Washington County sets the stage for e-government.

Overview

- ***Challenge***
  Washington County's underlying process inefficiencies were preventing it from providing citizens and employees with convenient access to critical services, such as budget information and historical tax data
- ***Why Become an On Demand Business?***
  The county needed to become more responsive to its constituents by providing better access to its services, while paving the way for broad process transformation in the future
- ***Solution***
  Washington County created an e-government portal solution that gives citizens and staff members the information and services they need, when and where they need them
- ***Key Benefits***
  - *Higher employee productivity and effectiveness*
  - *Increase in customer and staff satisfaction*
  - *Ability to maximize the return on technology investments*
  - *No requirement to immediately replace or rebuild existing IT infrastructure*

Washington County includes the Great Valley region of Virginia, where Abingdon, the County Seat, was established in the 1700s.

Based in Abingdon, Virginia, the Washington County government encompasses 566 square miles in the southwest corner of the state. The county provides more than 51,000 citizens and 1,200 fulltime employees with a wide variety of diverse services. These include everything from providing private citizens with online tax assessment information to providing county schools online access to critical budget reports. Emergency personnel also relied on the county for geographic information services, such as mapping.

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–Nadine Culberson, Information Systems Manager, Washington County

On Demand Business Benefits

- Improved employee productivity
- Ability to provide access to data outside the internal network allows county to respond more efficiently to citizens and staff

The On Demand Workplace Defined

- A real-time e-government portal that delivers existing applications and information through a centralized electronic workplace, improving employee effectiveness and productivity
- An open, Web-based framework and content management platform

Like many governmental entities, Washington County constantly seeks to provide up-to-date services. Accordingly, when citizens and county employees began asking for easier access to information, Washington County knew it had to act quickly. Citizens wanted to spend less time visiting county buildings to retrieve information and receive services, while employees were demanding easier access to back-end information

At issue were Washington County's outdated business processes, which were creating bottlenecks for citizens, driving down the productivity of county staff and generally preventing the county from becoming a more responsive government. For example, tax attorneys had to drive to a county building just to view home-owner tax assessment data. And the county's 15 schools had to rely on monthly printouts to balance their budgets. To provide a higher standard of service, the county would need to transform its core business processes. And, because it operates on a limited public budget, it wanted to address these challenges with minimal changes to its current IT infrastructure.

For help with this transformation, the county turned to IBM Business Partner Burk Consulting, Inc., a Tennessee-based provider of IT services. Working with Burk Consulting—charged with creating an on demand operating environment—the county implemented an e-government portal solution based on IBM WebSphere® Host Access Transformation Services (HATS) and IBM WebSphere Portal Enable for Multiplatforms running on a Linux-based server. The solution also uses IBM Websphere Application Server and DB2® Universal Database™. "We evaluated a lot of solutions, including Microsoft .Net," says Nadine Culberson, information systems manager, Washington County. "But the IBM WebSphere solution gave us an open, integrated environment to build e-government solutions across a variety of hardware and software platforms."

Adds Culberson, "This project would not have been possible without the help of Burk Consulting and the IBM Software Innovation Center. They were the ones that actually sat down with us and made us hammer out exactly what our goals were, exactly what our expectations were and the parameters of how this was going to work. I can't tell you what a difference that makes from a customer perspective as far as success or failure goes."

Although still in the early stages of implementation, the newly transformed application using HATS and WebSphere Portal is already generating benefits in the form of increased staff productivity and effectiveness and higher citizen and employee satisfaction. In addition, by extending its time-tested applications to the Web, the county can maximize the return on its technology investments.

Enabling on demand business

To improve customer experience and set the stage for e-government, Washington County took a close look at its main Web site. Consisting mostly of static forms and schedules, the site lacked dynamic capabilities and offered no way to access key information. For example, the property tax and budgetary data were

housed on an internal IBM @server® iSeries™ system. Other key applications, such as a mapping program used by emergency personnel, ran on their own servers. Most of these systems were not available over the Web.

