DEVELOPING AN EFORMS STRATEGY

INFORMATIONAL ARTICLE

Developing an eForms Strategy

Let's take a look at the important elements and considerations for an effective and professional eForms strategy. We first start with definitions.

A form is "a specialized document that contains fields for the capture and/or display of variable data." It is the presence of these fields that differentiate forms from other document types. Forms are developed to interact with users, processes, printing, production distribution, and capture systems. A "filled out" form becomes a record.

For development purposes, we divide forms into four categories. Each category has unique development requirements.

1. **eForms (Electronic Forms).** Digital forms used in non-browser environments. eForms are typically proprietary formats such as PDF, Word, etc.

2. **iForms (Internet Forms).** Digital forms that run within a browser environment. These forms use HTML, JavaScript, and other technologies specific to browsers. They can be deployed on intranets or on the Internet.

3. **pForms (Physical Forms).** Paper or other physical substrate forms, including pressure-sensitive labels that contain fields for variable data.

4. **vForms (Virtual Forms).** Forms are generated when code is executed, such as web forms, print output templates, and applications.

An enterprise-wide forms management program generally includes plans for development, deployment, support, software standards, output strategy, management reporting, and cost-benefit requirements, including Return-on-Investment. These plans can vary widely between organizations and are dependent upon the organization's existing infrastructure and standards already in place. Each element has specific considerations that should be decided and published as a part of the Enterprise Forms Program Manual and Style Guide. Looking at each element:

A. **Development.** This addresses what department(s) and individuals are assigned forms development responsibilities. Frequently, anyone is authorized to create a basic design, describe the requirement and business process(es) supported, and submit the request to a professional designer. There is generally a process in place for creating new forms, revising existing forms, declaring forms inactive or obsolete, and assigning control numbers such as form number, edition date, and retention requirements. Multiple versions of a form (State, Country, Language, etc.) may be required. Various approvals (legal, regulatory, marketing, etc.) may be required. In addition, the Information technology infrastructure must be considered in areas such as database access, server scripts, networks, email compatibility, and more.

B. **Deployment.** Strategies for deployment include email support, servers, forms portals, user access controls, user submission of filled forms, security requirements (secure servers, eCommerce support, encryption, electronic signature support), and more.

C. **Support.** Includes issues such as user training, help desk support, instruction manuals, user guides, and designer training.

D. **Software Standards.** These must be developed and supported. This generally becomes an important consideration for the design software and any user-required software (fillers, browser editions, and Acrobat® Reader edition, for example). Designer software developed to support the unique requirements for forms design is very important. We would never recommend using general-purpose software. Any business professional must be provided with the professional tools required by the profession. Forms designers need the same consideration.

E. **Output Strategy.** This defines how users will output the results of their fill sessions. One very early lesson learned is that users must be able to save and print their work or they simply will not use the electronic form.

This is particularly true for the public doing business with your organization, but it also applies to employees. We generally think in terms of paper being unnecessary (after all, they are electronic forms), but this issue has stopped more than one electronic forms program. Users want what they want!

F. **Management Reporting.** Reports should include all statistics necessary to determine the extent of use, who uses the forms, development statistics, user requests for enhancements, and usage trends. Any program goals that are established should have concomitant metrics and reports established. One cannot manage what one does not measure!

G. **Cost-Benefit Analysis.** This element is crucial to the long-term success of any program. For each form, the expected development and maintenance costs should be compared to the expected cost savings, including productivity improvements. A Return on Investment (ROI) should be calculated, including the expected payback period. If an acceptable ROI cannot be shown, the form should not be converted to electronic form.

Putting all this together in a coherent eForms strategy statement is the responsibility of the forms management department, working closely with all other departments within the organization.