

SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR DISTRIBUTED ELECTRONIC SIGNATURE DOCUMENTS INCLUDING VERSION CONTROL

PRIORITY CLAIM

[0001] This application claims priority to U.S. Application Serial No. 12/773,720 filed May 4, 2010, which is hereby incorporated by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The traditional process of negotiating and executing a written contract is familiar to many. In this process, the contract document is circulated among the parties, often several times, for their review, modification and signature. During the course of the document's circulation, one or more of the parties may suggest handwritten modifications to the contract terms and affix their handwritten initials proximal to such modifications to indicate their assent thereto.

[0003] Frequently, however, because of poor handwriting or ink blurring, it becomes difficult for the parties to discern the intelligibility of the handwritten terms and/or the identity of the initialing party. Additionally, it may prove difficult to discern whether such handwritten modifications were made subsequent to one or more of the parties having finally executed the contract document, believing the contract's terms to be settled.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0004] Systems and methods are disclosed for facilitating version control over an electronic document, the electronic document being subject to a distribution sequence among at least first and second reviewing parties over a network. The method includes receiving an instruction set from a source client. Based on the instruction set, at least one editable field populated with content is embedded in the electronic document. The progress of the electronic document through the distribution sequence is monitored over the network. The content of the editable field being edited by the first reviewing party is determined. In response to determining that the content has been edited by the first reviewing party, the edited electronic document is provided to the second reviewing party. The electronic document being electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties is validated. The editable field is locked from further electronic editing.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0005] The preferred and alternative embodiments of the present invention are described in detail below with reference to the following drawings:

[0006] FIGURE 1 shows an exemplary system for creation, processing and execution of distributed electronic signature documents;

[0007] FIGURE 2 shows a preferred method for distributed electronic signature documents;

[0008] FIGURE 3 shows a user interface for customizing electronic documents according to an embodiment; and

[0009] FIGURE 4 shows a process for facilitating version control according to an embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0010] Embodiments of the invention may be described in the general context of, or may be implemented by, computer-executable instructions, such as program modules, being executed by a computer and/or by computer-readable media on which such instructions or modules can be stored. Generally, program modules include routines, programs, objects,

components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks or implement particular abstract data types. The invention may also be practiced in distributed computing environments where tasks are performed by remote processing devices that are linked through a communications network. In a distributed computing environment, program modules may be located in both local and remote computer storage media including memory storage devices.

[0011] Embodiments of the invention may incorporate concepts described in commonly owned U. S. Patent Application No. 12/038,728 entitled "SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR DOCUMENT TAGGING TEMPLATES," and U. S. Patent Application No. 12/490,602 entitled "SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR DISTRIBUTED ELECTRONIC SIGNATURE DOCUMENTS," (Atty. Docket No. DOCU-1-1020) which are hereby incorporated by reference as if fully set forth herein.

[0012] FIGURE 1 shows an example system 100 for creation, processing and execution of distributed electronic signature documents. The system 100 includes a single computer 101, or includes a computer 101 in communication with pluralities of other computers 103. The computer 101 is connected with a web signing service 104 and an electronic signature service 106 over a network such as the Internet. In one embodiment, a bank of servers, a wireless device, a cellular telephone and/or other data capture/entry device can be used in place of the computer 101. An application program, such as a source-client application, is run by the computer 101, which then creates a signing template 120 and/or a signable document 122. The computer 101 can include an application program that allows the signing template 120 and/or the signable document 122 to be sent for signature via email.

[0013] The signing template 120 is a file that preferably contains information about the signing process, locations, sequence and authentication. It contains linkages to any form fields in the signable document that will be used to fully execute the signing template. It may also contain information about the account holder and any limitations on the signing process. It may identify other parties that will also sign, as well as authentication requirements for any of the signers. The signable document 122 is a document file that preferably contains text

and/or graphics along with a customizable control or link (e.g., tag) back to the signing template for execution. The web signing server 104 is a web server on the Internet that preferably hosts the application logic to correlate data transmitted by the embedded control in the signable document 122 with signing template 120 rule sets. An electronic signature service 106, such as the existing DocuSign service, executes the signing template instructions through the web signing server.

