



Online Business Filing Document Request System

CATEGORY: Digital Government – Government to Business

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Executive Summary

As the state of South Carolina continues to focus its attention on becoming one of the most industry friendly states in the country through infrastructure investment, corporate tax incentives, and business friendly legislation, the Secretary of State's office has taken on the challenge of offering more efficient services to businesses of all sizes. The Business Filing Document Request system was built in response to this issue, decreasing the time needed to process paper request forms by automating major parts of the process. This, in turn, helps position South Carolina as an innovative and business friendly location for organizational expansion and development.

This application was developed through a partnership between the South Carolina Secretary of State's office and SC.gov, the official government Web portal for the state of South Carolina. The benefits this application provides to businesses and state government have exceeded expectations, and includes the following:

- Achieved application adoption rate of 97 percent
- Decreased Secretary of State business document request labor cost
- Decreased turn-around time for businesses
- Improved perception of government to business relations

The Online Business Filing Document Request system allows the public to request certified copies of business filings from the Secretary of State's official library which consists of over 4 million individual filings. The new system replaces the previously used method of submitting paper request forms, thus giving the general public expedited access to business filing documents and leading to improved transparency for corporations, nonprofits, and other organization types. This application also allows the public to request Certificates of Existence and Certificates of Authority for individual organizations. These certificates are used by banks, businesses, and the legal system to validate existence of an organization and to verify that it is in good standing with the state of South Carolina.

From an administrative perspective, the application allows the staff at the Secretary of State's office to quickly review and fulfill requests for documents or certificates. This system replaces the manual process of reviewing paper request forms then generating and mailing the appropriate certificate or document copies.

With an estimate of 25,000 requests processed each year, the Online Business Filing Document Request application has instantly become an integral part of the day-to-day operations of businesses and government. This new application has not only exceeded expectations, it has set a precedent for other states, serving as a model among other Secretary of State's offices and demonstrating the incredible advantages, to both government and businesses, that online technology and automation can provide.

The Problem

The Secretary of State is the agency responsible for maintaining the official records of businesses operating in South Carolina. As part of this effort, it is focused on improving systems and processes that will demonstrate the state's business friendly values to existing organizations and businesses looking to establish operations inside of state lines.

An issue of importance is the ever increasing volume of document requests received by the Secretary of State's office for manual processing. This is one of the primary reasons behind the Secretary of State's focus on developing new systems and technologies designed to help automate processes and decrease processing times. Such developments not only benefit agency staff, but also help to nourish the agency's business friendly reputation by simplifying the ways in which citizens and businesses interact with the office.

Another concern for the Secretary of State's Office was the number of requests that had to be rejected due to incorrect payment amounts accompanying the request. With the new Online Business Filing Document Request system, this concern is greatly reduced as copy request prices are automatically calculated by the application, thus preventing rejections and delays.

In all, the Online Business Filing Document Request System was tasked with addressing a number of concerns, including:

1. Significant labor costs associated with processing copy work document requests
2. Extended turnaround time of several days for processing requests
3. Negative agency perception caused by antiquated paper based request process
4. Confusion with costs associated with requests, leading to extended turnaround times due to requests being rejected based on incorrect check amounts

The Solution

The solution to these problems was born out of a desire to modernize the antiquated system of paper request forms and to build a better point of connection between business and government. The first meeting to discuss a solution was held in early January 2015, between the leaders at the Secretary of State's office and the team that would eventually build and support this innovative application.

Ideas discussed ranged from integrated database systems that allowed for instantaneous access to documents, to an account based system that provided businesses with the ability to track new and existing requests and manage users. After identifying limitations with the current system platform that made such integration impractical, and being presented with an implementation deadline of six months; the

team settled on a list of project goals to help guide the development process. These included:

- Create a streamlined public facing request process that is simple and quick
- Create an administrative tool that allows Secretary of State employees to work through requests and match each request with the desired documents
- Build an integrated payment processing functionality to accept debit and credit card transactions as payment for documents
- Institute a digital document delivery system
- Create a way to digitally stamp documents as certified copies with date stamps and the Secretary of State's signature
- Create functionality that allows the Secretary of State's office to dynamically generate Certificates of Existence and Authorization

Following the initial requirements meeting, the development team initiated a weeklong strategy session in which application functionality and potential courses of action were discussed. After five days of deliberations, brainstorming, and research the team emerged with a complete plan.

The overall direction of the application would focus on making the process as simple and intuitive as possible for businesses while still giving the Secretary of State's office the necessary tools to decrease the effort required to process each request. The plan was to build an application that allowed the public to submit requests in under 60 seconds without being required to create an account or enter payment information before a request was fulfilled. The belief was that this would help encourage the adoption of the application and thus increase the adoption rate. Once a Secretary of State staff member approved the request, the user would receive an email link to complete the payment online and download the requested documents.

