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Review: pdfDocs compareDocs 3.1 for Document Comparison

By John Heckman

pdfDocs compareDocs 3.1

www.docscorp.com

TechnoScore: 4.5

1 = Lowest Possible Score; 5 = Highest Possible Score

INTRODUCTION

The document comparison changed dramatically when LexisNexis killed CompareRite almost exactly seven years ago (it was officially “retired” on February 1, 2002). For a long time DeltaView (now incorporated into the more extensive set of Workshare tools) was the only game in town — and priced accordingly. DiffDoc provided a less expensive (but also less complete) alternative. Acrobat 9 Pro also now enables you to compare two PDF files.

A lot of firms just use Word’s track changes feature, despite the fact that it is associated with serious metadata issues that can cost a firm dearly. For years the document comparison feature was so bad that Microsoft recommended against using it in a legal setting.

So what’s a poor lawyer to do?

Enter compareDocs, from DocsCorp, which advertises its ability to “Compare Apples with Oranges.” The first thing to understand is that compareDocs has different functionality depending on whether it is used in conjunction with pdfDocs Desktop (the converter and organizer) and the OCR Server which, as the name suggests, converts scanned documents into PDF files.

Used on its own, compareDocs will compare Word-to-Word or PDF-to-PDF documents. Used with pdfDocs Desktop, it will convert a variety of other formats to PDF and compare any Word-to-PDF or PDF to other document formats, including Outlook, PowerPoint, Excel, or text files. It does not support

WordPerfect, but WP has its own internal document comparison feature (which is extremely good, on par with the old CompareRite) and can natively convert WP to PDF files, which could then be used for comparison.

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Aside from Word-to-PDF, the most useful of these options is most likely the ability to compare two spreadsheets. The resulting PDF file shows what changes have been made. With Excel, you have the option to include all worksheets or only the first one.

When evaluating such a program, there are two basic criteria: convenience of use and accuracy of comparison. For example, Word’s “document comparison” feature while convenient is not very accurate and not really appropriate for law firms. If you need document redlining, you need it so price should not be a major factor.

CONVENIENCE

It is compareDocs’ convenience that makes it stand out. It puts a “pdfDocs compareDocs” entry into Windows Explorer, so if you right-click on one or

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multiple files, you can compare them (by default the program opens to My Documents — I would prefer the ability to change this option).

More importantly, it integrates seamlessly with Hummingbird, Interwoven, and Wordox as well as some other less common Document Management Systems. In Wordox, for example, you select the files (or versions) you want to compare, right-click and select “Compare Files.” CompareDocs opens as well as the two documents you’ve selected. You then have control over how the files are compared, you can switch the directionality of the comparison, etc. You can then save the resulting comparison back to the DMS.

The comparison of Tables and Headers/Footers was completely accurate.

You could do this sort of thing manually, for example, by converting the documents you want to compare to PDF files, and then running a PDF comparison in Acrobat Pro 9. However, doing so would be considerably more cumbersome than using compareDocs.

Unlike some other programs, compareDocs does not use a proprietary format for document comparison. Instead, it uses Word’s Track Changes to generate the redlined document. However, you can choose to output the comparison in a number of ways:

Word-to-Word

- Produce a Word document using Track Changes. This displays the changes on the left and you can easily scroll through the list accepting or rejecting changes.
- A consolidated report in Word — more like the traditional document comparison function. This gives you a hard-coded document (with deleted text in struck-through red; added text is double-underscoped blue).

PDF-to-PDF or Word-to-PDF

- Produce a PDF consolidated report marked up with annotations.
- Produce a side-by-side PDF report showing annotations.

Using Word’s Track Changes interface is a two-edge sword. On the one hand, it has the major advantage of offering users a familiar interface and makes the results very easy to use. In particular, it enables you to consolidate, accept, or reject changes.

On the downside, it is hobbled by the limited options in Word’s Track Changes and thus cannot match the flexibility of other programs in terms of how you mark up the document. But if the defaults are acceptable, this is a minor issue.

You can also generate a report either showing the detail of changes or a summary of them. If you are using Word’s Track Changes you can modify the rendering set (what is marked and how) to include (or not) Tables, Footers, List Numbers, Field Codes, Text Boxes, etc. If you have Word 2007, you can show moves as moves (as opposed to deletions and then insertions). You can also choose the degree of granularity (at the character, word, or sentence level). If you are doing a PDF comparison, you can select High (words), Medium (sentences), or Low (paragraphs).

After you run the comparison, you can have the document open to your desktop or immediately emailed to someone. If you choose to email the result (not really a very good idea until you have checked the comparison), you can attach the original, modified or the comparison, or any combination of them.

ACCURACY

Traditionally, document comparison programs have done a good job on basic comparison, but have had problems with advanced features commonly used by law firms such as Tables, Headers/Footers, and numbered lists. So to give compareDocs a workout, I used several Word 2007 documents containing this kind of formatting.

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The comparison of Tables and Headers/Footers was completely accurate. Numbered paragraphs also designated the changes correctly, although entirely new paragraphs added at the end showed the text as added, but not the number (although renumbered paragraphs show the old number as deleted). All in all, I encountered no glitches (though I did not test using 100+ page behemoths).

SHARING DOCUMENTS

Hopefully more and more law firms will realize that emailing Word files with track changes turned on is just asking for trouble, and instead use some sort of metadata removal tool that strips out the track changes. CompareDocs enables you to control this by generating a document either with controlled track changes or a fixed comparison, thus getting around the problem.

CONCLUSION

Although comparison of other formats requires pdfDocs Desktop, compareDocs is very convenient when comparing Word-to-Word and PDF-to-PDF. However, adding pdfDocs Desktop can substantially expand its capabilities, namely for comparing Word to PDF or other file formats with a PDF output comparison.

Even taken as a simple standalone program, compareDocs is a viable alternative to other existing options. It would be my first choice in recommending an electronic redlining program.

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DOCSCORP'S RESPONSE

We invited DocsCorp to respond to this TechnoFeature. Kerry Carroll, DocsCorp's marketing and public relations manager, responded as follows:

Firstly, I would like to thank John for taking the time to review pdfDocs compareDocs and for his appraisal of the software. One point needs to be clarified:

pdfDocs compareDocs only uses Word's Track Changes to mark up differences. The differences between two documents are calculated by the compareDocs engine — a best-of-breed comparison engine which uses complex algorithms to detect changes between two documents. The differences calculated are then marked up using Track Changes, giving users familiarity of this Word feature and the convenience of instantly accepting and rejecting changes ... without the risk of differences being missed.

You can try compareDocs for free or schedule a Web demonstration.

ABOUT JOHN HECKMAN

John Heckman has been assisting law firms with technology issues for over 25 years. Heckman Consulting is a software integration firm specializing in Amicus Attorney, PCLaw, Worldox document management, Time Matters, and other legal-specific software. It services the greater New York area and clients range from solo practitioners to AmLaw 100 firms. Check out John's blog, [Does It Compute](#), and the [Heckman Consulting](#) Web site for newsletters, tips and tricks for specific programs, and other useful information.

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