[0014] FIGURE 2 shows a method for distributed electronic signature documents 200 in one embodiment. At block 202 a document originator creates a signing template file that contains information about how a signable document is to be signed. A document originator may be a user, a party to a transaction, an agency or any entity interested in creating a signable document. The signing template file may include but is not limited to the location of signatures and initials for one or more signers; linkage between form fields in the actual document; information to be used to notify or authenticate the signer; information that may be used by decision systems to decide on different signature execution processes based on what is entered into the document during the signing process; the number of times the signable document can be executed; who will pay for the signature process; information governing whether the signable document content is modifiable by the signer; and other controlling information that may be changed or modified at any time by the sender who has access to it on the web server connected to the Internet. The signing template is preferably stored on a web signing server that is connected to the Internet.

[0015] In one embodiment, at block 204, the document originator may create a signable document that is to be distributed to recipients for signing or viewing. The creation of the signing template and signable document preferably occurs in the same application, but may also occur in a different sequence and in different applications. The core signable document preferably includes an embedded control that provides information about the companion signing template. This information is similar to a secure hyperlink that enables the signer to click a button ("SDButton") or a link in the signable document that contains information about how to connect over the Internet to the signing template for processing.

The signable document is preferably paired with a signing template; however, there may be multiple signable documents relating back to one or more signable templates.

[0016] The document originator, at block 206, transmits electronically the signing template and signable document to the signer. In an alternative embodiment, the signing template may be distributed via a simple hyperlink back to the signable document stored on a web server available to the Internet. When the signer is ready and when the SDButton is activated, at block 208, a message is sent to the signing template on the web signing server, which invokes a signing process. This signing process preferably launches a procedure that validates the transaction and uploads the data provided by any form fields in the signable document to the web signing server and invokes a signing process that spawns a local web browser on the signer's computer and begins a signing process as defined by the signing template.

[0017] After the signer has been authenticated by the system by any means defined in the signing template, at block 210 a version of the signable document that is created from the server is presented in the browser window. The signing process uses the current method of signing found in the DocuSign service, but may accommodate alternative methods of signing found in similar services. At block 212, the signer signs the document.

[0018] Preferably only the form field data from the signer is uploaded to the server and merged into the signing template (which contains the signable document copy). In this embodiment, the signers are not able to modify the underlying documents because this data is not used when the contract is presented to them during the signing process.

[0019] In an alternative embodiment, if the sender allows the content to be modified prior to submitting to the web signing server for signing, the entire signable document rather than only the field information is uploaded to the web signing server for handling through the signing process. In this embodiment, the modified document is displayed for the signer to sign in the web signing server.

[0020] In another embodiment, the sender does not allow the content to be modified and the entire document is posted to the web signing server for the signing process. Next, a

document integrity validation occurs on the posted document to ensure that the underlying content has not been changed.

[0021] Once a signable document/signing template pairing has been created, the signable document can be used in many different ways to enable businesses to easily allow electronic signatures to be collected. The following provide non-limiting examples of alternative embodiments as may be desired or dictated by application requirements.

[0022] In one example, a business creates a signable document for the company 401k signing sheet and emails it to multiple employees. Each employee opens the file and fills in the form, clicking a button that may say "Sign." The web signing server responds by presenting a web interface that authenticates and presents the document for signature for each employee and collects the signature and any data provided.

[0023] In another example, a business creates a signable document for a sales order form and creates the companion signing template, which requests that after the original signer has signed the document must be countersigned internally by two other people before being completed. To execute a sales transaction, the sales representative opens the document, enters in the data required for the sale, and sends the file to the signer for signature. The signer merely clicks the "Sign" button. The web signing server responds by presenting a web interface that authenticates and provides the document for signature to the first signer. Once the first signer has signed, the document is routed to the other two signers for signatures before it is completed.

[0024] A business creates a signable document that is unlocked (i.e. the content is changeable) for the company consulting agreement, and a signing template with instructions about the signing process, which ensures the company signer signs second. This contract is edited by both the company and consultant several times before it is deemed to be the final copy. Once the final copy is reached, either party may click the "Submit for Signature" link or button and the web signing server manages the signing process.

[0025] A company has an "Account Setup Form" that currently prospects download, print and fill out manually, and faxing the form back to the company for account

setup. Using the systems and methods described herein, the sender company creates the form as a signable document linked to a signing template that defines the signing process for opening an account. When the user clicks on a hyperlink on a web page that says "Open Account," the form is displayed in the browser window, and the user fills out the form using all form fields defined in the signable document (for example a PDF form). When the user clicks "Sign" the web signing server executes the signing process for the document.

