

District of Columbia Capitalizes on Web Portal Update

DC.gov gains a new look and functionality with Web Content Management from Open Text ECM Suite

Industry

Public Sector

Customer



Open Text Partner



Business Challenges

- Managing content for 125 agency Web sites with over 200,000 pages of unstructured content
- Outdated Content Management System, pages still in HTML
- Lack of content ownership by the agencies and over-reliance on Web Maintenance Team
- Difficult for sites to stay up to date with new applications and regulations

Business Solution

- Open Text Web Experience Management
- Open Text Portal

Business Benefits

- Improved productivity and efficiency for content producers, site developers
- Better customer service and regulation compliance
- Savings of time and development costs
- Mobile site will allow users to access news and services via mobile devices

As the capital of the United States, Washington D.C. has a global presence. In addition to the city's residents and commuters, the city also serves a large number of tourists each year. Within the District of Columbia government there are over 80 agencies that people go to for services and information, each with its own Web site. To best manage the information, the District of Columbia Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) operates DC.gov. The DC.gov portal offers its visitors quick, centralized access to each agency's Web site, the ability to complete numerous service transactions online with the local government, and needed information about the District with minimal searching. When the time came to update the aging portal, OCTO wanted a site that would be an international leader both in its accessibility to visitors and its appearance, eschewing a bureaucratic look in favor of a more commercial look.

Updating the outdated

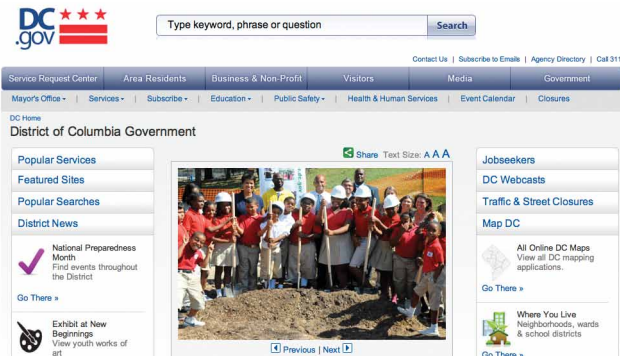
Many factors contributed to the decision to revamp the DC.gov portal. It had been nearly a decade since the last redesign, and the OCTO Web Management Team was running the site from an antiquated content management system (CMS) while also managing sites still in static HTML and trying to keep 125 Web sites and 200,000 pages of unstructured content as up to date as possible. Such an undertaking was proving difficult at the team's current size.

The OCTO team also felt it was important to provide a portal with more citizen-centric information architecture, where you didn't need to know the agency, administration, or office you needed to go to get the service you required. The ease of use also needed to be updated in order to ensure that all citizens and visitors would find the Web site accessible and also to meet Section 508 compliance regulations. The changes required rethinking everything from the overall architecture of the portal to how to incorporate graphics and text resizing.

Access from anywhere was another key feature that OCTO wanted to integrate in DC.gov, making the development of a mobile site a priority as well as incorporating the ability to access social networking sites. The team had noticed that the portal was falling behind in its ability to communicate with visitors. "We were seeing the growing trends of social media and the need to integrate more seamlessly with other applications. The system that we had as well as the design just wasn't set up for that," says Joy McCrady, DC.gov Web Portal Manager.

Improved usability for the content developers was another priority. In many cases, OCTO was overwhelmed with work and spent more time acting as copyeditor than Web producer or architect. "Typically, we were getting about a thousand requests a week for Web updates, and it was just becoming more and more unmanageable," says McCrady. They also felt it was important for the content experts at each agency to feel empowered to work on their





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Joy McCrady,
Web Portal Manager, District of Columbia Office of the Chief Technology Officer

Web sites and provide content without needing to ask OCTO for help. For this purpose, they needed a new format that would make it simple to upload various multimedia and post content. According to McCrady, “We really wanted the individual agencies to have more capability and ease of use in updating their pages, so the more that we could use templating was going to ensure that agency Web authors didn’t have to be technical. We would still be there to provide training and answer questions about Web standards. But we didn’t want agencies to fear doing updates themselves.”

