



NEVADA COUNTY CITIZEN'S INTEGRATED INFORMATION PORTAL

2003 COMPUTERWORLD HONORS CASE STUDY

GOVERNMENT & NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

AGGRESSIVE USE OF ONLINE WEB TECHNOLOGIES ALLOWS RESIDENTS OF A RURAL CALIFORNIA COUNTY TO CONNECT TO THE RESOURCES OF DOZENS OF COUNTY DEPARTMENTS, WHILE MAKING WEB DEVELOPMENT SIMPLE ENOUGH THAT DEPARTMENT EMPLOYEES CAN MAINTAIN PAGES THEMSELVES. [20034854]

A Search for New Horizons



SUMMARY

A rural California County developed a Web site that integrates online services, multi-level governmental information, and thousands of documents accessible via a replicable Information Architecture developed with the State and partner Counties. The project fostered a cultural change within the County for sharing of information and cooperating on major projects.

APPLICATION

In 1999, all 28 Nevada County departments were using different systems for storing, organizing and retrieving information. Although some departments were planning to restructure their systems to be more efficient and user-friendly, these attempts to improve content management were not being coordinated amongst other County departments. Realizing this could potentially result in a "crazy quilt" of incompatible and disconnected systems, the Nevada County Information Systems Department identified the imminent need to develop a coordinated strategy for the implementation of a single, advanced management system for all internal and public County information.

The Information Systems Department selected a technology solution from Xerox to solve the County's document management problem. Core solution elements included Xerox DocuShare®, a Web-based, enterprise-wide, content and document management system, and its related Xerox FlowPort® scanning system used in conjunction with Xerox Document Centre® digital multifunction devices for copying and scanning.

Around the same time, the County also embarked on a major project to expand its online information and interactive services to the public so County residents could more quickly and easily access government and public information. A series of vehicle emission reduction grants from the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District were used to develop a government Web site enabling citizens and businesses to interact with the County without having to drive to County facilities. The Web site, now in its third generation, utilizes the Affino Content Management System (CMS) from Emajo® Ltd. of London, England.

These two seemingly unrelated projects came together through the implementation of the Web-based DocuShare system. Because every County document is stored in DocuShare "Collections," and each Collection and file is given a Web-compatible URL (address), it is easy for pages on the County's Web site to contain links that directly download documents from DocuShare. Visitors are also able to view Collections, where they may browse and select the documents they need. The implementation of DocuShare, and its integration with the County's new Web site, has enabled Nevada County to provide information to our citizens far beyond the capabilities of most governmental entities of our

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size.

BENEFITS

Our project has provided tremendous benefits for our County employees, citizens and environment.

Prior to implementing the dynamic portal, all Web pages had to be maintained by the Webmaster, and the site had very limited search and integration abilities. Now, using DocuShare, we have a fully searchable, centralized location for storing PC-created or scanned documents. This has saved time and made document sharing and public access possible as never before. In addition, once the Affino CMS Web site is fully implemented in 2003, authorized staff in all County departments will be able to maintain their own Web site content. This means information will be made available directly to the public in a timely fashion, ensuring the most updated information is included. However, with easy and flexible assignment of permissions for access to these documents and Collections, from "author only" to the entire Internet population, private internal documents are well protected.

For our citizens, the process of attaining County information has fundamentally changed. For a government of our size, Nevada County provides an extremely high level of online services. Public safety, tax, community and social programs information (and much more) are conveniently available online in a user-friendly environment that is easy to navigate and enables visitors to quickly access the information they need. This also benefits County employees as the amount of time the County spends fielding calls and sending out information via alternative means has dramatically reduced. One department reported that 75 out of every 100 calls end with the citizen agreeing to visit the Web site to get what they needed. Plus, citizens can subscribe to information and are immediately alerted via e-mail when new content arrives, saving them a call or a trip.