[0026] Embodiments of the invention include systems and methods for facilitating version control over an electronic document, the electronic document being subject to a distribution sequence among at least first and second reviewing parties over a network. Elements of the system 100 may include one or more computer-readable media having stored thereon instructions that, when executed by one or more elements of system 100, enable such elements to implement the described embodiments.

[0027] In an embodiment, a user desiring to create or otherwise format a document to be subject to a distribution sequence among a number of parties to review and execute the document may use a browser or desktop application associated with computer 101, for example, to access a document formatting service, which may be maintained by the administrator of web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106. For example, the user may access a website maintained by such administrator and provide authentication information identifying the user in order to access previously stored base documents and/or provide base documents for formatting.

[0028] Upon accessing the site, and as illustrated in FIGURE 3, the administrator may provide to the computer 101 a web page 300 or other content providing a graphical user interface allowing the user to customize, including establishing rules for, a document for circulation among prospective reviewers/signatories. As illustrated in FIGURE 3, the page 300 includes a region 310 from which the user may select from among a number of overlay fields/tags (*e.g.*, electronic signature fields 311, electronic initial fields 312, electronically editable data fields 313, *etc.*) to be embedded into, or otherwise associated with, an electronic document 315. As discussed elsewhere herein, these fields/tags may function as activatable

controls, such that the selection, electronic signing, or modification of the field/tag by a reviewer/signatory can be detected by the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106. The electronic document 315 may be a document previously stored in, or uploaded to, a memory device accessible to the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106. The electronic document 315 may be of any conventional format (*e.g.*, .pdf, Microsoft® Word, *etc.*)

[0029] As further illustrated in FIGURE 3, upon selection of a field/tag from the region 310, the page 300 includes a dialog box 320 allowing the user to select from among, or otherwise establish, a number of parameters associated with the selected field/tag. For example, the user may designate the field as being uniquely usable, editable and/or viewable by a particular reviewer/signatory or set of reviewers/signatories. Consequently, and as discussed in greater detail herein, the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 is able to track the actions of each reviewer/signatory as indicated by actions taken with respect to a corresponding field/tag. Additionally, the user may select, or otherwise provide, one or more blocks of text (*e.g.*, contract language to be negotiated) in the document 315 as being editable, and may further designate one or more reviewers/signatories as being exclusively able to modify such editable text block(s). For example, if the document 315 includes pre-existing text, the user may, in a conventional manner, point and drag a cursor to select one or more blocks of text to be designated as editable by one or more reviewers/signatories. Alternatively, the user may embed into the document 315 an editable data field 313 and subsequently enter editable text or other content into such field.

[0030] After the user has customized the document 315 in the manner discussed above, the document is circulated among, or otherwise made available to, the reviewers/signatories designated by the user in the customization process. For example, once the document 315 is ready for review, the user may notify the reviewers/signatories that the document is accessible online via the web signing server 104, electronic signature service 106 and/or other network device. Alternatively, the document may be distributed to the reviewers/signatories via email or other network-distribution method. In any case, the user

may further designate a sequence or order in which the reviewers/signatories will be able to access, edit, and/or sign the document 315 to facilitate version control over the document.

[0031] The web signing server 104 functions to monitor the progress of the document 315 through the distribution sequence. For example, using techniques described elsewhere herein, elements of the system 100 are operable to determine when a field/tag or other activatable control within the document 315 has been activated (*e.g.*, a field in the document has been edited, the document has been electronically signed and/or initialed, *etc.*) and by whom the control was activated. Upon determining that a field within the document 315 has been edited, as may be accompanied by an electronic initialing by the party making the edit, the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 may notify the other reviewers/signatories that the document has been edited. This notification may be by email or other network-distribution method, and may include a specific indication of the edit made and the identity of the party making the edit. If the document 315 has been edited by a party, the other reviewers/signatories are given the subsequent opportunity to edit the document, even if such reviewers/signatories have previously electronically signed the document indicating their assent to the terms of the document as of the time that they signed the document.

[0032] If the document is edited subsequent to a party affixing his/her electronic signature to the document 315, the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 may function to electronically remove such signature to afford the party an opportunity to decide anew whether the edited document is to be approved and signed by the party. Alternatively, the party may be requested to ratify his/her signature via a graphical user interface or other electronic manner of indication.

[0033] Once the document 315 has been electronically signed by all reviewers/signatories designated by the user, and such electronic signatures have been affixed to the document subsequent to the latest edit to the document, the document is locked so as to prevent further editing. The web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 may then notify all parties that the document 315 has been finalized.

