

Success Story

The European Court of Human Rights Streamlines Case Management Processes

Integrated workflow solution from Microsoft and Open Text radically enhances overall case management function of the Court

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has been an Open Text customer since 1998, having deployed the Open Text Document Management, eDOCS Edition™ and Knowledge Management systems as part of its overall Court Management Information System (CMIS). (See success story.) The open architecture and flexibility of the Open Text software supports the diverse range of applications that the Court utilizes on a day-to-day basis—including Microsoft® Exchange, the Microsoft Office Suite, and Microsoft SQL Server® databases, scanning and publishing applications.

The ECHR is part of the Council of Europe, an international intergovernmental organization that was established in 1949 to promote political democracy and human rights, social progress and European cultural identity continent wide. Currently, the Council is made up of 47 member states that have all signed

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John Hunter,
Head of IT Division,
The European Court of Human Rights..

up to the system of human rights protection under the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court has a jurisdiction over a European population of some 800 million people. CMIS provides the ECHR with an integrated case file and document management system to handle the operations of the Court more efficiently. It has completely transformed the Court's processes for handling incoming and outgoing information.

CMIS improves internal processes

Every application to the Court is entered into the CMIS database, including all the relevant information such as the name and contact details of the parties and the representatives, information on the registry lawyers who are responsible for the case, and judicial information about the case assignment. The different procedures or events related to a case are also recorded in the CMIS to ensure rapid access to all case details and all documents in the case file. The system also manages the Court's timetable.

The information about the applications can be automatically inserted into over 2,000 forms and model letters stored in Open Text Document Management, eDOCS edition™, which were developed to allow staff to automate the majority of the case management processes. As a result, the Court has been able to achieve substantial efficiency.

“The Open Text DM system enables our users to find all the documents easily, and it allows them to link documents to the case files,” says John Hunter, Head of IT Division for the ECHR. “The system also automatically indexes all of the documents enabling users to perform full text searches, thereby reducing the time that was previously spent looking for documents in the condensed folder filing structure. The DM system is also linked to publishing software, which allows us to easily publish documents and relevant information to the Internet site, making judgments available to the public. The fact that we can publish our judgments and make them widely available means that lawyers and applicants in all the 47 member states can refer to these cases and hopefully get justice in their own country.”

Industry

Legal/Government

Customer



Business Challenges

- Improve manual approval processes
- Speed up the processing of cases
- Improve efficiencies and productivity

Business Solution

In-house solution built with solutions from Microsoft and Open Text:

- Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS) Workflow Foundation
- Web services using the Microsoft .NET Framework
- Microsoft SQL Reporting Services
- Open Text Document Management, eDOCS Edition™

Business Benefits

- Streamlined case management processes
- Ease of use improves overall productivity
- Improved quality control
- Increased storage space

Exploding caseload required a streamlined approval process

Over the last few years the Court's caseload has exploded, with the number of applications to the Court growing from 14,000 in 1997 to over 54,000 in 2008. According to Hunter, 90 percent of the applications to the Court are committee cases, which he refers to as "no-hoppers," meaning inadmissible. However, these cases still need to be processed and a committee decision made. The problem was that the whole process was done manually and was costing the Court a considerable amount of administrative time. "In order to stay on top of the workload the Court really needs to process these committee cases very quickly. But unfortunately we have been bogged down by the methods we were using for dealing with the different approval routes," explains Hunter. "The approval process was laborious at best."

The manual process was executed like this: when an application reached the court, a lawyer created a committee note using one of the model letters and other information available in the CMIS. The note was saved in the Open Text DM system. The lawyer printed the committee note and gave the hard copy to his or her assistant, who would then open an Office Excel® spreadsheet to record the movement of all documents. The assistant would then enter the date that she received the note, the name of the lawyer responsible for the case, and the date that she sent it to the quality checker (QC). The QC would review the document, and if it was approved, would sign the hard copy and send it back to the legal assistant who would scan the document, save it as a PDF, and send it to the Section assistant. The Section assistant would then place the committee note onto the timetable with usually more than a hundred other committee notes that are sent to the judge for a final decision.

When the Section assistant received the decision back from the judge, she would open the CMIS and add the events for the case, for example, when it was communicated to the government for observations; when it was declared inadmissible into the court; and the date of the actual judgment itself. Finally, the committee note is archived in the DM system for future reference.

Recognizing that it was time to streamline its internal approval processes in order to cope with the exploding caseload, the Court's IT Department developed an in-house automated workflow solution using the Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server (MOSS) Workflow Foundation, four Web services using the Microsoft .NET Framework that allows the Court to seamlessly integrate its case management and document management databases, and a series of Microsoft SQL Reporting Services so users can easily see the status of all workflows at any point in time.

This new workflow solution will help manage the approval process for committee and chamber cases and provide the Court with a mechanism that radically streamlines its case management processes, further enhancing the productivity of the legal divisions.

Workflow helps operations flow smoothly

Hunter is rolling out the workflow solution progressively across the Court, starting with Section I, which, of the five Sections, has one of the busiest case loads in terms of applications. "We decided to pilot the workflow solution for the committee notes with Section I," he says, "so that we could see whether the streamlined processes made it easier for them to deal with the high volume of committee cases. After only two months in production, we have received very positive feedback from the user base. It has been a big success. It is saving us time, and we are generally very happy with it."

When a user wants to send a document on an approval route, they right click on the document name from within the Open Text DM system and choose the option "Start Workflow." This launches a Web service that identifies the case associated with the document in the CMIS and dynamically builds the route of the workflow based on the lawyers responsible and the supervisor for the case and the type of workflow they choose.

"When we profile the documents in the DM system, we put a unique key to the actual case ID in the CMIS," says Hunter. "This registered number acts to dynamically create a workflow based on the case ID. We have different workflow routes for different types of procedures. In this instance, we're using a method to approve committee cases."