From the many, one solution

In order to swiftly and efficiently accomplish their goal of a Web portal overhaul, OCTO, through a competitive procurement process, chose Open Text Portal and Open Text Web Experience Management, products of the Web Content Management component of the Open Text ECM Suite. The array of different functions, plus the ease with which even non-technical content producers could load and manage content, were one of its advantages. The new Web site design allowed each agency to take ownership of its own site and content, freeing up OCTO to work on larger Web strategies.

“We wanted to turn things over to the agencies. After all, they are the content matter experts,” says McCrady. “We could then be elevated into Web producers, where we could actually look at all of the content and data and make adjustments based on better information. Now we are moving towards thinking through classification strategies, overseeing special micro sites and acting as auditors in terms of ensuring we are meeting 508 compliance, versus having to review and edit every single item that needed to be posted.” The DC.gov portal can now serve as an example for other government and commercial Web sites in terms of meeting regulations and increasing accessibility.

The site’s architecture was also changed to a format that was more customer-focused. The old portal, besides looking outdated, wasn’t providing visitors with the information and services they needed. In addition, each agency’s site had the same information architecture. Pages either went under the category Services or Information—too broad for users to find information they were looking for. Even

though the look was the same for each site, there was only one template option for all pages. This meant that anything unique about the page from creating jump links to embedding photo galleries had to be hard-coded each and every time. This type of time consuming development usually fell to OCTO.

With Portal, OCTO created a variety of homepage, landing page and listing templates as well as a variety of detailed pages that agencies could pick and choose from to meet their needs. This created a standard look and feel across the sites while allowing customizations to fit each agency’s individual needs. “We set up the system in Open Text where basically every agency has its own site, but the content from each site could be repurposed on other agency sites and on subportal sites that we’re creating by topic or audience. So you might have a subportal for residents, you might have one for visitors, you might have one for public safety, health or education,” says McCrady. As well, the templates ensured that each webpage met government regulations and allowed authors to easily add more complicated page components without having to know HTML or other programming languages.

“All of the content can roll up and it can also roll up to the main DC.gov home portal that will feature all types of news, services, activities, events, et cetera,” adds McCrady. “In addition, the same content will be formatted differently but pulled in to appear on our mobile site. Now that the data is structured we can also parse it out and put it into datasets in our data catalog.”

An education in Web portal development

To update the DC.gov portal it came with a list of challenges to overcome—it was a project to revamp 10 years worth of growth. OCTO chose RCK Corp. through a competitive procurement process to join the vendor team and help manage the initial development. RCK Corp. specializes in providing technology services, legacy modernization processes, and world-class consultants to the public and private sectors. “This was a huge project. We had a lot of different executive changes along the way. We had very limited resources and a limited budget,” says McCrady. With the help of Open Text and RCK Corp., OCTO was able to turn many of these challenges into new opportunities to improve services and reduce costs.



Before beginning the changeover, the OCTO group based their plans on careful investigation of the many different possibilities available to them as well as how they needed to improve the site for both agencies and visitors. “We did a lot of research and work in the beginning to gauge feedback and requirements from all District agencies. We also worked extensively with the Mayor’s communications office,” says McCrady.

Partnered with Open Text and RCK Corp., OCTO was able to feel confident about learning to use the new solution. “What was very helpful was we were able to set up time for the vendor’s team to transfer a lot of knowledge to our development team as well as our Web editors. Our team could shadow them and see the work that they were doing so we were empowered once the vendor went away to make configuration and customization changes ourselves,” explains McCrady.

The templates and standardization that OCTO was able to create helped to ensure that each agency feels confident that they are using best practices, even for new applications such as social networking. “We also have different standards for the different social networks and the way the agencies should be using tools like Facebook® and Twitter® in terms of disseminating content, and many have really taken to it. They’re using it whether it’s to respond to complaints, publicize events, or provide customer service,” says McCrady.

New benefits for DC.gov’s users, whether creators or guests

One of the goals for the new portal was to improve the users’ overall experience. “We wanted to make the sites more dynamic, enable the agencies to be able to post more types of multimedia, photographs, marketing materials, and so on, and to be able to easily disseminate information about different programs,” says McCrady. “This allowed us to look at the fact that we had developed many legacy applications over the years that really didn’t have a lot of functionality to them. With the new site’s improved functionality, we were able to create content type definitions where we could essentially eliminate many of those applications because the system was actually doing the work for us.”