[0034] FIGURE 4 illustrates a process 400 according to an embodiment of the invention. The process 400 is implementable in an electronic system coupled to or including a storage device. The process 400 is illustrated as a set of operations shown as discrete blocks. The process 400 may be implemented in any suitable hardware, software, firmware, or combination thereof. The order in which the operations are described is not to be necessarily construed as a limitation.

[0035] At a block 410, an instruction set is received from a source client. For example, an administrator of web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 may provide to the computer 101 a web page 300 or other content providing a graphical user interface allowing the user to customize, including establishing rules for, a document for circulation among prospective reviewers/signatories.

[0036] At a block 420, based on the instruction set, at least one editable field populated with content is embedded in the electronic document. For example, the page 300 includes a region 310 from which the user may select from among a number of overlay fields/tags (*e.g.*, electronic signature fields 311, electronic initial fields 312, electronically editable data fields 313, *etc.*) to be embedded into, or otherwise associated with, the electronic document 315.

[0037] At a block 430, the progress of the electronic document through a distribution sequence is monitored over a network. For example, the web signing server 104 functions to monitor the progress of the document 315 through the distribution sequence. Elements of the system 100 are operable to determine when a field/tag or other activatable control within the document 315 has been activated (*e.g.*, a field in the document has been edited, the document has been electronically signed and/or initialed, *etc.*) and by whom the control was activated.

[0038] At a block 440, whether the content of the editable field has been edited by a first reviewing party is determined.

[0039] At a block 450, in response to determining that the content has been edited by the first reviewing party, the edited electronic document is provided to a second reviewing

party. For example, upon determining that a field within the document 315 has been edited, the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 may notify the other reviewers/signatories that the document has been edited. If the document 315 has been edited by a party, the other reviewers/signatories are given the subsequent opportunity to edit the document, even if such reviewers/signatories have previously electronically signed the document indicating their assent to the terms of the document as of the time that they signed the document.

[0040] At a block 460, that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties is validated.

[0041] At a block 470, in response to validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, the editable field is locked from further electronic editing. For example, once the document 315 has been electronically signed by all reviewers/signatories designated by the user, and such electronic signatures have been affixed to the document subsequent to the latest edit to the document, the document is locked by the web signing server 104 and/or electronic signature service 106 so as to prevent further editing.

[0042] While the preferred embodiment of the invention has been illustrated and described, as noted above, many changes can be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Accordingly, the scope of the invention is not limited by the disclosure of the preferred embodiment, but to the invention as described above and illustrated in the exemplars shown below.

CLAIMS

1. A method of facilitating version control over an electronic document, the electronic document being subject to a distribution sequence among at least first and second reviewing parties over a network, the method comprising:

receiving an instruction set from a source client including a signing template that is distinct from the electronic document and that specifies a distribution sequence designating the order in which first and second reviewing parties can access, edit, and sign the electronic document;

based on the instruction set, embedding in the electronic document at least one editable field populated with content, wherein signature fields within the electronic document are separate from the at least one editable field;

monitoring over the network the progress of the electronic document through the distribution sequence;

determining that the content of the editable field has been edited by the first reviewing party;

determining that the electronic document includes an electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party, the electronic initialing field associated with the editable field;

in response to determining that the content has been edited by the first reviewing party and that the electronic document includes the electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party, providing the edited electronic document to the second reviewing party;

validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, wherein the electronic signatures provided by the first and second reviewing parties are separate from the electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party; and

in response to validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, locking the editable field from further electronic editing.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties comprises:
 - determining, at a first time, that the second reviewing party has electronically signed the electronic document;
 - determining, at a second time subsequent to the first time, that the first reviewing party has edited the content of the editable field and electronically signed the electronic document;
 - providing, at a third time subsequent to the second time, the edited electronic document to the second reviewing party for approval of the edited content; and
 - receiving from the second reviewing party an indication of approval of the edited content.
3. The method of claim 2, further comprising electronically removing the signature of the second reviewing party upon determining that the first reviewing party has edited the content, wherein the indication of approval comprises the second reviewing party electronically re-signing the electronic document.
4. The method of claim 2, wherein the indication of approval comprises the second reviewing party providing an electronic instruction to ratify the electronic signature of the second reviewing party.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein the instruction set comprises a restriction on which of the at least first and second reviewing parties are permitted to edit the content.
6. The method of claim 1, wherein the instruction set comprises a designation of which content of the electronic document is to be included in the editable field.
7. A system, comprising:
 - a source client executable on a first computing device, the source client configured to generate an electronic document, the electronic document being subject to a

