



## Document workflow keeps up with county's growing needs, shrinking budget

- By William Jackson
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About seven years ago, Durham County, N.C., began replacing paper with electronic documents in its Social Services Department, storing and managing the documents digitally and incorporating them into a digital workflow management process.

“It has changed the way the department operates,” said Jerry Sawyer, the county’s senior program analyst. “It frees up human resources to do other things. It has freed up caseworkers so that they can concentrate on those who need services.”

Today, the digitization effort has evolved into a full-blown case management program, and it has been so successful that another eight departments have now adopted the document and workflow management tools from Laserfiche that the Social Services Department uses. “As other departments hear how it has improved efficiencies, we’ve found that they are coming to us and wanting to use it,” Sawyer said.

The county’s Social Services Department has been a pioneer in using document and workflow management tools for digital case management, which saves time and money by providing the right documents to those that need them just as they are needed, cutting the time workers have to spend seeking and waiting for paperwork.

Metadata associated with each document enables the file to be associated automatically with a case or cases, and storage in a central archive rather than in silos makes information immediately available to everyone who needs it across the work group or enterprise.

Situated in North Carolina’s Research Triangle, Durham is one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, but revenue and manpower are not keeping up with the demands placed on its government by a growing population.

Budget and staff cuts are the new normal in local government, said Katie Burke, government program strategist for Laserfiche, so automation is being used to fill the gap between demands and resources. “Case management is ripe for automation,” she said.

The migration to digital recordkeeping began when Social Services and the Public Health Service were preparing to move to new combined quarters, Sawyer said. “They had two locations and were planning to consolidate. As they were designing the building they realized they were going to be spending close to a million dollars for an archival room,” that would hold the departments’ paper records.

In addition to the cost of the facility to file them, paper records were cumbersome. They had to be physically retrieved when needed and could only be used by one person at a time.

However, Social Services and the Public Health Service now share the Health and Human Services pavilion, and adoption of the Laserfiche system saved \$1 million by eliminating an archival room, giving both departments more space for workers.

### **How it works**

The Laserfiche system in Durham County has three primary components. Quick Fields is batch processing software that handles documents after they have been digitally scanned into the system. According to the type of documents, they can be processed immediately or in batches at the end of the day or the week.

Quick Fields "reads" scanned documents as well as documents newly filed in a repository or other network file, identifies them for proper filing and extracts metadata that is associated with each document to be used for searching and routing. "The metadata is what drives the organization of the documents in the Laserfiche repository," said Burke.

Quick Fields uses both location and patterns to identify and extract metadata. Zone OCR (optical character reader) looks for specific data fields in each document type that contain specific kinds of information. And Pattern Match recognizes data in specific formats, such as Social Security numbers, which fit the pattern 000-00-0000.

When a document cannot be confidently identified automatically for filing, it is routed to a separate folder for review. Burke did not have statistics for the accuracy of Quick Fields in identifying documents and metadata, but said, "We have had quite a lot of success with it," particularly with common forms that use the same formats over and over.

The Laserfiche Workflow tool automates repeatable processes across an organization. Specific workflows can be designed for different jobs, routing documents to the proper person in the right order. A workflow is triggered when a particular type of document is filed or a specified activity occurs, such as a signing or a checkbox being marked. This eliminates the need to manually deliver documents and files, speeding up the process.

The final component is the repository, which holds the digital documents. The repository works with SQL servers and is created in the Laserfiche Administration Console when the user specifies the path to the folder where the documents are being maintained. This folder is local to the Laserfiche server and does not use a mapped network drive. Having a common repository makes documents available to all users without having to search through multiple locations for a particular document.

"Whatever document you have archived, it is only a keystroke away," Sawyer said.

A Gartner study estimated that an automated workflow can increase productivity by 20 percent. In a government office, the gains could be even greater, Burke said. "I find that in local government the documents are the blood of the organization."

### **Setting up requirements**

Implementing digital management in an office requires forethought, because just automating existing processes seldom is the most effective way to use the technology. Laserfiche has a library of policies that customers can use to aid the development of their own workflows and document management policies.

Although each organization and each job is different, the policy library provides “a good starting place” for development, Burke said. Simplifying policy making means that the business office can own the process rather than depending on the IT shop for it, although, “most often this is a collaboration between the IT people and the business users,” she said.

Some documents now are being created digitally, and rather than being scanned they are “printed” to the system. The county plans to start using more online forms that would be supported by a Laserfiche add-on to its website, which would offer more opportunities for citizens to use digital documents. “That would reduce a lot of paperwork,” Sawyer said.

Since Social Services adopted the Laserfiche system, the Legal Department, Public Health Service, Emergency Medical Service, Human Resources Department, the library, Soil and Water Conservation Department, IT Department and Veterans Services have signed on. The county has 750 user licenses now.

Digital management has not only solved the challenge of storing documents, but also achieved the strategic goals of automating business processes, Sawyer said, by reducing duplication and waste, improving response time and customer service, and making it easier to cooperate across departmental lines.

Sawyer said the county has not kept track of the savings generated by the document management system, aside from the \$1 million expense that was avoided in the construction of the new facility for the department. “We work with the efficiencies that are created,” enabling better service to a growing population, he said. “That’s what we concentrate on.”

#### About the Author

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