Also benefiting our citizens is the Web integration in our Budget Portal: (<http://new.mynevadacounty.com/ceo/index.cfm?ccs=553>)

All the documents - forms, worksheets, goals & objectives, staffing requests - connected with the annual budget process are available to the public while the process is going on. Names and e-mail addresses of key budget team members are also listed. With so many of the County's priorities reflected in its budget, this is an opportunity for the public to be informed and involved during this critical period.

An additional benefit, unseen at the beginning of the project, was how collaboration would affect the County's work processes. County departments became empowered to control, maintain and distribute their own information. "Is that in DocuShare?" became a frequently asked question at inter-departmental meetings whenever someone referred to a document or showed a slide presentation. The Countywide sharing environment of DocuShare, made easily accessible via the Web, encouraged and fostered a cultural change within the governmental structure. Now, County departments share information and work cooperatively on projects at a level that is envied by other government agencies with whom we work regularly.

Finally, for our County's environment, we have reduced the overall traffic making trips to County buildings to attain information. Extensive tracking of Web site use, along with ongoing surveying of facility visitors, revealed that between October 1, 2000 and April 30, 2002, overall trips to County buildings to pick up forms or get information dramatically reduced. Nearly 65,000 round-trips were eliminated during this period. This project is continuously reducing driving in the County by nearly three million miles

annually. That translates to a reduction of more than 7.5 tons of auto emissions in the atmosphere each year. This is especially important in California, where air quality is a major concern. In Nevada County, even though the majority of air pollutants drift in from Sacramento and San Francisco, we have adopted the attitude that every little bit helps.

IMPORTANCE

This is completely an Information Technology project. The DocuShare system, and its related FlowPort scanning system, enables the posting of documents by more than 500 County employees for direct access by the public. The Web site is the door - the community portal - to all of that information; the new Affino CMS-driven site will provide the means for employees to update and maintain their own sections of the site.

DocuShare's collaborative environment has been critical to this project. Any document, or collection of documents, can be made "read-only" or "read/write" accessible to any combination of users. The author can have sole rights, or can give rights to his/her division, workgroup, department, or any individual staff member. Read-only permission for public access can be applied to a document, so the Webmaster can make it instantly and transparently available by just placing a direct link on the Web site. (In a few cases, we have given DocuShare accounts to outside persons so that collaborative multi-agency work can take place; our role in the California Counties Information Architecture Project <http://docs.co.nevada.ca.us/dscgi/ds.py/View/Collection-2674> is an excellent example of this.) We were also able to make a connection between effective document management and air quality management.

Although Nevada County has not developed a new technology, we have found innovative, synergistic ways to leverage the use of inexpensive, easily available technology products. Our use of DocuShare has stretched the limits of that system, using it to its fullest potential. The Affino CMS is an incredibly robust under-\$15,000 package that has required very little outside consulting assistance to build a site with a complex structure and hundreds of pages.

The structure of the County's Web site deserves some attention at this point. Nevada County is a leader in the state of California in Web services, and we have worked with the California State Library, San Mateo County and several other counties to develop a Web "Information Architecture" that can be used by any county in the state, from Alpine (population 1,192) to Los Angeles (9,600,000). The Information Architecture allows site visitors to find the information or service they seek without knowing anything about the organizational structure of the local government. Whenever possible, a visitor will find their page with a few mouse clicks, even if that information is on some other government agency's Web site.

The real value of the Architecture, however, is that it can be replicated across the State of California (and, with modifications, other states as well). Small counties do not have the budget to hire consultants in order to "reinvent the wheel" when they want to expand their Web information services. Since every county in California is responsible for essentially the same public services, the Architecture can be used to easily design the structure of their own site. And citizens who visit different county Web sites that have adopted the common Architecture will find it easy to locate the information they need.

ORIGINALITY

This project has the potential to affect everyone in our community, as well

as our environment. It is rare to find a county of our size with the ability to organize its information in a centralized system and provide such a breadth of services and information online for its residents. Nevada County has been able to leverage technology investments and integrate technologies to benefit internal workflow processes and provide easy access to public and government information via a community portal at www.mynevadacounty.com. Plus, we have used document management to improve our air quality, and in turn used reduced auto emissions as a measurement of the success of our document management system.

