

ACCESS TO UTAH GOVERNMENT SERVICES: CUSTOMIZED SEARCH ENGINE AND ONLINE SERVICES DATABASE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Utah.gov, the official Web site for the State of Utah, provides access to over 800 State, local, and federal services, as well as a host of Utah related information. Since the site's inception, the State has been tracking these services in an effort to make them easily accessible to citizens. The State of Utah realizes that there are two major challenges facing online government: making multi-layered government organizational structures and processes coherent, and providing efficient, seamless service.

Because 18% of visitors to Utah.gov are seeking one or more online services, citizens require a practical way to locate a specific service. This year Utah.gov improved user access through an enhanced search application featuring a Customized Search Engine (CSE), as well as an extensive Online Services Database. The two integral features provide a clean, usable, common-sense interface that seamlessly directs citizens, businesses, and visitors through the labyrinth of Utah information regardless of the agency or jurisdiction.

The newest iteration of Utah.gov, officially launched in May 2007, has indexed over 800 State, federal, and local services, tagging them with keywords and including them in a taxonomy-based tag cloud to make search efforts even more effective. Utah is the first state to catalog all of these services and make them available through a simple and straightforward search engine built to better connect citizens to the information they are looking for. The purpose of this initiative was to provide Utah.gov users with a consistent experience to ensure that citizen users do not find themselves "lost" within the State enterprise.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

This project has been designed to provide a single point of access to e-government services and information for Utah citizens, businesses, and government entities. The project is based on unified access to government services that is both seamless and intuitive, irrespective of jurisdiction.

Descriptions of the Business Problem

To communicate the availability of government information and services to the public, the State of Utah has inventoried e-government services on the Utah.gov Web site since its inception. As government services and information have multiplied over the years, the manual service and Web site tracking approach utilized through 2006 had become difficult to manage. The worry was that with so many services available to citizens they would not be able to navigate the breadth and depth of services. Needs assessments and user behavior studies confirmed that on occasion this was the case. This is why citizens require an uncomplicated, functional way to locate specific online services.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the project was to leverage the widely used Utah.gov portal site as a single point of entry to government services and information in Utah. In order to quickly and easily access the hundreds of services, the site needed to provide a customized search function for Utah information and services as well as database access to Utah online services.

Solution Description

The solution has two major points of service emphasis:

- Development of search engine capability for easy access to all relevant government Web sites that pertain to Utah information and State services. Search engine capabilities were enhanced in three ways:
 - **Customized Search Engine**—This Utah.gov search engine was built to better connect citizens to the information they are looking for.
 - **Partitioned Searching**—Similar to Yahoo and Google, Utah.gov Search is divided into “Services,” “Agencies,” and “Utah.gov.” As Services is the most popular search, it is set as the default. The “Utah.gov” search features the CSE.
 - **AJAX Driven**—Last year Utah.gov implemented an AJAX Services search; this year that functionality was extended to the agencies

search. The AJAX search improved search results and tremendously improved user experience.

- Development of an online database that indexes online services for State, federal, and local Utah online government services.

Both of these services, the enhanced search engine and the online database, are available on a consistent basis on the Utah.gov Web site.

Length of Time in Operation

Utah has been tracking government services and Web sites since approximately 1997. Development of the enhanced search engine began in November 2006, and the online services database was also initiated in the fall of 2006. Both of these applications have been in production since March 2007, with continual improvements since that time.

SIGNIFICANCE TO IMPROVED GOVERNMENT OPERATION

Operational Maturity

Utah.gov users actively utilize both applications, and both are providing substantial new and improved access to Utah online services and information. The Utah.gov Web site is now database driven for all online services and provides substantially improved access to a wide range of federal, State, and local government information.

Predictable Results

The Utah.gov Enhanced Search Engine, featuring CSE, and the Utah Online Services Database have performed well under actual user loads and are providing thousands of new access points to government services and information of a repeatable and reliable basis.

Cost Effective Development

The CSE and the online services database were moved from concept to production ready applications in less than six months, with no new outside expenses to the State aside from normal planned costs to support the Utah.gov Web site.

Reliability and Timeliness

The CSE and online services database were designed and implemented as technology components of a redesigned Utah.gov Web site (www.utah.gov) that is now extensively driven by a variety of online databases. All of this was concluded in concert with the new site design and rollout on May 31, 2007.

PUBLIC VALUE OF THE PROJECT

Stakeholder Participation

Utah State agencies were involved in reviewing all of their relevant sites and online services and were given access to the CSE as it evolved, and to the initial development database of online services. Agency participation increased identifiable online services alone by more than 100%. Agencies also participated in CSE testing and development to ensure the relevance of searches for agency sites. Federal and local government information was identified through a combination of research and evaluation of relevant federal and local government sites.

Public Policy Benefits

Utah citizens make a substantial investment in the work and activities of State, federal, and local government agencies. Improving access to services so dramatically provides a much better return for citizens on access to this information and use of online services. The existing use of the Utah.gov Web site averages around 900,000 unique visitors per month. With that much existing reach, providing better access can only improve the user experience for citizens.

State and Agency Benefits

Agency Web sites indexed by the Utah CSE are enjoying substantially improved access and utilization. The Utah Online Services Database has opened access to more than 665 State online services, and over 140 federal and local government services. The intent of the site, to provide a “no wrong door” approach to government services, is nearing reality. Citizens no longer have to navigate government structure to find government information and services.

REALIZED RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Adoption

On average, Utah.gov receives nearly 1.7 million visitors each month; of those, 843,862 are unique visitors. Utah is the #1 most visited government site per capita. Per capita Utah has the most reach of any of the 50 states (statistics from Compete.com and Alexa.com). The CSE and online services database is instantly available to every citizen that visits the Utah.gov portal.

Utah has always received positive customer satisfaction scores and adoption rates. However, measurement methods have not always been consistent across the State enterprise. Utah is the first state to begin consolidating these metrics into databases that are consistently measured across the enterprise. Implemented in April 2007, the following tools are used to track the success of the enhanced search engine and online services database:

- **Adoption Rate Wizard**—This tool allows any State agency to track application usage by transaction or by hits. Reports can be pulled at any time and by any date range. (<https://secure.utah.gov/arw/>)
- **Feedback Database**—Utah.gov is converting all of their disparate feedback forms into one form that tracks all feedback in a single database for easy comparison. (<https://secure.utah.gov/feedback/admin/index.html> Username: utahadmin, Password: n1md4h4tu)
- **Google Analytics**—Utah has also employed the use of Google's analytical tools across the enterprise for tracking Web traffic patterns.

Savings and Cost Avoidance

As noted above, the CSE and the online services database were developed with no new outside expenses to the State aside from normal planned costs to support the Utah.gov Web site.

Return on Investment

Services that integrate related but disconnected government processes result in immeasurable efficiencies.

Continuing Operational Benefits

Utah.gov is the result of a public/private partnership between the State of Utah and Utah Interactive, Inc. (UII). This partnership provides for the development and support of interactive applications without the appropriation of tax dollars because it is based on a self-funding enterprise model. This model allows the State to leverage its private partnership and aggregate transaction

revenues from its commercially valuable services to fund online initiatives that can neither be funded directly nor have any commercial value. The State of Utah pays no annual operating costs for hosting and maintenance of the Web portal. Additionally, UII offers 24/7 customer support at no additional charge to the State.

Thus, Utah.gov has exhibited immeasurable operational benefit to the State of Utah. With no annual operational costs assessed to the State, the Utah.gov portal facilitates the interaction between citizens and multiple government agencies at an unbeatable value.