

Seamless e-forms and back office systems integration delivers 'Service First' strategy for London Borough of Hackney

From mid-November to the end of December 2005, the London  Borough of Hackney produced over six hundred electronic forms for its web site.

These forms are designed to provide the Borough's citizens with an additional means of requesting services at a time and a place that suits them.

The e-forms are integrated with Hackney's Microsoft-based CRM (customer relationship management) and Biztalk (business process management) systems to provide a seamless process from start to finish. The process requires no manual intervention apart from the delivery of the actual service. Development of the forms and the associated integration has been made possible by the use of Ebase Technology's software, Ebase.

Daniel Mimmagh is e-forms project manager for the London Borough of Hackney: "We will be in a situation where every service that the council offers is on the web site, and every service will be covered by an electronic form which integrates with our back office systems. Each service request will be allocated a unique reference number which is recognised by Ebase, our CRM system and the native back office systems, making it simple to track the request throughout its lifecycle.

"I already had experience of developing e-forms for another Council. It used to take three days to develop an e-form and integrate it with a database. With Ebase, our developers can build and integrate fifteen forms in just one day."

Meeting targets

When Daniel Mimmagh arrived at Hackney in August 2005, the Council

already had two types of forms – downloadable and bespoke electronic - on its web site.

The former required citizens to download a PDF or Word file, complete it offline and then send it in the post to the Council offices, where it was re-keyed into back office systems and processed. Not only was this time-consuming, but it also failed to meet the ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) requirements for the delivery of 100% of all services online. The existing electronic forms were no better. They had proved to be very labour intensive (and thus expensive) to develop, requiring expertise in a specialist web publishing system language. In addition, it was impossible to track the progress of the forms as they did not integrate with any of Hackney's other systems.

Any new e-form solution implemented by Hackney needed to help in the achievement of ODPM priority outcomes, such as reporting of environmental issues, parking contravention mitigation and the ability to assign unique reference numbers to allow tracking. Meeting Gershon targets by reducing processing times and raising the Council's web site rating from 'content plus' to 'fully transactional', together with the ability to provide improved service accessibility for all citizens, especially the deaf and mobility impaired, were all important factors in the choice of a new system.



Identifying a solution

The Council was keen to find an off-the-shelf package for the development of e-forms, rather than pursuing a bespoke route.

Daniel Mimmagh: "Rapid application development – which is a feature of off-the-shelf packages – was very attractive to us, together with consistency of form design across the web site. However, the key criterion for our choice of product was how well it could handle integration with our other systems. Only when you have full integration with back office systems does citizen self-service really become efficient."

Seven different products were assessed, from which a shortlist of three was produced. According to Daniel Mimmagh: "Not surprisingly all the products could produce e-forms easily. However, the product from Ebase Technology was far above all the others: it incorporated the ability to build applications within the same package and its ease of integration was far superior."

Into production

“The seamless integration of e-forms with the Council’s CRM and other back office systems, delivered by Ebase, will be a core element in enabling us to achieve our ‘Service First’ goal.”

Work on producing the forms started in November. The two developers in the team were assigned forms based on PIDs (process identifiers). These served not only to identify all the services offered by the Council but to link them with an e-enablement date.

Allied to these specific timescales was the overall target of producing all the requisite forms by 31st December 2005.

Many of the Council’s services already had a paper-based form. These were taken as the starting point, with the ‘form owner’ and the developer discussing how each one could be transformed into an integrated e-form. The first draft was produced and sent electronically, by the next day, to the owner of the form. After one further iteration, the form was tested by the developer and the owner, and linked into the content management system to go live on the web site. Daniel Mimmagh: “Integration of the Ebase forms with our Microsoft CRM and Biztalk systems has proved incredibly easy – in fact, much easier than we had expected.”

A citizen’s eye view

Citizens of the London Borough of Hackney can access the Council’s web site from home, local libraries or Internet



cafes, at any time of the day or night. They will complete the form relating to the service they are requesting and will be supplied with a unique CRM reference number within their confirmation email. Data will be submitted from the e-form by Microsoft BizTalk and a case will be created in the CRM system. The service request will be automatically triggered in the appropriate back office application. Once the service has been delivered, the completion of the job will be logged in the back office system, the CRM system will be updated and the case closed. Throughout the process, the citizen will be able to track the progress of their request, using the unique reference number.

Daniel Mimmagh: “The benefits of this fully automated approach are numerous. From the citizens’ viewpoint, they will be able to request a service at a time and in a way that suits them. In fact almost 50% of the fifty or so e-forms we receive already each day are sent outside office hours. The speed at which the service request is carried out will also deliver a major benefit. Because of the lack of manual intervention, there is no requirement for time-consuming (and potentially error-prone) re-keying and no delay caused by emails going to just one individual. The request will go straight into the back office system, ready to be initiated. It will be completely streamlined.

“From the point of view of our corporate call centre personnel it will also be a great improvement to have a single unique reference number. This will enable them to see immediately the status of any job.”

Gillian Wheeldon, Assistant Director – Customer Services concluded: “The London Borough of Hackney’s ‘Service First’ strategy is designed to provide our citizens and businesses with consistently high quality, customer-focused services, accessible via the telephone, face-to-face or the website, without the need to know which department or agency provides the particular service they need. The seamless integration of e-forms with the Council’s CRM and other back office systems, delivered by Ebase, will be a core element in enabling us to achieve our ‘Service First’ goal.”

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