DELIVERING INTERACTIVE GOVERNMENT

Intelligent documents and forms streamline processes, speed responsiveness

Despite ongoing attempts at automation, it's amazing how many federal agencies and departments still juggle combinations of paper and electronic documents to complete critical daily processes.

This is especially true for processes that reach out to constituents, mobile workers or other agencies. Processes often begin on paper and are typed into a system only to be printed out and sent to the next destination, where the form or document being "processed" gets typed in again!

This clunky processing cycle results in higher costs and slower response times. In today's 24-7, order-it-today-and-get-it-tomorrow world, constituents and businesses don't understand why they can't interact with the federal government as easily and efficiently as they do with private-sector enterprises.

Agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and Internal Revenue Service, however, are solving this problem by leveraging the free Adobe Reader. Often referred to as an "intelligent document," the latest generation of the Reader's now-familiar Portable Document Format (PDF) combines the look of paper with the business logic, XML data, digital signatures and other attributes needed to become an active participant in secure, automated processes. Using t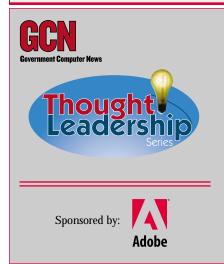he Adobe Intelligent Document Platform, federal agencies are improving the way people interact with information and each other.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), for example, has 224,000 employees who provide a full range of healthcare, financial and burial benefits to the nation's 26 million veterans and their families.

The Veterans Health Administration, a division of the VA, offers veterans and their beneficiaries online digital forms for access to VA healthcare benefits via www.va.gov/vaforms, while a separate intranet site provides VHA staff with internal forms. The Web site has generated much interest: Between January and April 2005, there were 1.5 million hits, with an average of 13,000 hits per day.

VHA's criteria for a forms-based intelligent document solution were that it operate on an industry-standard architecture, be accessible to people with disabilities, be usable without the need to purchase form-filler software, enable secure forms processing and data encryption, and supply scalability to support digital signatures once those are made available to VHA.

VHA chose Adobe as its primary forms solutions provider. "Today, the Adobe LiveCycle Forms and LiveCycle Reader Extensions allow VHA to create forms that end users can fill out online, print, and save copies of, with data populating each form," said Mary Stout, chief of forms, publications and records management services for VHA.

Adobe LiveCycle Reader Extensions helps the VHA activate properties in the Adobe Reader that make it easier to fill out and process information in online forms. It creates a portable local file users can even send via e-mail to the next destination for processing. With 156 VHA medical centers across the United States, this enhancement enables everyone to access, use, save and process many VHA forms.

> "Veterans can now submit acurate applications in minutes instead of days or weeks [resulting] in substantially faster processing by VHA staff."
>
> *Mary Stout*
> *Chief of Forms, Publications and Records Management Services*
> *Veterans Health Administration*

Veterans Affairs at Palo Alto, California

User acceptance is growing. In September, VHA posted a Health Care Benefits Renewal Form, 10-10EZR, used by veterans to determine their annual eligibility for medical benefits. In only six months, usage has grown dramatically: More than 12,000 forms were downloaded from the Web site in April alone. Veterans applying for healthcare benefits for the first time can submit the six-page 10-10EZ to a specific VHA medical center via e-mail. Information from this form is stored in a database at the designated VHA facility. When eligibility has been verified and the veteran arrives at the medical center with a signed form in hand, he or she is readily approved to receive required health services.

The online forms solution has improved constituent services, reduced operating costs and helped VHA comply with regulations such as the Government Paperwork Elimination Act and Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act. According to Stout, veterans can now submit accurate applications in minutes instead of days or weeks because information is validated as it is entered, meaning forms are correct on submission. "This results in substantially faster processing by VHA staff," she said.

In the future, VHA will continue posting forms that can be used with the free Adobe Reader. As Stout explained, "Everyone from our veteran constituents to internal staffers to medical professionals can download, fill, save, edit and send these forms to the next logical destination, saving time and money to greatly benefit VHA's employees and the 26 million veterans and families served."

Certainly, the government's document management task is huge. "The size and criticality of issues such as taxes, Social Security, or even parking tickets translate to a scalability challenge that's unsurpassed in its complexity," said Christopher Baum, research vice president, public sector, Gartner Inc.

And yet, he continued, "it's that complexity and need for scalability that also make the requirement for intelligent document processing so very compelling."

An unending cycle of deadlines and deliverables is just part of business as usual for the Internal Revenue Service, where 100,000 employees handle billions of documents, review returns, issue refunds, process payments and publish tax updates and other materials.

As a leading consumer of technologies that better manage information and enable responsiveness to taxpayer needs, the IRS is well versed in almost every conceivable document tool, from the first release of Adobe Acrobat in 1993 through the use of advanced intelligent document solutions that enable users to fill out, save and edit information on local PCs and even electronically submit some forms to further speed processing. Since 1996, for example, the IRS has offered Web access to tax returns and publications, saving millions of dollars annually by decreasing money spent on printing,

IRS Building, Washington, D.C.

storing and mailing tax materials. Providing tax forms online has also diminished telephone orders fielded by IRS distribution centers, enabling the agency to consolidate from three to one centrally managed distribution center in Bloomington, Ill.—generating an operational cost savings in excess of $60 million over five years.

The IRS has made almost all tax forms available online in PDF for download and printing and has enabled forms that are "fillable" online to be offered in PDF as well. "Enabling taxpayers to visit our Web site, conduct an online search, and either download and print or fill out forms online has transformed the way we provide services, dramatically improving customer satisfaction," said Paul Showalter, senior publishing analyst, IRS Publishing Division.

The ability to save information keyed into forms online and come back later to edit or update that information has drawn positive feedback. "People with visual disabilities, in particular, are telling us they can more easily access and work on their taxes this way," said Showalter.

The IRS has been encouraging U.S. taxpayers to file annual 1040 tax forms electronically for several years but has noticed that many fill out the forms online and then print and mail the documents—which necessitates the rekeying of information once the returns arrive at the IRS. In the current tax year, if taxpayers choose to print and mail rather than "e-file," the data in certain forms is captured in a 2D barcode, and when the form is mailed to the IRS, the barcode is scanned so data can be read and reapplied to the form, "speeding our ability to process forms quickly and accurately," said Showalter.

"We see value in the ability to comment and not change the source document, easily review all comments, and clearly track all changes, to speed review cycles and increase the accuracy of information," he said.

By providing a standards-based, secure and convenient online experience, federal agencies can indeed change the way government interacts with those who are governed. Whether the goal is to cut costs, improve responsiveness, speed service delivery, or provide secure interagency collaboration, agencies are finding that the Adobe Intelligent Document Platform is a viable solution offering the flexibility to grow as budgets and priorities change. ■

> "Intelligent document solutions...enable users to fill out, save and edit information on local PCs and even electronically submit some forms to further speed processing."
>
> *Paul Showalter*
> *Senior Publishing Analyst*
> *IRS Publishing Division*