Digital issues & developments within the State of Iowa

managing IT

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Down on the Server Farm

The term "server farm" may be one you've heard more frequently since the state's move toward digital government began. By definition, it's a group of computers acting as servers and housed together in a single location. It's sometimes called a server cluster.

ITD uses the term to describe the data center space set up to house servers. It provides a secure location with access control (a limited number of people have access); power that cannot be interrupted (generators and battery backup); air conditioning; fire protection; and flexible network connectivity. Three types of services fall under the server farm umbrella:

- Hosting servers to meet a specific agency requirement
- Providing a range of server-based services
- Remotely managing agency servers

According to Russ Rozinek, Operations Division Administrator for ITD, there are two main benefits to having a secure, high quality location for a large group of servers rather than providing those things for individual, isolated servers. They include: 1) cost efficiencies because of their secure, central location; 2) empowering state employees to achieve a higher level of productivity by having more time to focus more on direct customer service with less time on maintenance, trouble shooting, upgrades and operational details of individual department servers.

With so many facets comprising the movement toward a comprehensive digital government, it can become downright confusing (especially when technical jargon appears). This section features details about crucial components that you'll hear about more frequently as electronic government initiatives continue gaining speed.

Here's a look at innovative current projects and applications that are making their way toward electronic integration.

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE INTEGRATION

Chances are, no one stops to think about how information acquired by the Department of Corrections about a person entering the system is shared between various agencies. Currently, data such as demographics, restitution, sentences, etc. are manually input several times in various locations. That's a lot of data entry and paper pushing. Think of the benefits for numerous agencies to know accurate information while forgoing repetitious entering of the same data about an individual.

With a new multi-agency, inter-branch IT initiative under way, more timely and accurate information sharing within and between criminal justice agencies at all levels of government will be possible. This endeavor will provide a common network to allow real-time data sharing at all levels of the justice process.

"Information systems used currently by the justice community were developed separately from each other or with incompatible technologies that make sharing information either difficult or completely impossible," said David Meyers, ITD Justice Information Systems Coordinator.

"This technology will greatly impact a number of areas," said John Baldwin, DOC Deputy Director of Administration, "For example, more information will be managed with the same number of staff. The Governor and legislators will receive accurate information that can be used to determine what works and what doesn't within the criminal justice arena. The data can also be used for projections to detect the impact of future changes in sentencing patterns or the future impact of laws."

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Be a Tech Advisor

ITD is looking for bright, thoughtful people to share their thoughts on statewide computing applications from the customer's perspective. The department is forming "customer advisory councils" for server farm consolidation, email consolidation, Web hosting, data warehousing and storage area network. Last month the Governor and Lt. Governor directed that these functions be centralized under ITD administration. ITD seeks council members who can discuss budgets and business processes running on these systems. Time commitment for council members will likely be one to two hours a week. Those interested in taking part should contact:

Server Farm: Steven.Mosena@dhs.state.ia.us or Wes.Hunsberger@itd.state.ia.us
Email: Darwin.TenHaken@itd.state.ia.us
Web Hosting: Lowell.Sneller@itd.state.ia.us
Data Warehouse: Randy.Clemenson@itd.state.ia.us
Storage Area Network: Doug.Kern@itd.state.ia us

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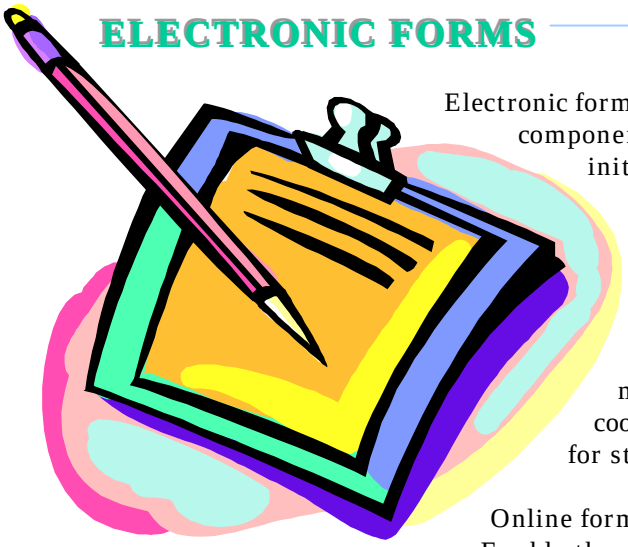
ELECTRONIC FORMS



Electronic forms and workflow was identified as a critical architecture component needed for Gov. Vilsack's digital government initiatives that will foster an environment of paperless government and enhance customer service.

"Electronic applications are beneficial because people can access them at their convenience rather than standing in long lines, waiting on the phone, filling out the information and spending money on postage to mail them," said Mary Hadd, ITD electronic documents coordinator. "In addition, electronic forms can be easier for state employees to read than handwritten ones."

Online forms will:

- Enable the government to electronically collect data from the user
- Automatically complete some fields on the form based on input into other fields (for example, if a social security number is entered, that number is automatically looked up in a database and the person's name appears on the form)
- Be automatically sent to an employee for processing
- Be automatically inserted into a workflow
- Allow for more convenient access by State employees and customers

Transitioning to electronic forms is quite an undertaking. Accelio™ (formerly JetForms) was chosen by ITD as the e-forms platform because it's a leader in the development of integrated business process solutions. Among other things, Accelio offers applications to manage electronic forms and simplify the task of filling them out.