distribution sequence among at least first and second reviewing parties over a network, wherein the distribution sequence is provided within a signing template that is distinct from the electronic document and that specifies the order in which first and second reviewing parties can access, edit, and sign the electronic document; and

an electronic device coupled to the first computing device over the network, the electronic device configured to:

receive an instruction set from the source client, the instruction set including the signing template;

based on the instruction set, embed in the electronic document at least one editable field populated with content, wherein signature fields within the electronic document are separate from the at least one editable field;

monitor over the network the progress of the electronic document through the distribution sequence;

determine that the content of the editable field has been edited by the first reviewing party;

determine that the electronic document includes an electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party, the electronic initialing field associated with the editable field;

in response to determining that the content has been edited by the first reviewing party and that the electronic document includes the electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party, provide the edited electronic document to the second reviewing party;

validate that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, wherein the electronic signatures provided by the first and second reviewing parties are separate from the electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party; and

in response to validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, lock the editable field from further electronic editing.

8. The system of claim 7, wherein validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties comprises:

determining, at a first time, that the second reviewing party has electronically signed the electronic document;

determining, at a second time subsequent to the first time, that the first reviewing party has edited the content of the editable field and electronically signed the electronic document;

providing, at a third time subsequent to the second time, the edited electronic document to the second reviewing party for approval of the edited content; and

receiving from the second reviewing party an indication of approval of the edited content.

9. The system of claim 8, wherein the electronic device is further configured to electronically remove the signature of the second reviewing party upon determining that the first reviewing party has edited the content, wherein the indication of approval comprises the second reviewing party electronically re-signing the electronic document.

10. The system of claim 8, wherein the indication of approval comprises the second reviewing party providing an electronic instruction to ratify the electronic signature of the second reviewing party.

11. The system of claim 7, wherein the instruction set comprises a restriction on which of the at least first and second reviewing parties are permitted to edit the content.

12. The system of claim 7, wherein the instruction set comprises a designation of which content of the electronic document is to be included in the editable field.

13. A computer readable medium including instructions that, when executed by an electronic device, enable the electronic device to perform steps for facilitating version control over an electronic document, the electronic document being subject to a

distribution sequence among at least first and second reviewing parties over a network, the steps comprising:

receiving an instruction set from a source client including a signing template that is distinct from the electronic document and that specifies a distribution sequence designating the order in which first and second reviewing parties can access, edit, and sign the electronic document;

based on the instruction set, embedding in the electronic document at least one editable field populated with content, wherein signature fields within the electronic document are separate from the at least one editable field;

monitoring over the network the progress of the electronic document through the distribution sequence;

determining that the content of the editable field has been edited by the first reviewing party;

determining that the electronic document includes an electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party, the electronic initialing field associated with the editable field;

in response to determining that the content has been edited by the first reviewing party and that the electronic document includes the electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party, providing the edited electronic document to the second reviewing party;

validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, wherein the electronic signatures provided by the first and second reviewing parties are separate from the electronic initialing field completed by the first reviewing party; and

in response to validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties, locking the editable field from further electronic editing.

14. The medium of claim 13, wherein validating that the electronic document has been electronically signed by the first and second reviewing parties comprises:

determining, at a first time, that the second reviewing party has electronically signed the electronic document;

determining, at a second time subsequent to the first time, that the first reviewing party has edited the content of the editable field and electronically signed the electronic document;

providing, at a third time subsequent to the second time, the edited electronic document to the second reviewing party for approval of the edited content; and

receiving from the second reviewing party an indication of approval of the edited content.

15. The medium of claim 14, wherein the steps further comprise electronically removing the signature of the second reviewing party upon determining that the first reviewing party has edited the content, wherein the indication of approval comprises the second reviewing party electronically re-signing the electronic document.

16. The medium of claim 14, wherein the indication of approval comprises the second reviewing party providing an electronic instruction to ratify the electronic signature of the second reviewing party.

17. The medium of claim 13, wherein the instruction set comprises a restriction on which of the at least first and second reviewing parties are permitted to edit the content.

18. The medium of claim 13, wherein the instruction set comprises a designation of which content of the electronic document is to be included in the editable field.