

eForms in a Digital Britain

- Intelligent forms and efficient service delivery

Can the latest generation of intelligent forms help transform public services? Helen Olsen reviews the findings of LGITU magazine's survey into this often misjudged technology and looks at its potential to unlock savings in public service delivery.

The most important finding the research team took away from the initial qualitative exercise (reported LGITU Sep/Oct 09) was that many people believe that eForms were "done" under the local e-government and wider e-government programmes of the early part of this decade.

However, in the landscape of the Digital Switchover of Public Services Programme in 2012, the latest generation of eForms technologies look like useful tools for this process of delivering digital-only channels.

Bob Kamall, senior policy advisor, public service reform, at the Cabinet Office says that eForms "could indeed play a key part in delivering on the Digital Britain promise to switch to digital channels from 2012". He is keen to point out that the switchover programme is still in its early days and that the current economic conditions "will impact on any plans that departments may have for eForms, whether new or existing initiatives".

Indeed, cost savings in the face of inevitable cuts – whichever political hue they are dictated by – will be fundamental to public service delivery for the foreseeable future and will inevitably influence the direction of developments. Solutions that remove layers of complexity and process – and therefore cost – will undoubtedly find favour.

Projects that the Cabinet Office is looking for to 'trail-blaze' the digital switchover must be easily replicable by other parts of government, and must demonstrate their contribution to streamlining of processes and efficiency. They must also, inevitably, deliver significant savings on current means of service delivery. The future of public sector services leaves no room for 'add-on luxuries' – the future is efficient, streamlined and cost effective. Less, rather than more.

It is in the context of digital switchover that the key message coming back from this project's initial interviews was surprising: eForms were "done" in the e-gov programme. Indeed, it became evident that many views on the technology are stuck in that era. However,

those using the latest technology were keen to highlight just how far the technology and its capabilities had moved on since then.

A subsequent 'quick survey' elicited 200 responses from across frontline and central government services, from which two findings leap out:

96% believe that eForms can cut the cost of processing customer transactions

58% believe that eForms can be easily integrated with existing back office systems

It is interesting to see that so many believe that eForms can deliver savings; even when so few believe that back end integration is easy. Indeed, many of the comments revolved around this issue, suggesting that the real benefits of eForms "would only be realised when back end systems were integrated" – indeed, the benefits were being "underestimated".

These results suggest that if back end systems and process workflow integration was achievable there could be a dramatic step change in service delivery and cost.

This belief about the difficulties of back-end integration mirrored the in-depth sample – where the issue scored an average of 2.9, but had the widest range of answers of all questions. Some strongly agreed and others strongly disagreed with the statement.

Benefits

Many respondents in the quick survey reported successful developments. Said one "It has been one success story in my organisation being rated as one of the best 30 local authority websites for customer experience in the UK."

Explained another, "We use eForms quite a lot now and have integrated with our other e-channels to present one customer portal to our citizens.

One reported that, "Increasingly we are moving over to their use in delivering frontline services to the public."

Leaving out the belief that eForms can cut processing costs, other benefits identified in the quick survey were:

95% think that eForms could reduce error rates by removing the need to re-key information and by being able to validate information as it is entered on to a form

91% say that eForms can speed up the process of service application/delivery

84% believe that eForms can pull together/send information to multiple back-end systems from one form

74% feel that intelligent eForms were highly accessible and easy for the citizen or business to use

74% feel that eForms offered a high quality customer experience for the citizen or business

72% believe that eForms can standardise delivery of their organisation's services via third party/agencies

71% think that eForms could enable secure joint working for their organisation with other parts of the public sector

71% think that eForms could enable the secure sharing of information where appropriate

Use, cost and development

In the in-depth survey, most used both paper and electronic forms. Said one: "We can use paper, but we prefer electronic forms. We have made it easy for service providers to use the electronic forms."

The sample was not large enough to state statistics. However, of those who knew how many electronic or paper forms were used in their organisation (approximately half) the numbers ranged from less than 10 to over 100 for both types of form.

Interestingly, not one respondent knew what the cost of processing either electronic or paper forms was to their organisation. And only two respondents were able to estimate the cost of developing either electronic (range £0 to £10,000) or paper (£0 to £25,000).

This finding was backed up in the quick survey:

83% did not know the cost of developing an eForm

88% did not know the cost of developing a paper form

Interestingly the expectation in the in-depth exercise was that paper forms were more expensive to develop. In the quick survey this was reversed, with those putting a figure to the estimate for development assuming that paper forms were cheaper in general to develop than electronic forms.

Of note too in the quick survey was that many of those commenting about the cost of eForm development were clearly factoring in the overall integration and business process re-engineering.

Plans for future development were hazy, with varied estimates of expected form development – ranging from 'less than 10' to 'over 350' on either electronic or paper forms. However, one central government respondent said that their organisation had no plans to develop further paper forms, but intended to develop 80 electronic forms. Accessibility was seen as important, with requirements for new form developments and plans to make

existing eForms compliant with AAA accessibility standards.

In-house development capabilities

Just four of the central government organisations (33%) in the in-depth sample had the ability to develop eForms in-house. The others did not know whether their organisation had this capability or would "Look to the private sector for help".

In contrast, almost three quarters (74%) of the quick survey among central and local government and other frontline service organisations said that they had the ability to develop eForms in house.

Barriers to eForm development

The impression that eForms 'had been done' under e-government may hurt future developments – the fact that these initial implementations had not delivered 'end to end service transformation' or integration into back-office systems may be perceived as a limitation with the technology of today, rather than the technology available in the e-gov era.

The parlous state of the economy and the public sector purse will also inevitably impact development. However, this may well be mitigated with solid metrics looking at the latest achievements in eForm projects.

Problems with past back-office integration techniques and workflow in both the in-depth and quick survey samples had left an impression that this was a limitation of the technology. Security of forms has also been seen as a major barrier in the past – but this may change with advent of the government secure extranet, GCSX, and the latest

eForm technology security capabilities.

However, culture change, legalities of digital signatures and the ability of applicants to satisfactorily identify themselves are seen as barriers of today's technology.

Referring to culture, said one respondent, "Authorities are used to working in a certain way in the paper world and want to translate it wholesale into the electronic world."

Another added that "the public sector tendency to try to cover every conceivable eventuality in online services delivery" would be a major barrier: "This leads to public sector screens often being complicated with guidance... with notes regarding exceptions/exclusions."

Positive outlook

In the quick survey these themes were repeated. However, repeated referrals to the "complexity" of processes that eForms needed to accommodate were tempered by acknowledgement of the opportunities their implementation present for re-engineering business processes.

Key themes to the comments in the quick survey emphasised the importance of end to end integration if benefits were to be delivered. The enthusiasm of those that had encountered early success was palpable; as was, equally, the disappointment of those who had struggled in recent years with earlier technology.

Indeed, encouragingly, respondents appeared to be actively seeking opportunities for cost savings and streamlining processes for the services their organisations deliver.

Some shining beacons of excellence were highlighted by respondents. Award winning council websites, the Planning Portal and the EU Services Directive were all cited as evidence that the technology had much to offer.

So, can this latest generation of eForms technology help deliver the next generation of online government citizen services?

Key to the success of engaging those who are digitally able but not yet using online services, plus those currently excluded from the digital world, will be use and integration of widely available technology to deliver engaging, intuitive and trustworthy services.

The stark truth is that the public sector must deliver more with less. And common sense dictates that harnessing today's ubiquitous low cost technologies to deliver engaging, efficient services is a necessity.



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