On the administrative side, it was decided that a request queue would be developed that was updated in real time as requests were received. Each request would contain a profile that displayed a list of action items an administrative user would need to work through before the request was approved. These action items include scanning the requested documents into the system, generating official Certificates of Existence and Authorization, calculating fees based on attached documents or generated certificates, and approving or rejecting the request. A feature was also added to allow administrative users to claim requests they were working on so as to allow multiple users to work simultaneously without workflow overlap.

Since the customer base for this application includes any and all types of businesses and legal practices, it was decided that all technology used in this application needed to be focused on providing a consistent and reliable experience across all devices, platforms and browsers.

With this goal in mind, the Business Filing Document Request system is supported by the latest Microsoft stack of products including OS, Database and Frameworks. The

entire system is also set up for disaster recovery with secondary site replication technology.

Atalasoftware scanning software is utilized to scan documents directly into the Web application through the administrative portal thus bypassing the standard upload functionality common in most such applications. This ability offers a streamlined workflow for administrative users, allowing the application to control how a document is saved as an image in order for it to be edited to include a watermark or date and time stamp.

The most innovative technique employed in the system is the adaptation of the method by which watermarks are added to images. Through this technique, the Secretary of State's office has the ability to generate four-color certificates with a decorative border and official seal, then overlay that on top of the certificate text which is dynamically generated based on user-defined variables.

A twofold approach was used in regards to security. First, any type of sensitive information being provided or requested by the public was eliminated, thereby greatly reducing the value an uninvited party would obtain by attempting to compromise the application. Secondly, a team of cyber security experts performed scans and penetration tests to help ensure there were no known vulnerabilities.

The Online Business Filing Document Request system was also designed with accessibility standards in mind as section 508 compliance guidelines were adhered to throughout the process, thereby ensuring the application would be accessible to everyone. The system was also developed using responsive design technology in an effort to ensure accessibility on all devices.

The completed application was launched July 29, 2015, and was well received by the business community. Within one month, not only had the system surpassed the projected 50 percent adoption rate, it had achieved an astonishing 97 percent rate of adoption in less than 30 days.

Significance

Few government applications have ever met with near universal approval, especially considering there were no incentives offered to the business community outside of the obvious advantages the application itself provided.

Having an application that is met with this type of overwhelmingly positive response is exactly what the South Carolina Secretary of State's office was trying to achieve when it undertook the initiative to improve government to business perception and interaction. The Online Business Filing Document Request system now serves as a model in demonstrating to businesses that the state is dedicated to offering a better interface between government and commerce than can be found elsewhere.

This application is not only helping to establish a strong reputation of government and business interaction, but it has also set a precedent for other states. What helps make this application truly unique is its ability to work with any existing backend system, thus allowing any state to consider a comparable solution that offers unbelievable time savings, but does not require significant infrastructure investment. By following the lead of the South Carolina Secretary of State to build similar standalone systems, similar offices in other leading states like New York and California could implement a cost effective alternative to their current antiquated paper request systems within a matter of months.

Impact

With over 25,000 document requests processed every year, it was taking 60 hours a week to process the incoming requests. With the Online Business Filing Document Request system in place, it now takes a single staff member less than three hours to process and complete the same number of requests.

In addition to the impressive decrease in labor, the system has also decreased the turnaround time for businesses. Before this application was launched, a business would typically have to wait several days to receive the requested documents. There was also an elimination of the frustration and delays over rejections due to the inaccurate calculation of payment for document requests. With the implementation of this new system, turnaround time was cut down to less than 24 hours with the majority of requests being fulfilled the same day. Through the implementation of a pricing calculation tool and the ability for businesses to pay using a debit or credit card, the issue of rejected filings due to miscalculated fees was eliminated.

These results, for both government and business, have had a significant positive effect on the efforts being made to improve the perception that the state of South Carolina is invested in improving government to business interaction. By digitalizing the document delivery process, the Online Business Filing Document Request system has saved the agency thousands of dollars per year in postage and office supplies such as printer ink and envelopes.

Through utilizing a partnership with SC.gov, the South Carolina Secretary of State's office was also able to benefit from a cost avoidance of \$120,000 in development costs. This means that the application cost the state zero dollars, thus allowing every dollar saved through the implementation of the software to go toward helping the Secretary of State's office devise and implement additional methods of improving government to business interaction.

This application is being nominated for the NASCIO State IT Recognition Awards for three reasons.

1. Being the first of its kind, this application has set a precedent for best practices regarding government to business interaction.
2. Having achieved a 97 percent adoption rate within the first 30 days, this application has set an example for other agencies regarding the type of services the public sector is looking to implement.
3. With time savings for both the agency and businesses, this application sets a new benchmark by which to measure the efficiency that can be achieved through digitalization and automation of agency processes.

We are proud to say that the Online Business Filing Document Request System exceeded expectations and has set significant precedents for other state applications in the area of agency benefit and government to business interaction. These results are what we are so proud of and why we believe that this application deserves to win this year's NASCIO Award.