

Engaging with a Digital Britain

Next generation eForm technology has a key role to play in delivering online services in a Digital Britain.

According to LGITU's research, 'eForms in a Digital Britain' (LGITU Nov/Dec), more than nine in 10 central and frontline public sector respondents believe that eForms can cut the cost of processing customer transactions; reduce error rates and the need for re-keying information to back end systems; and speed up the process of service delivery to the citizen or business.

Over seven in 10 feel that intelligent eForms can deliver standard, accessible, high quality joined up services and enable secure data sharing and joint working – indeed 85% also said that eForms are a tool for pulling together information from multiple back-end systems for one service application form.

However, it was clear from the survey that the full benefits of eForms would not be realised until the technology was fully integrated into back office systems and processes – and this could be difficult to get right.

LGITU invited Craig Belsham, head of Point of Single Contact Delivery, EU Services Directive at BIS; Nigel Kelly, e-Working project manager in the MoJ's Access to Justice Group; Hampshire County Council's Andy Key; and Adobe's Berwyn Jones, to meet, round the table and on the record, to explore the research findings.

Seventy four frontline and central government 'virtual delegates' also joined the live webcast to submit questions to the panel and vote on key questions.

Back end integration

The issue of most interest to panel members and audience alike was the integration of eForms with back office systems. It was a complex task, but if done properly well worth the effort. Legacy systems not only cover disparate technology platforms; they also model historical working practices. Indeed, actual data integration with modern eForm technology can be straightforward, but integrating modern, efficient workflow process can be tricky as ways of working have often fundamentally changed.

For example, with the MoJ's e-Working pilot the initial aim was to integrate eForms and case management into the ministry's legacy case management systems. However the team quickly found that all

workflow and case management can be completed within the LiveCycle system and deployed at such a high quality level that the whole process could be more effectively carried out within the new system – the legacy systems are instead due to be switched off. Said Kelly, "We would have switched straight away if we knew then what we know now."

However, key to the pilot's success has been its measured approach of tackling things in "small, bite sized chunks", ensuring that people are comfortable with the new system and working practices along the way.

Audience member, Rachel Smith, web services manager at East Sussex, asked the panel for advice in demonstrating the real cost benefits associated with eForms when you are no longer comparing similar workflows or processes.

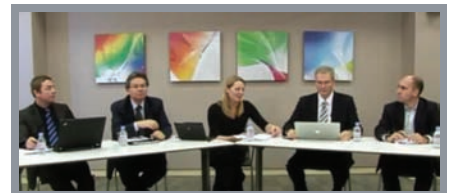
Kelly outlined the MoJ approach, which "started from the premise that we were going to change the processes, therefore we needed a baseline of what people did with the old paper system. As we introduced the new systems we could then directly compare the differences and identify the benefits."

The pilot has demonstrated significant time savings and efficiencies, especially for processes that involve frequent reuse of documents once captured.

Andy Key's advice was to always get a solid baseline and then work out whether the reengineering of that particular process would benefit from use of eForms – "rather than approach it as 'let's use an eForm'". He pointed out that it was difficult to compare different processes, but the cost benefits of redesigning a process around electronic communication as a whole still needed to be justified.

Hampshire has been reviewing work done under the local e-gov programme, focusing on those transactions they do thousands of times a year. "The e-gov programme basically required us to put all services online, to tick the box, but without considering the appropriateness of doing so," said Kelly.

Complicating factors are expensive legacy requirements (such as two photos and a £2.50 fee for Blue Badge processing) that increase the cost of online delivery, and



The Panel



Nigel Kelly, e-Working project manager, Access to Justice Group, Ministry of Justice



Craig Belsham, head of Point of Single Contact Delivery, EU Services Directive, Business Innovation and Skills



Andy Key, senior IT consultant, Hampshire County Council and member of various Socitm working groups



Berwyn Jones, senior manager for government at Adobe



Interviewer: Helen Olsen, managing editor, LGITU, Tomorrow's Town Hall and www.UKauthorITy.com

third party supplier systems. Take school admissions – in Hampshire online primary admissions works extremely well and saves money as every child is 'new' to the county. But as the county is unable to alter the schools admissions system itself it has proven cheaper to use paper rather than online options for secondary school admissions. Says Key, "It is out of our hands, we cannot build our own forms into this system."

Next generation technology

Just how far has the technology moved on from the local e-gov days? Would there be a different starting point now for such an e-aspiration?

"There are many more opportunities to integrate forms and back end systems now, and also opportunities around CRM, which would be the starting point today," says Key. "The technology has certainly moved on."

There are indeed many more standard ways of integrating and passing data back and forth - to central CRM systems and then on to individual back end systems.

However not, perhaps, as many as there could have been: "Egov should have produced more standards that would be useful to us, but it didn't. Perhaps because central government was too kind to local government, but there was no clear steer, says Key, and the sector didn't get as much benefit from the programme as it should have.

But what can the technology do today that it couldn't do back in 2005?

For starters, says Adobe's Berwyn Jones, the range of possibilities is far greater. "eForms can be very simple; they can be available online or offline and can use barcodes to integrate into workflow systems... They can also be incredibly complex online transactions involving the citizen and various branches of government where the form is integrated with back office systems."

The next generation of eForms, he said, "Have rich, wizard based experiences within them - in the US they are even embedding video to help users navigate through the process. The improved user experience available today will deliver ever more benefit to the public sector."