As a result, the county was finding it difficult to respond to its internal and external users in a timely manner. "We needed an efficient way to quickly Web-enable and extend our existing core applications and provide Internet access to the content housed in our internal systems," says Culberson. "At the same time, we wanted to create an IT environment that we could build on for years to come."

Leveraging HATS and WebSphere Portal, the county quickly implemented an interactive e-government portal that has changed the way government operates in southwest Virginia. The solution transcends internal procedures and boundaries by providing seamless access to relevant information for citizens and staff—whether they are in the office or in the field—whenever they need it.

Key to its new e-government portal is HATS, which runs directly with WebSphere Portal. The County was faced with the problems associated with combining a variety of operating platforms into a seamless, service-providing system. Using HATS, the county was able to rapidly make its property tax and budgetary applications available as HTML pages via the Internet. HATS integrates screens from multiple host applications into a single Web interface—allowing information from different platforms to be displayed on one screen.

"HATS enabled us to easily web enable our host applications without modifying the source code or requiring web developer skills. Today our legacy 'green screen' applications have a new Web look and feel."

"HATS recognizes the components of the host screens and transforms them in real time to a Web interface based on a set of predefined actions that can include drop-down lists, links, buttons and customized logos," adds Culberson. "Skipping unnecessary host screens, removing excess text and providing custom prompts can be accomplished quickly without programming."

Another core component is WebSphere Portal, which provides a single point of access to the county's internal information and applications. Now, all fifteen schools in the county have real-time Web access to critical financial applications running on the IBM iSeries server. By allowing the remote schools to access financial data on demand, the solution empowers the schools to manage their allocated budgets with greater efficiency.

Web-enabling the budget information comprised the first phase of the county's business transformation. The next step was to provide private attorneys with Web access to delinquent tax information. Previously, attorneys had to leave their office and share the one public computer available in the county building. Now, attorneys are able to retrieve information from their own office – freeing up their time to spend on more productive matters.

Key Components

Software

- IBM WebSphere Host Access Transformation Services (HATS)
- IBM WebSphere Portal Enable for Multiplatforms
- IBM Lotus® Workplace Web Content Management
- IBM WebSphere Application Server
- IBM DB2 Universal Database
- Red Hat Linux

Hardware

- IBM @server iSeries

Services

- IBM Software Innovation Center

IBM Business Partner

- Burk Consulting, Inc.

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IBM Lotus Workplace Web Content Management

The county also uses IBM Lotus Workplace Web Content Management. Included with WebSphere Portal, Lotus Workplace Web Content Management provides Washington County with a framework for simplifying content creation and management.

Mark Reeter, County Administrator, Washington County, says, "With Lotus Workplace Web Content Management, we have a very interactive Web search function. Users can now go into the county's wealth of content, whether it's 10 years of minutes and agendas or county codes, and easily find what they are looking for. They can do keyword searches and be able to bring up those documents and instantly display them. We also see using the product to get a better grip on the more than 10,000 electronic documents within the county system."

The county uses DB2 Universal Database to store all of the information for the Lotus Workplace Web Content Management application. Rounding out the solution is WebSphere Application Server, which, along with DB2 Universal Database, ships with WebSphere Portal. WebSphere Application Server acts as the runtime environment for the Web programs, with Red Hat Linux as the operating system platform. For high availability, all of the back-end applications run on the iSeries system.

Moving forward, the county plans to arm building inspectors with tablet computers that connect wirelessly to the portal in real time. They will be able to check building histories, review past inspections and access property records on the inside network—all from the field. In addition, the county intends to provide emergency personnel with mobile access to the geographic information system.

Concludes Culberson, "Not only do we have the means to be much more responsive to our employees and constituents, we also have laid the foundation for seamless future growth. Today, we are closer to becoming an on demand business."

For more information

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Produced in the United States of America
09-04

G225-4037-00