Accelio forms will be used internally and externally. Internal forms will be created and workflow attached to them for tasks such as travel payment documents, timesheets and other forms. External forms will be created and placed on the web for customer use and are accessible through programs such as Internet Explorer, Netscape or Web TV.

Any department will be able to use these forms. So, what does all this really mean? In simple terms, the impact is huge – for customers and state government. "It enables customers to use computers to complete forms for services they need at anytime. It empowers state employees to achieve a higher level of efficiency so they can focus efforts on delivering customer service rather than paper shuffling," said Hadd

"Another advantage is the capacity to place limits on the length of time a submitted form can sit in someone's e-mail inbox waiting to be accessed," adds Hadd. "To ensure forms are processed with proficiency after a certain amount of time, the form can be automatically forwarded to another person to finish. And the status of each item is accessible to everyone in the business process."

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Partnering with ITD can make the procedure of going electronic fairly simple:

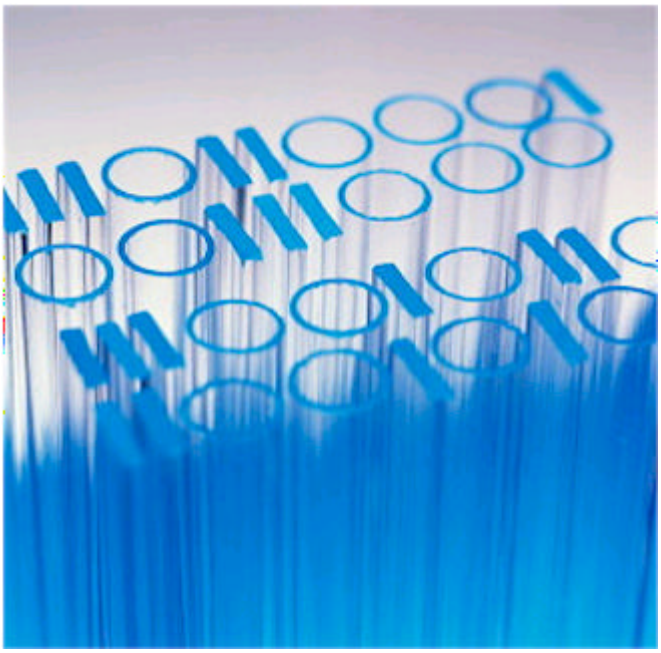
- The form is submitted to ITD (if the agency isn't going to design the form)
- ITD does a short business process review and then designs the form
- Once the form is designed, ITD coordinates with the agency for approval
- Once it's approved, it's tested.
- After testing is complete, it's placed online

ITD has acquired several extra e-forms features from Accelio. These include forms designed for both the Formflow99 and the Reachform products. Such forms can be used away from the office or on personal digital assistants such as Palm Pilots. The forms can automatically download information to a database and can also populate fields on the form from a database.

The workflow management feature will greatly decrease the amount of time spent on forms. The process can be streamlined and time limits can be placed on each part of the process. Another product will take information from the mainframe, populate a form and then send mass quantities of the form out either by mail, email or fax. This will save a tremendous amount of paper by discontinuing the need for large print runs of paper forms and eliminating paper waste when forms become outdated. Updates to forms can be made within minutes.

PUBLIC KEY INFRASTRUCTURE

Think about the last time you e-mailed someone. Was it completely confidential? Could it be seen by someone else on a network?



"In some instances, sending an e-mail message is like sending a postcard through the U.S. Postal Service . . . anyone can read it," notes Ken Adrian, ITD E-Commerce Coordinator. A soon-to-be-implemented technology known as Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) can change that.

PKI allows people to have a digital identity. The identity is comprised of a string of digits, also known as a "certificate." One of the first applications the State will use it for is e-mail. By using PKI with e-mail, it's assured that only the person you send the message to can open it, and the person sending the message is verified. It also enables individuals to sign-in on websites and applications and places a legally binding signature on a document.

Other applications PKI will be used for include the ability to digitally sign timesheets, travel requests and other such forms. That directly translates into reduced paper use, greater efficiency and cost savings. The technology can be used to implement digital signatures for use in contract signing and real estate property transactions.

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"Until recently, one of the greatest barriers in progressing from paper to digital government was the requirement of a legal signature," said Adrian. "With the adoption of digital signature legislation and the development of PKI, this barrier is becoming less of an obstacle."

PKI helps ITD achieve its mission of 1) bringing government closer to the people and 2) empowering state employees to achieve a higher level of efficiency so more time can be devoted to customer service.

In addition, PKI technology:

- Further enables convenient interaction between citizens and state government. With these on-line opportunities, citizens will have the capacity to receive feedback almost instantaneously and can better track the status of their requests.
- Allows state employees to move from routine paper tasks to electronic ones more efficiently as digital signatures allow for electronic creation and routing of the more common forms. With these tasks being handled electronically, state employees will have more time to focus on areas where additional customer service is critical.

PKI implementation is progressing steadily. Requests for Proposals have been distributed. Pilot projects will be completed during the second quarter of 2002 and the rollout will occur after pilot projects are assessed.