The project began as two separate tasks, to develop a document management system, and to create a unified Web presence for all the County departments. The two projects merged as a result of DocuShare's use of a Web browser interface and Internet-compatible addresses for all its files and Collections. The development of the Web site, with financial assistance from the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District, incorporated DocuShare's capabilities. Simultaneously, DocuShare's integration into the Web site generated new ideas for making documents - or even processes, like the annual budget - accessible to the public.

The most original aspects of this project include the ways the County was able to stretch its technologies and products. Some of these ways involve combining two systems in a unique way, such as using DocuShare with the free mailing list software called "Majordomo" to create a simple, maintenance-free, costless means for departments to notify self-subscribed public users via e-mail when new documents (newsletters, RFP's, job listings, agendas, etc.) are created. We are also able to provide unique, real-time access to the annual budget process, generating true citizen involvement.

SUCCESS

The information, documents and services contained in the County Web site are available to everyone in the world that has Internet access, but is directed towards the 95,000 Nevada County residents, its businesses and organizations. The site primarily benefits the 80% of the County's adult population who have Internet access, as they are most likely to access the County information online.

The community portal is currently being used approximately 2,100 times each day, with the Human Resources and the Library sections being the most popular, and that figure continues to increase. More than 26,000 documents are stored on the DocuShare system, with more added daily.

We were also able to achieve our goals established in the series of grants from the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District, as we proved that nearly 65,000 round trips to county buildings, (averaging 46 miles) were eliminated annually, resulting in an auto emissions reduction of 7.5 tons. This reduced the number of miles County residents drive annually by nearly 3 million, resulting in less wear and tear on county roads.

This citizen-centric portal is not only user-friendly, but also empowering. County residents are able to pull all relevant information and view public records, making them more vested in County government. County employees are able to control and update their own information. Senior Administrative Analyst Stephanie Snyder said this about one unique feature, the Budget Home Page:

"We have over 100 people directly involved in the budget preparation process. Together, we produce work that impacts over 1,000 employees

and reaches out to all of the County's 95,000 citizens. Now, with the budget portal, we do this work more efficiently and effectively."

Overall, this project has succeeded because of a cooperative, "Sure we can do that!" attitude on the part of all concerned. County employees will continue to inform the residents about what services and information are available to them online. We predict that visitor and usage rates will continue to increase as time goes on, especially given the clear convenience and time saving benefits of accessing information online.

We continue to expand our e-Government services:

- * The County intranet will be completely rebuilt using the Affino system, and enabling departments to post their own content to be viewed by all staff or only by their own departmental employees.
- * A Citizens Relationship Management system, in the final stages before launch, will enable citizens to file complaints or request services from the County online, and then follow the progress of their request through the system in real time.
- * Our online Interactive GIS (Geographic Information System) Mapping will be expanded and improved for greater speed and access to more data layers.
- * Other government Web sites (initially, the City of Nevada City) will be added to the Affino system, enabling the sharing of content and a seamless transition for citizens between different levels of government.
- * New ideas - generated internally, suggested by the public, or found in archives like this one - will be evaluated and the best ones implemented in an environment of cooperation and innovation.

DIFFICULTY

Technical problems tend to be the easiest ones to overcome. Although they may take considerable time and money, the process is orderly and the successful conclusion is easily identifiable. The Information Systems Department staff, although small (33 staff to service the entire County's computer and telephone network), is skilled, knowledgeable and dedicated. Staff members who administer DocuShare and build the Web site both have specific knowledge and experience in these areas.

A forward-looking County administration had already developed a decentralized, "bottom-up" structure for making major technology decisions. The need for a document management system was apparent throughout the County structure, and an open evaluation process made the selection of DocuShare and FlowPort readily acceptable.

For the Webmaster, the greatest difficulty is always getting content from departments. Everyone is busy, and taking the time to select information of primary importance to the public to pass on to the Webmaster isn't always possible. It becomes the Webmaster's task to glean much of this information from public sources, and then feed it back to the department for editing.