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Cities Lose Paper & Gain Efficiency

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"Government" and "efficiency" are two words rarely spoken together, but at a conference last month, they fit like peanut butter and jelly.

At the Empower 2014 conference in Anaheim, Calif., put on by content management software firm Laserfiche, two government agencies demonstrated how they transformed arduous paper processes into simple electronic processes using enterprise content management (ECM) and business process management (BPM) technology. These local government bureaus serve as templates for private sector companies searching for technology-based efficiency. The following are summaries of both cases:

Taming paper in the O.C.
Newport Beach, Calif., is more than *The O.C.* It's one of the wealthiest communities in Southern California. But in 2010, finding paper documents in the city archives was like the ending of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* -- once information was filed, it would take a search party to locate it.

Public library and city hall complex, Newport Beach, Calif.
(Source: Tracie Hall via Flickr)

According to Rob Houston, assistant to the city manager and IT manager at Newport Beach, the city was using a nine-year-old legacy computer program for records management that featured corrupted files, frequent crashes, and a non-intuitive user interface. In 2013, when the city offices moved into a new city hall building, Newport Beach decided it was time that its records management was as modern as its office location, Houston said.

One area that desperately needed help was managing contracts. The old way meant entering metadata into an Access database, then scanning the contracts, converting them to PDF files, importing them into the legacy software, and entering more metadata. The legacy software, Alchemy, had no OCR functions, so the metadata had to be correct -- and it wasn't always, according to IT specialist Ivan Juarez.

Newport Beach flipped contract management on its head by installing document management software that uses bar codes to define the document type, department type, and template type. These bar codes are posted on a cover sheet that is put in a copier/scanner with the contract, and the metadata is instantly routed into a database, Juarez said. "We wanted to capture a lot of data, and we were looking for a way to automate [data entry]," he added. While the city still needs paper copies because the city attorney hasn't signed off on e-signatures, workers are better able to search for and manage contracts.

Corralling two centuries of paper
Tompkins County, N.Y., was also buried in paper -- 200 years of it, to be exact. Its first project, motivated by disaster recovery concerns, was to scan nearly two centuries of records and also deploy a Web portal service, according to Maureen Reynolds, deputy county clerk. Basically, anything that was on paper got scanned, including land records, the legislature's annual book of proceedings, contracts, maps, payroll records, tax files, case files, and birth and death certificates. Eliminating stored paper freed up an entire garage the county now uses for parking cars.

Employees may be wary of the new system, but Reynolds has a unique approach to garnering user adoption. "I go in with a hand truck, box up files, say, 'Trust me, you're going to love it,' and I

never bring the paper back," she said. Users, once they've tried electronic records, rarely ask for their paper, which is then stored in a Cold War-era bunker offsite.

Because the court records are now accessible through a Web portal, Tompkins County prosecutors and judges can access them while they're in court or about to head in for a hearing. It's a faster, simpler way of getting everything from divorce records to prior arrest records instantly, which is helpful when the defense throws a curve ball.

Tompkins County court house, N.Y.
(Source: Paul Sableman via Flickr)

For private sector companies that haven't yet digitized, the possibilities of automating the paper trail are endless: accessing sales records on the road, working from home during weather emergencies, and creating customer portals that offer more than trouble tickets and user manuals.

While local governments -- like their federal counterparts -- may seem like paragons of inefficiency, Newport Beach and Tompkins County prove that technology can help enormously.

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