

Issue Brief

Abandoning the High Cost of Traditional Enterprise Content Management (ECM)

Governments across the country are confronting a new reality. Acutely feeling the pinch of dwindling budgets, they are drowning in paperwork generated by aging enterprise systems and legacy content management systems that were built to manage data in another era. Legacy systems, and the processes that often accompany them, make information storing and retrieval cumbersome at best, resulting in lengthy lag times to recover archived data, frequent backlogs and unnecessary inefficiencies.

The more technically oriented generation now working its way into public employment has a different set of expectations than the generation of baby boomers nearing retirement age. Instead of getting up, going to a file cabinet and searching for hard copies of records and other critical files, they expect access to information within a couple of mouse clicks.

But many public sector organizations are wary of major new investments in IT, and with good reason. Under the microscope on all technology purchases, their budgets are at their lowest points in several years. According to the National League of Cities,¹ personnel cuts remain the No. 1 strategy used by local governments struggling to keep their budgets in the black. Consequently, staffing has been reduced across the board — many departments are suffering layoffs, and others are left unable to fill vacated positions. Add to that the growing expectations of government from an increasingly digital constituency, and these challenges are compounded.

While it's true that many agencies have made significant investments in major ECM systems, those technologies are now being replaced by more modern solutions. An agile, modern public workforce is better served by a new breed of ECM that boasts simple integration, and introduces more transparency into government operations, fostering the public trust for which every agency strives. Innovations in the marketplace have produced options that are forcing governments to take notice.

ECM in the public sector

The explosion in the amount of data generated in today's workplace is well documented. ECM is a critical tool in helping manage that data. Defined by PCMag.com,² "ECM is the management of unstructured information in an organization, wherever that information is found." Traditionally regarded as most relevant for an organization's back-office operations like human resources, accounts payable/receivable and finance, ECM is making significant inroads in many other lines of business as well.

For example, some law enforcement agencies use ECM to manage inmate records. Municipalities use it to track economic development projects. Nurses and other health care professionals receive permits using ECM tools. These same tools simplify social service program processes, moving information capture much closer to program beneficiaries. This de-centralized approach reduces errors and speeds processing by eliminating needless paperwork.

Today's public servant

In an ideal world, technology helps people do their jobs, making it easier for government employees to provide service to their constituents. In most cases, the less contact a government representative has with the public, the more they can help them.



Modern ECM Solutions for an Agile Public Sector Agency

New ECM technologies are bringing many benefits for governments:

- Modest initial investment, delivering fast ROI
- IT staff empowered to expand initial deployments independently
- Highly configurable, seamless integration
- User friendly with intuitive learning tools
- A greener agency: major reduction in printing/physical storage needs
- Huge gains in efficiency, productivity
- More transparent operations

While this may sound counter-intuitive, consider this: with simple, streamlined processes, the majority of customers complete their business quickly and efficiently. Those that need assistance with more specialized, complex transactions are met by capable professionals with the necessary expertise to address their specific concerns in a timely way. All constituents receive quality service, leaving highly satisfied with their interaction with the agency.

Strategies to maximize benefits

Starting on the path to better content management need not break the bank. The old example of large agencies making multi-million dollar-plus investments in massive ECM overhauls spanning several years is just that — outdated. Gone is the worry that this kind of major endeavor will go unrewarded because the system no longer meets the agency's needs once the lengthy implementation process is finally completed.

With a much more modest initial investment, agencies are recovering their dollars quickly, and introducing efficiencies in many more areas than they initially envisioned. Success stories featuring small pilots using highly configurable tools, simply integrated and then expanded further out into an organization are making an impact. Forward-thinking decision-makers in government are discovering the proof they need that it's time to give their content management system another look.

Content in Context: It Can Be Done

The Office of the District Court Trustee in Johnson County, Kan., is charged with collecting court-ordered child support. Managing thousands of child support files led to a paper-intensive filing system, rife with duplication and difficult to keep organized. As a result, staff would exchange roughly 30 e-mails each day trying to locate files. Employees spent approximately five hours each day searching for, copying and struggling to manage an ever-growing supply of physical documentation.

This misuse of talented staff became intolerable: the Court Trustee's office needed an ECM solution. What they found was a local company offering simple integration with their custom-built court trustee application. The new system brings benefits inside and outside the organization. Professional staff, armed with one-click access to information, can often resolve inquiries in a single interaction.

IT professionals with Johnson County quickly mastered the deployment process they honed during the Court Trustee Office implementation. Empowered with the necessary tools and skills, they are rolling out the same ECM efficiencies to many other offices within the organization. In this example, the return on investment was realized quickly, as subsequent deployments are carried out with internal technical expertise, eliminating ongoing costs for external consultants.

The Ocean County Utilities Authority (OCUA) in New Jersey protects the Barnegat Bay environment for future generations, with 80 million gallons of water passing through its treatment facilities each day. But unwieldy paper-based processes were clogging up the functions of its internal purchasing, accounts payable and accounts receivable departments.

Its new ECM system had to configure easily, and integrate well with existing systems that represented significant investments of agency dollars. With modern ECM tools, OCUA scanned 60,000 paper documents in just four hours. These new tools represent a huge improvement over the previous time-consuming, error-prone system, enabling OCUA to easily clear up a six-month backlog.

And that backlog is gone for good. Officials report that the ECM update saves 40 staff hours per month spent on approvals and another 40 hours of scanning time. Related overtime needs have been eliminated and environmental benefits include reductions in untold numbers of photocopies, now unnecessary. The Authority benefits from a much lower cost of ownership than with its previous solution, and staff continues to find new ways to innovate in their other lines of business.

Endnotes

1. National League of Cities, www.nlc.org
2. PCMag.com, www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia

Freedom of Information Act

In the spirit of open, transparent government, the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, outlines the rights of the public to access most government documents as a matter of public record. Requests pour in at all levels of government, in many forms and for many purposes. While responding to these requests has historically required significant manpower and considerable resources, ECM solutions are becoming an important part of how FOIA requests are dealt with in public organizations.

In fact, many agencies are finding that updating their ECM processes positions them for effective, timely responses to FOIA requests, without any additional outlay for software. With an effective ECM solution in place, requested data is well organized and easy to retrieve, with streamlined workflows and approvals built in.

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