Once the committee note has been created and the workflow launched, the Web service goes to the CMIS database to identify the QC and the Section assistant. The QC will review the note, ensuring accuracy. If the QC rejects the note, it is sent back through the workflow with comments to the originating lawyer.

"A comment could be: 'You need to consider the Article 8 complaint. Could you look at that and send it back to me?' The lawyer will then review the comments and make the appropriate revisions. So, not only are we facilitating the editing of the documents, we are facilitating quality control," says Hunter. "Also, it helps the supervisor monitor the overall quality control of the Court and the actual content of the committee notes themselves. That has been very useful."

The document is managed by the MOSS workflow module until it is finally approved. Once approved, another Web service calls a PDF server-based converter that automatically converts the Word file into PDF and calls another Web service that inserts an electronic signature into the PDF version. The final PDF document is locked down by the Open Text DM system and replaces the original Word version—thereby ensuring that the Court has only one copy of the final document. Where appropriate the system also inserts events, recording the actions and also the decision taken into the CMIS database. These events are used for information and statistical purposes.

"Now, with the electronic version, there is no paper movement," says Hunter. "The note doesn't need to go through other parties to reach the QC. The fact that the QC can make amendments immediately on the document is a big advantage. And the fact that at the end of the day the final document is a PDF with an electronic signature saves a considerable amount of time administratively and also in terms of quality checking and processes. There is no longer the need for users to enter data into Excel spreadsheets to track where a document is. It is now automatic, and we have a report that tells the user exactly what stage the note is at in the workflow. So we are freeing up time there as well."

Users from the different sections in the Courts can go to the Web-based workflow site and click on "Tasks" to find all outstanding workflows assigned to them. This way people are not bombarded with emails as the documents are routed through the workflow. "Our QCs, for instance, get hundreds and hundreds of documents to check," he says. "So instead of getting email notifications, they can look at their tasks in the workflow site. It is completely dynamic. Once a step is approved, the task is removed from their 'to-do' list. Another example is signing a letter. Again, it will appear as a task in the work list. The user can click on the link, which will open up the letter, and within Word they can click 'Sign.' Word does a call to the Web service, which closes the document to call the electronic signature solution, puts in the signature, converts the document to a PDF, and the task is complete."

Hunter adds, "We do have an option in the signed document task where a user can check a box if they want an email sent to someone to get a letter signed urgently. In that scenario, he or she does receive an email."

The solution also offers the ability to do batch approvals, another custom application that was written in-house by Hunter and his team. "In the task list, we created boxes beside each task," he says, "so a person could, for example, tick off the five committee notes that he has approved and then click "Sign." Those five documents are signed and will all be converted at one time into PDF."

The next step on the workflow route is putting the document onto the timetable. Previously, the Section assistant had to go into CMIS and place the committee note onto the timetable. She would have to look for the case, go into edit mode, append the timetable, and then add the new case into the timetable. This was very slow and time consuming. "Now, with the workflow module, the Section assistant can add to the timetable from within the CMIS," explains Hunter. "She can pick one or several documents, put them on the timetable, then put in the 'when' and the 'where' and click 'OK.'"

On-the-fly reporting and other advantages

Users can easily see the status of workflows via the SQL reporting tool that resides within a SharePoint Web page. "The reporting is completely dynamic. So if a person performs an action on the workflow and then hits the button to generate a report, they will get a complete snapshot at that exact second of the position of the workflow," says Hunter.

Storing PDF documents with an electronic signature has proven to be another key benefit to the ECHR. "Because we now have the legally signed document in PDF format in our DM system," explains Hunter, "we have the ability to send the document by electronic methods to governments or applicants. Before implementing the workflow, the documents were signed and then scanned back into the system with the signature in it. Now, this solution automatically converts the document to PDF and adds the signature. This means that the divisions aren't doing any scanning now if they need to send the file electronically."

"Another great benefit for us," adds Hunter, "is the fact that the electronically signed version is easy to archive. It also means that we do not necessarily

need to keep the paper version. This will be fantastic for us in the future because we archive more and more data. The important documents for the committee cases, such as the committee notes and the decisions, can be stored electronically and kept forever. We are also going to reduce the amount of space needed for hard copy retention of documents, so that is part of the plan as well."

Workflow solution receives a winning verdict

Initial feedback of the workflow solution has been extremely positive. "The system is so easy to use and so convenient. When we showed it to the registrars and upper management, they applauded!" says Hunter. "The overall user sentiment is that the system saves time, is easy to use, has led to less work for the legal assistants improving efficiencies, and is more streamlined than sending the committee notes by paper. Division assistants highlight the fact that the workflow solution automatically tracks the route of the workflow, and that the dynamic reports make it easy for the divisions and sections to find out what stage a workflow is at."

Future Plans

With the workflow solution for committee notes successfully underway, the Court now plans to begin piloting its workflow for chamber notes.

Another IT project underway at the Court involves bar coding technology. "When a new application arrives at the Court," explains Hunter, "we print out a series of bar codes that we send to the applicant asking them to stick the bar codes onto any letters or correspondence that they send to us relating to the case. When a letter arrives into the central office, we use bar code readers that automatically open up a screen in the CMIS and tell us the division, section, lawyer, and the last major events for the case. This way, the staff will know where to route the letter. It automatically adds an event into CMIS called 'last letter received' with a date stamp. Not only can we see when a letter was entered into CMIS, we can use the information as part of our archiving policy."

"We also put a bar code onto the case file," adds Hunter, "which is the physical folder that we use to store the documents in. This way we are able to track the circulation of a case file, so if it is loaned out, it is scanned so we can track where it is in the building."

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