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Introducing Office Business Gateway: The next generation of Office Business Applications (OBA)

In today's dynamic work environment, people constantly access data from different universes of information:

- structured data from enterprise applications (such as ERP and CRM)
- unstructured information in productivity applications (such as Microsoft® Office or Microsoft® SharePoint®)
- social information from networks like Facebook®, LinkedIn®, XING®, Twitter® and others
Web services (wikis, blogs etc.).

Despite the wide range of applications and portals, most employees spend much of their time within a particular main application, such as Microsoft® Office. It is therefore natural to strive for access to relevant information from within an already familiar environment. Technically however, this has consistently proven to be a challenge as ease-of-use considerations weigh against integration efforts. With the "Office Business Gateway" these challenges can now largely be overcome.



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Microsoft® Office Business Applications ("OBA") were originally conceived to fit that information integration challenge for Microsoft® Office and they did so with some success. However, over time numerous limitations to the OBA approach have become apparent: one must take into account the different object models of the Microsoft® Office suite applications and attend to their various programming structures. Microsoft® Office itself brings with it only a few tools for the creation of OBA's and relies primarily on Visual Studio® Tools for Office (VSTO).

‘OBAs connect Line of Business (LOB) systems with the people that use them through the familiar user interface of Microsoft Office. OBAs enable businesses to extend the Microsoft Office clients and servers into business processes running in LOB applications such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Customer Relationship Management (CRM), and Supply Chain Management (SCM). This enables enterprises to create new value from existing IT investments by combining them in innovative ways.’

Quelle: <http://www.obacentral.com>

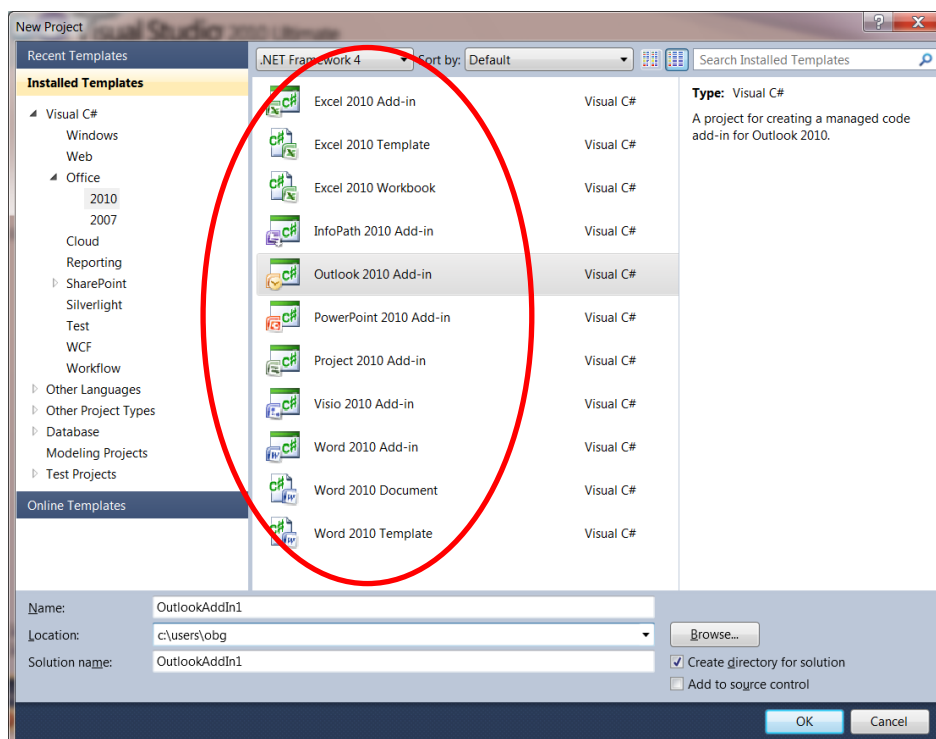


Figure 1: Selection of the "VSTO Target Application" in Visual Studio®



The development paradigm is to write document extensions or add-ins for each specific Office application. The selection of the target Office application must hence be deliberate from the start. OBAs are therefore extensions of individual Office applications (Microsoft® Word, Microsoft® Excel®, Microsoft® Outlook® etc.) based on managed code (.NET), rather than a flexible, configurable integration framework.

