UNDERSTANDING FORMS

INFORMATIONAL ARTICLE

Understanding Forms: A Complete Guide for Design and Management

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Forms are a complex technology. This comes as no surprise to those of us who have spent a lifetime in the forms business and have witnessed the rapid changes that continue to impact our profession. However, many people don't take forms all that seriously, and business efficiency suffers as a direct result.

BFMA has entered into an agreement with Essociates Group, Inc. for the development of forms-specific training in a variety of areas. The first result is a three-day class entitled "Understanding Forms: A Complete Guide for Design and Management". This class discusses this new course and outlines the topics and concepts that are presented. As we stated above, forms are complex, and this paper can only outline the concepts covered in the class.

There is no standard, generally accepted definition for most of the terminology used within the forms profession. That is the first problem. Without standards, effective communication becomes difficult to achieve. Therefore, we start with our definitions, coupled with those developed and copyrighted by BFMA back in 1986.

Document. A "document" is a container of information. This is a useful definition since it rightfully covers virtually anything that displays information, including signs, posters, billboards, forms, brochures, letters, memos - the list is endless. Accordingly, the term "document", which has become almost bankrupt in its general use today, is much too general when used as a substitute for a "form". It appears that many forms companies, and even many forms professionals, are anxious to replace "form" with "document" as if somehow form is a bad word. Let's get past that problem quickly. A "form" is a specific kind of document, and we are in the forms business.

Form. A form is a basic business tool (whether printed or electronic, for collecting and transmitting information. It is the catalyst for getting things done and a record of what was done. (This is the BFMA definition).

We like to point out that a form is a form until someone fills it out. Then it becomes a record and is subject to record management requirements. Before it is filled out, it is a form, subject to forms management requirements. There is a very distinct difference.

A "form" consists of four elements. All forms contain all four elements to differing degrees, but all four elements must be considered when developing forms. A complete understanding of these four elements is vital for effective, efficient forms development, regardless of the "form of the form", paper or electronic.

These four elements are:

1. **Intent**
2. **Container**
3. **Data**
4. **Image**

Let's briefly define and look at each element:

Intent:

All forms must have a reason to exist, or the form shouldn't exist. The justification for the existence of the form is its "intent". What workflow does it support? What are the primary business functions? What primary, secondary, and tertiary business systems are supported by the form? What business

rules apply? What are the pre-and post-processing requirements? What is the form's lifecycle? Does the form require legal approval? Signatures? Secure access? What are the retention and filing requirements for records created from the form?

Answers to these questions are determined through process analysis techniques, including cost analysis and return on investment (ROI).

Forms require periodic reviews to ascertain that workflow requirements are still met. Processes change regularly. Business changes regularly. Accordingly, forms need to be changed to meet new process requirements. A regular, systematic review of all forms is very important.

We generally define analysis requirements as falling into three areas:

a. Macro Analysis, or an analysis of the population of forms as a whole. We perform queries against the database, looking for opportunities to combine forms, eliminate forms, or redesign forms. This macro analysis is performed at least annually.

b. Reorder Analysis is performed when a form reaches the reorder point (paper forms) or annually for electronic forms. Every form must be subjected to a periodic review. This review ranges from a simple email to the form owner asking if anything has changed to a formal review of the business process supported by the form.

c. Ad Hoc Analysis is performed upon request. A form owner may initiate an Ad Hoc review, or a proposed system change may trigger a review. For whatever reason required, such a review challenges the form and its processes.

Container:

This is the physical layout of the data collection vehicle. It is the lines, boxes, graphics, text, and other objects that make up the static description of the form. A container takes many shapes, substrates, sizes, and properties.

One of the first steps in container design is to complete a design analysis. Successful completion of the analysis requires a thorough understanding of what is possible. This includes knowledge of substrates, production technology, printing methods, marking engines, inks, browsers, networks, servers, fillers, drawing techniques, secure document requirements and techniques, form types, and much more.

Containers can range from paper to pressure-sensitive labels to browsers-based designs and can include tags, unit sets, continuous forms, envelopes, self-mailers, cut sheets, register books, secure documents, electronic forms, Internet forms, data capture pages (caption-blank forms), and more. Forms can be combinations of product types such as form-label combinations, dual web products, combination tags and unit sets, and combinations of combinations. There are many unique designs that have been created to serve specific workflow requirements.

After design analysis, creating the design is accomplished using a wide variety of methods and tools. Familiarity with such methods and tools enables the designer to solve workflow requirements in very creative and cost-effective ways.

Data:

One of the primary purposes of forms is to capture and display data. It is the data that distinguishes a form from other documents. A thorough understanding of the sources and uses of data is vital to effective forms design and management.

Data originates from many sources. These include handwriting, OCR, OMR, ICR, MICR, keyboard entry, database interaction, XML, barcode scans, bit-mapped scans, and more. Each type of data capture has features, advantages, and benefits that must be understood to effectively solve workflow requirements.

Data collection is a science in and of itself. There are many features and tools available to qualify and restrict data entry, validate data, display formats, and capture data for reuse. Techniques for scanning, importing, database connectivity, storage and retrieval, ensuring data integrity, and interaction with users are all tools available to the competent designer. Understanding data techniques for physical substrates, electronic forms, and Internet forms is key for effective forms development.

Many forms, once filled out, serve as legal records with very specific retention requirements. Such requirements must be considered at the time of container design. Data retention is also an important consideration, such as providing for containers and data to be recreated exactly as the user originally completed the transaction. Form edition management is an important part of data, as is signature management, secure access, and information privacy.

Image:

This is an often overlooked, yet very important function for a form. Image directs the interface between the form and the form users. It is the graphical interface between the data and users, systems, and information.

Image also considers the marketing aspects of a form. All forms, whether internally or externally used, project an image of the organization to the users. For many external users, such as customers, the form container may very well be their only interaction with your organization. They will form lasting impressions of you based on their experience with your forms. Proper usability considerations, logo displays, marketing messages, and use of standards can influence Image.

Many companies utilize a formal “Style Guide” or program manual to communicate and enforce standards of design, presentation, and business rules. Contents of the style guide can vary but usually include acceptable logo uses, fonts, substrates, typestyles, style sheets, and more.

Image also includes accessibility. This defines standards for design such that all forms deployed in electronic format are accessible and usable by persons with disabilities as well as all others. Section 508, of the Rehabilitation Act, defines accessibility standards and requirements for Internet-based forms. Today, compliance with Section 508 requirements is mandatory for all federal government agencies. It is just a matter of time before such requirements are mandatory for most other governments and large businesses. Forms professionals should understand the requirements and how to attain accessibility, not because it may become the law, but because it is the right thing to do.

Putting it all together. Forms management is the process of managing all aspects of forms development, production, and deployment of forms throughout the enterprise. It includes program establishment, process analysis, forms control, forms files, forms databases, forms procurement, warehousing and distribution, and revision and edition control.

There are many position titles and descriptions in use today. There is a trend towards assigning this function to Information Technology Departments, mirroring the trend away from paper-based forms to electronic and Internet forms. Generally, such an assignment is not successful, as all organizations still have lots of paper forms and they tend to be unmanaged by IT groups. Forms Management is a vital function that, when performed well, can significantly improve an organization’s business processes, reduce costs throughout the process, and drive improved sales, customer service, and customer retention.

BFMA is the leading organization for forms and forms management education in the world. BFMA offers many educational opportunities, including the Annual Symposium, regional seminars, traveling training classes, local chapter meetings, a website, Formspace (a Listserve group), publications, and professional networking.

Check out www.bfma.org and www.essociatesgroup.com for more information.