Another advantage for the content creators is that each department can have a unique look while maintaining a consistent graphic design across every Web site in the portal, which keeps the whole look coherent. Between the templates and the enhanced user interface, content experts could easily update their own site without relying on OCTO to make the changes. “Whether it was an application or Web site that may have been built by a third party, they could easily snap in our header and footer and our style sheet,” explains McCrady. “What’s been great is we have already launched about



25 Web sites and we’ve been able to make enhancements as we’ve received feedback from agencies and the public, so that has been really encouraging.”

For the citizens and tourists visiting the site, there are also many clear advantages over the previous portal. Information has been rewritten, reorganized and reduced so that it is easier to find online services currently available. “The goal is for the new structure and format to benefit residents and make the sites easier to use. We had a real problem where some agencies did not take full ownership of their content. Information was either out of date or inconsistent across different agency websites. This creates real confusion and frustration for site visitors. The redesign effort has given each agency the opportunity to clean house, refocus their messaging and classify information based on services and topics. This information informs the OCTO Web Maintenance Team how to continue to shape portal architecture so that visitors do not need to know exactly what agency provides the service,” adds McCrady.

The portal’s ability to work with new applications and social networking sites is also greatly appreciated by its users for improving communications between agencies and citizens. Many agencies use the networking applications to provide quick, continual updates, such as for customer wait times. Others use the applications in order to solicit feedback, providing guests a quick, easy, and familiar method to submit requests and questions about services offered by the agencies. The sites are also now able to use many new applications that help DC.gov serve its constituents better, such as improved search and service directories and new functions, such as RSS feeds for DC news and listing pages and the ability to bookmark or share pages.

For McCrady, the biggest advantages are those that improve the experience of both the content producers and the end-users. “The overall success of the project will be when agencies feel empowered and do more of their Web work, to make them better planners, to



see them collaborate with other programs within and outside their agencies as well as with residents to continue to transform the portal into a tool that is easy for all visitors to use," she says.

District of Columbia Public Schools Web Site – Winner of Best-in-Nation Award

The first Web site the team rebuilt was the Web site for DC's public schools, <http://dcps.dc.gov>, which won the 2010 Digital Education Achievement Award (DEAA) and Best of the Web Award for best K-12 Website in the nation.

"This award is well deserved recognition for the DCPS Web team, which has worked tirelessly since our Website went live in August of 2009 to keep the DCPS community well informed and engaged in the education of our children," says Chancellor Michelle Rhee. "Our Web team continues to innovate and improve our Website, adding a wealth of video, features and vital information for our students, parents, teachers and school staff. I expect that this site and the way we use it to inform, communicate with and listen to our communities in order to support student achievement will set a standard for other school districts."

Improving education in DC is a top priority of the District's mayor, and communication was considered a key element of the revamp. "School changes, emergency information, et cetera is now published real time out to the constituents. So it's gotten great reviews," says Jeff Lloyd of RCK Corp. "This in turn has reduced the number of calls and requests made to the school system's offices since people are able to get the right information without being confused online or finding old data that shouldn't be out there anymore. Using the tool has really cleaned up the messaging of all the information."

McCrary adds, "We learned a lot of great lessons from the public schools implementation that we were then able to take and focus on for the development for the DC.gov agency sites. So within a 90-day time frame, we didn't just develop the DCPS site; we configured all the hardware, the networking, and completed the testing and the content creation at the same time. It was a huge effort, but we learned so much and we've had many successful launches since then on the agency side."

Conclusion

With the success of the DC public schools Web site in mind, OCTO is now in the midst of migrating all 125 sites to the new architecture and design and is about to launch the new mobile version as well. Concludes McCrary, "We're in a place now where we have been able to leverage the foundational work that has been done to convert sites to the new system. We are now working with over 60 agencies on a proven process so they can rework their information architecture and rewrite and migrate their content."

Another recent launch for OCTO was for the Executive Office of the Mayor: <http://mayor.dc.gov/>.



Headquartered in Washington DC, and with offices in Northern Virginia's technology corridor and New York's Capital Region, RCK Associates specializes in providing technology services, legacy modernization processes, and world-class consultants to the public and private sectors. RCK Associates primary mission is to provide its clients with the best practical solutions, teams and support needed to meet their strategic IT business process goals and objectives. For more information, please visit: www.RCKCORP.com

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