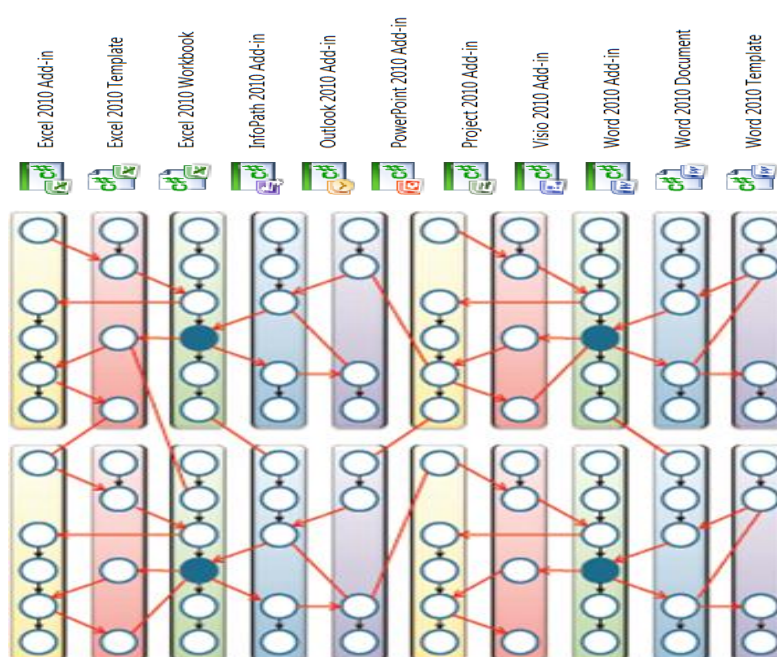


Figure 2: Point-to-Point Connection

Furthermore, a stand-alone OBA must be developed, maintained and organized over the entire life cycle not only for each Office application but also for each release version. This quickly became a complex versioning challenge.

In contrast, the Office Business Gateway enables the same information integration benefits, but in a significantly more elegant manner. Unlike the “classic” OBA, the Office Business Gateway is a framework rather than a coded point solution. It uses server-side metadata for dynamic provisioning of dedicated user interfaces within the task pane. All specific applications within the



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client task pane can be executed from an assembly store at run time or from a client-side cache within the task pane. As a consequence, only the client add-in must be deployed and changes can be implemented within the framework without the need to redeploy the client. This makes development of new information "views" significantly easier, deployment is faster and management costs are kept low, while keeping all the benefits OBA's were originally designed for. Uniquely, the Office Business Gateway integrates not only with Microsoft® Outlook®, but with Microsoft® Word, Microsoft® Excel® and Microsoft® PowerPoint® as well. In an upcoming release the Gateway will also integrate with Internet Explorer® 8.0 (a completely different paradigm altogether) as well as Adobe® Acrobat. In combination this allows for ergonomic access of information from different repositories within Microsoft® Office, Microsoft® Dynamics™ CRM and other Host applications. An example of the implementation of the Office Business Gateway technology is Microsoft's "Modern Government Workplace" initiative. The solution by Microsoft® partner Combionic was awarded the Microsoft Government Innovation Award.

Comparative analysis from an Developer point of view

Feature	Visual Studio® Tools for Office	OBG
Management of Views and Regions	Programming effort (-)	available (+)
Integration in 5 Office Applications	Not supported (-)	available (+)
Contextual Search	Programming effort (-)	available (+)
WPF Integration	Use of Controls is possible	Use of Controls is possible
Flexible Configuration	Programming effort (-)	available (+)
Context Caching	Programming effort (-)	available (+)
Deployment	Client Installation for Add-Ins (+)	Client Installation of OBG Add-In is necessary. Depending on the setting the component can be taken from the central server. OBG loads the class libraries through own Cache mechanism. (+)
Connection to data sources (database, Web Services, SharePoint® etc.)	Not available. Programming effort (-)	Available for many Standard applications. Integration of AZURE™ Cloud Services (SQL, Blob Store) is available. BPOS Connector available (+)



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Able to operate beyond Office applications	No (-)	Yes. Applications run also in WinForms. (+)
Continuous Keyboard operation	Programming effort (-)	Supported, when OBG.net Task Pane is activated (+)

Next steps

Free trial versions of the Office Business Gateway can be downloaded at www.combionic.com.

Should you have any questions, or require detailed information about Combionic products, please visit our website www.combionic.com or e-mail us to info@combionic.com.



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About Combionic

Combionic is a pioneer for the modern workplace. Our software integrates information from every business application in Microsoft Office®, Internet Explorer® und Adobe Reader®. Users can access information in context of their current task without toggling between different business applications. This in turn creates a significantly more productive, compliant, and user-driven working environment. Combionic is the recipient of a Microsoft Government Innovation award.

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