STREAMLINING THE RESPONSE TO PUBLIC RECORDS REQUESTS

HOW LA PLATA COUNTY USES PREBUILT PROCESS TEMPLATES TO AUTOMATE DOCUMENT GATHERING AND REQUEST MANAGEMENT

SNAPSHOT: **LA PLATA COUNTY**
LOCATION: **SOUTHWESTERN COLORADO**
POPULATION: **55,000**
FY 2017 BUDGET: **$77 MILLION**

All too often, fulfilling a public records request means carrying paper around from department to department because it's the fastest and easiest way to assemble all the right documents. And because one employee typically serves as the response coordinator, deadlines could be missed when that person takes time off.

This was the challenge for La Plata County, Colo., where state law requires a response to records requests within 72 business hours.

"The 72-hour response requirement is a tight timeline and requires everybody to be on top of things because the legal implications for not meeting the deadline are huge," says Sarah Jacobson, manager of the county's administration office.

Today, La Plata's response process is largely automated within its Laserfiche enterprise content management system. County staff used the Laserfiche Business Process Library, a feature in Laserfiche Forms, to find a prebuilt template that reflects a typical records request workflow and automates task routing, document forwarding and due date reminders.

Using Laserfiche to create online forms and automate workflows is a significant part of the county's initiative to mitigate declining tax revenues by reducing direct costs and working with leaner operations.

"Laserfiche helps us increase our capacity to get work done, even in times of tight budgets," says Mike Hawkins, enterprise content analyst. The improvements gained from process automation are instrumental to the county's goal of saving $1 million in hard and soft costs in FY 2017 and to its Innovate La Plata initiative, a program that empowers staff to think differently about their work in order to streamline processes, save money and improve their job satisfaction.

MEETING DEADLINES, REDUCING WORK

When a public records request is entered into La Plata's Laserfiche system, the automated workflow starts freeing up county employees' time by:

- Tracking the status of required actions for each department and automatically sending reminder emails about items due
- Supporting redaction and allowing drag-and-drop document submissions into the response file
- Avoiding the need to manually convert documents into a PDF format before responding back to the appropriate request
- Routing the response file to the county attorney's office for legal review
- Sending an email to the requester with cost information if the request will involve charges for staff time, then issuing an invoice when the response work is finished

When the documents are ready for release, Laserfiche posts them to the county's website for public access, with an automated email to notify the requester.

"Releasing the requested documents electronically through Laserfiche helps save taxpayer money because we don't have the expense of printing documents or copying them onto a CD," says Jacobson.

The automation helps La Plata County avoid delays in fulfilling requests because the overall process is less reliant on a single employee serving as the coordinator. Additionally, contributing documents to the response is now a significantly easier process for all staff involved.

"Working with the new process isn't complicated, so for most employees you will only need to offer training once," says Jacobson.

To adapt the Laserfiche process template to fit their needs, La Plata County employees only had to enter basic configuration information and slightly modify the tracking process for requests that involve multiple departments.

"We thought we would need to develop our own forms, but when we went into the Laserfiche Business Process Library, we saw a lot of templates that are pertinent to us," says Hawkins. "I think the world of the template library because of all the time and effort it would take us to develop the requirements and process for a workflow. With the Laserfiche templates, that work is already complete."

The Laserfiche system replaced a previous document management system that could not meet the county's requirements for automating processes. The county also evaluated a system designed specifically for handling public records requests, but found it too expensive and restrictive.

"We chose Laserfiche because of how robust it is, how seamlessly it works with other systems we use and how easily we can set up automatic document deletion," says Jacobson.

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— Sarah Jacobson, Manager, La Plata County Administration Office

EXTENDING FORMS-BASED AUTOMATION TO OTHER GOVERNMENT PROCESSES

La Plata now uses more than 80 forms to automate various county processes. Some forms cover specific functions within a single department, while others — such as forms for submitting budget information — are used by all departments.

Using the Laserfiche templates as a starting point, county departments develop their own forms based on guidance from the IT and administration teams on required standards, such as securing the form with user authentication.

Hawkins notes, "For IT, this approach avoids the time spent on defining requirements and getting the department's buy-in on something that IT has created."

Other departments that are automating processes include:

✓ **Assessor's Office.** Previously, when a property owner applied to split a land parcel, staff exchanged information by passing spreadsheets back and forth. The process required 17 steps and used seven software applications. By replacing those spreadsheets with a Laserfiche form, the process is now only six steps, uses two software applications, reduces paper use by 100 pages per day and saves an estimated 500 hours of staff time per year.

✓ **Finance Office.** Collecting budget information from 22 divisions is simpler with automated forms for requesting capital and technology items, as well as information about employee overtime and temporary positions. In the past, these requests were submitted as a printed document, and finance staff had to rekey the pertinent data into the finance system. Now, the Laserfiche workflow automatically compiles the forms each division submits, transfers data into the finance system and budget book, and performs calculations such as adding the cost of employer taxes for temporary positions.

✓ **Treasurer's Office.** The county treasurer uses Laserfiche forms to automate entries to the accounting journal system.

✓ **Human Resources.** County staff scan paper records related to worker's compensation claims and store them in Laserfiche where the metadata is integrated with the data file the county receives from its external claims management vendor. The HR department also uses a Laserfiche form to receive and track submissions for employee recognition.

✓ **Planning and Code Enforcement.** A work-in-process report form, maintained in Laserfiche, helps staff across multiple county departments track current project status.

✓ **Citizen Boards.** An online form offers local residents an easy way to apply for appointment to the county's various citizen boards and commissions. Other forms allow staff to maintain a database of candidates and track information and renewal dates for current board members.

MORE IMPROVEMENTS TO COME

La Plata County will continue to use Laserfiche templates to create more forms and automate more processes, generating additional cost savings and improving productivity. The county will also benefit from one aspect of process automation that can be overlooked, says Hawkins: "It helps our employees work more effectively by making their jobs easier and more fun."

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