Kelly, meanwhile, was keen to highlight the intelligence that can now be built into forms to "both help the user to fill in the form but also deliver the information that then drives - even automates - the process and captures this directly into the system".

Belsham agrees that the technology has moved on, "which has helped us. When we were negotiating this directive we bought the ticket that said e-government had been done. But the landscape wasn't quite the one we had hoped it was."

Adobe AIR

A member of the audience from the Department for Transport was keen to find out what experience the panel had had using Adobe AIR for both offline and online eForms transactions.

Adobe AIR, explained Jones, was the platform used to deliver the immensely popular BBC iPlayer site. The latest figures show that around 46-47% of all consumers currently have AIR on their desktop compared to 97-98% with pdf.

He agreed that using AIR to deliver forms is "the next generation" as it gives online capabilities in an offline environment. "The South African Revenue Service has an EasyFile application on its website, which allows you to conduct all your tax affairs from a single application, offline."

This gives an enhanced user experience that Jones expects to see used more in the UK in future.

Indeed, the MoJ is currently using the AIR application for its Court Reader. According to Kelly, judges are already viewing forms and documents in court this way. "We are starting to integrate tasks through AIR too now, and are also looking to make this available online to parties who need to view the documents."

The budget and capability gap

The panel agreed that eForm technology could certainly help the sector meet the challenges ahead. "But it is going to be tough, as it is costly to do the reengineering of processes, and we have a

Audience Poll

	Yes	No
1. eForms are difficult to back end integrate to existing/legacy systems	86%	14%
2. There is a clear business case for eForms within public service delivery	95%	5%
3. In a landscape of savage cuts in public sector budgets and aspirations for a Digital Britain, eForm technology has a valuable role to play	100%	0%

Point of Single Contact, EU Services Directive - Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

The EU Services Directive is a legal requirement for all EU countries to have a 'Point of Single Contact' for businesses wishing to establish themselves in another member country - enabling them to find not only find out what licences and permits they require but also to apply for them, electronically. Driven by legislation rather than business case the programme involves 433 local authorities, 70+ other public bodies, and covers 300+ potential 'formalities'. The directive assumes that the future is electronic. BIS is using eForms to provide a standard set of auditable and accessible, genuinely electronic forms in a format that the customer is familiar with - but that is also compatible with electronic signatures and for which BIS can retain version control. Single Contact went live 31 December 2009.

e-Working, Access to Justice Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

A proof of concept pilot enabling law firms and court users to file documents to the courts service and manage the case management process electronically - encompassing lawyers, court users, support staff and judges in an end to end process. Feedback from users to date is enthusiastic. Law firms are generally already using technology to run their practices, and both court clerks and judges are enthusiastic about the electronic case management process - no more lugging large case files around. Significant reductions in turn around are being realised. In the past, filing an application and subsequent court order could take a week or two. This can now be done, 24/7, in an hour and a half - with the form automatically validating itself and informing the user of a success application.

credibility problem in local government in justifying more spend on technology," said Key. "I think that no, not all services will be online in all instances, but the business case will show that the ones that most people need, most of the time, will be."

Crucially, Key says that, in contrast to the days of e-gov, service managers "get the web; they understand it, work with it every day and they will be building the business case, not the IT people".

Digital signatures

In the EU many organisations are already using digital signatures within electronic processes; however UK law is slightly different. Walsall's Matt Lowe asked the panel for examples of working with digital signatures in eForms.

At BIS, the team is aware that the availability of ID cards in Europe has led to Digital Signatures being more common, says Belsham: "Our approach in the UK has been driven for usability, you can use a digital signature if you have one but it is not a necessity."

The MoJ pilot is also exploring digital signatures, says Kelly. However they are "keen to ensure that security doesn't get in the way of usability".

Jones agreed that digital signatures could be seen as a barrier in the UK. "But security can also be seen as part of the solution here in the UK - many government organisations are using the Government Gateway and authentication can be employed to certify that a form has genuinely come from the issuing organisation when you download it."

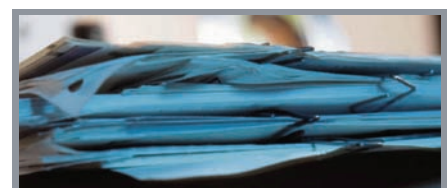
Online services from 2012

Delivering services fully online by 2012 "is a challenge," says Kelly. "We are only just starting a five to eight year cycle now of getting that level of take up. Mandating is difficult as we have to ensure that the service is open and accessible to all."

Indeed, switching citizen and business to online channels will be key. "We won't get the benefit unless we give the user a reason to do this," says Belsham. "It has to be useful and easy to use, as well as delivering a benefit to the department."

The public sector is not like the insurance business, agreed panellists. It can't say "if you don't go online we won't talk to you". As a sector it must keep all channels open.

So, do eForms have a part to play? The panel, and 100% of the audience who voted on the day, say yes. There was consensus too that the business case for eForms, although challenging, was clear. And although back end integration was challenging and complex, the effort was deemed well worth the rewards.



The 'eForms in a Digital Britain - Intelligent forms and efficient service delivery' research project was undertaken by LGITU magazine with support from the Tomorrow's Town Hall newsletter, UKauthorITy.com and Adobe. For a copy email Helen Olsen: Helen@infopub.co.uk