can alter the overall sense and intention of a document. This makes it essential for individuals involved in a review process to have a precise way of identifying anything that's different between two versions of the same file.

To get to an agreed final draft of a document, each iteration needs to progress through a series of structured reviews. The people involved in the process need to be confident they have been given full disclosure to every dot and comma, as they could become accountable for what that means in the overall context of the final document produced.

Document comparison solutions are important to these professionals, because it's not just money that's at stake. Any oversight, error or omission in a final agreement could cost a company, their client or a professional their reputation.

Business services organizations in particular have an important and vested interest in accurate document comparison. Professionals working in law firms; real estate; accounting; finance; transaction management all need to be 100% confident that the file they are signing off states everything exactly as agreed. The stakes are high because fully executed files; final signed contracts; letters landing on a doormat become legally binding and individuals or organizations are liable for them.

From lawyers to administrators, M&A advisors to executive assistants, many individuals in businesses spend a huge amount of time in the process of managing documents to sign off. Legal professionals, for example, invest around 40hrs a week in the process. This has huge implications in terms of cost and efficiency for firms. Even with a small, incremental improvement in file comparison activity could reap savings and productivity gains.

In this paper, we explore who needs to compare files; how documents can be compared; and the best way to compare files.

Moving away from manual file comparison

Precise file comparison is essential for any professional that needs to review files, agreements, contracts and so on with multiple parties, whether those parties are internal colleagues or external clients and partners.

Document review processes are where agreements are crafted and finally delivered, so access to automated solutions for the task of file comparison are indispensable. Manual comparison used to be the norm, but it's exceptionally long-winded and now completely redundant.

In many firms, it used to be that document comparison was completed as part of a time-hungry and labor-intensive process. In a legal practice, for example, one junior lawyer in the team would read a revised document aloud, while their colleague simultaneously and scrupulously went through the original hard copy, marking up corrections. This edited version would then be returned or sent on to the next party for review, and the process would begin again.

And, this was the idea scenario for manual comparison!

There were many instances in which a single individual was left to navigate through amendments, making their edits to create the next iteration of a document flying solo. When considering that important documentation is usually part of a process where the pressure is high and time is tight, manual file comparison is far from ideal. Those carrying out the comparison are subject to fatigue, making the probability of errors occurring even more likely.

The inefficiencies of manual methods of file comparison in world-class business services organizations are obvious, as are the risks of human error taking place. We've all suffered the uncomfortable feeling of having read a document through tens of times and still missing a typo. When working on financially or contractually binding matters, this goes way beyond just being an embarrassing slipup – it can't be tolerated.

In today's work environment, it's not simply Word documents that require comparison either. Content comes in different formats, including PDF or PowerPoint (PPT) for example. It's equally important for those dealing in documents to be able to execute a comparison on different types of file. Those tasked with going through a document need to be able to work in whatever format the content is presented.

Business services firms work on hundreds of files each day, week, month and year, which makes manual comparison unworkable, unaffordable and just plain unacceptable. It was a huge drain on time, resources and budget, and now it's easily avoided.

How to make file comparison fast and efficient

Leading file comparison software makes a review process fast and simple. The obvious benefit of automation is the increase in accuracy and reliability, which are of the utmost importance. Arguably, in document comparison software, delivering accuracy is more important than saving time. Although, the best file comparison solutions obviously deliver both.

Document comparison goes way beyond being able to track changes. It involves identifying amendments, yes, but it's also about changes by category, managing version control, keeping on top of the latest draft and speeding workflows to their natural conclusion i.e. a final draft.

The issue with running comparison technology in Word, for instance, is that it can only be used in Word. You can't compare an attachment from Outlook or run a comparison direct from a document management system (DMS) within Word. This limits flexibility and is prohibitive if the content is shared through any other application, such as PDF or PPT.

Professionals working on complicated matters may have tens of documents to review at any one time. Each document could run to hundreds of pages in length, which all need to be reviewed and edited by multiple parties. Using track changes for this process can make it incredibly hard to simply read a document, let alone discern what's changed, who made those changes and what stage the draft is at. To get a "clear" version of a document, it can be tempting to turn off track changes mid-review cycle, but forgetting to switch them back on again can lead to confusion at the next stage of review (not to mention issues with hidden metadata).

The best solutions ensure nothing is ever lost or overwritten during a review by keeping an archive of previous versions, while highlighting only what's changed in the latest iteration of the document. This level of precision around changes should also be possible to achieve in PDF file and PowerPoint presentations, not just Word documents.

Any solution employed for comparison should include the following features - It should be able to:

- Customize comparison themes, e.g. by color, to identify and display specific changes to a document.
- Easily compare multiple versions of a file and show only what's different.
- Review, accept or reject changes within the application without altering the formatting.
- Quickly move between differences in versions by navigating between pages or individual changes.
- Categorize changes, so reviewers can focus on different types of amendments.
- Provide automatic change notifications synchronized to Outlook, so when modified attachments are received, comparison can take place directly within Outlook.
- Compare different types of files – Word documents, PDF files and PowerPoint presentations

The best way to compare files

By using specific software for file comparison; designed to support structured review processes, business services firms can gain efficiency and productivity, while avoiding embarrassing errors and potential reputational damage.

Those working in law firms, real estate, accountancy, finance etc., exchange documents as part of the currency of their work each day and these files need to be perfect. This means edits and corrections must be made with complete accuracy and captured with confidence. The only way to ensure this accuracy is by using the right document comparison software for the job.

The solution should fit seamlessly within existing workflows, so as not to be disruptive. It should also be compatible with any applications being used to create a file or document e.g. Word, PowerPoint or PDF, and synced to Outlook, making the whole process more streamlined.

The edits or "redlines" should be such that they don't render a document unreadable. Instead they should make it easy to identify areas of change and show items that require attention. Overall, the technology should reduce the amount of time and resources it takes to evolve a high stakes document to its final conclusion.

With the right solution, the risk of changes or comments being missed in a document is mitigated, no matter how long or complex the content; how many people are involved in the review process; or how many times it needs to be reviewed. It should also remove the risk of human error from the file comparison process.

When professionals are dealing with high stakes documents, every change matters. Large or small, each comment, edit or correction by different parties can influence the ultimate meaning or intention of a document. Those responsible for delivering documents become liable for their contents, so they need to be 100% confident in what they are signing off.

About Workshare

Workshare is dedicated to helping professionals compare, protect and share their high stakes documents. Since 1999, Workshare has developed and released intelligent technology for business services firms Now, more than two million professionals use Workshare around the world.

Since being first to market with the ground-breaking DeltaView technology, Workshare has honed and perfected document comparison software. 15 years of experience has led to the best way to compare two documents. If you would like a demonstration of Workshare's file comparison solution, please call us on +44 (0)20 7426 0000.

t: +44 (0)20 7426 0000 / +1 415 590 7700 w: www.workshare.com e: sales@workshare.com
a: 20 Fashion St, London, E1 6PX o: London | San Francisco | New York | Sydney

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