

***iContact***<sup>®</sup>

**Collecting Client  
Information –  
Today's Essentials**

**7 STEPS**

**to making your  
e-service delivery program  
world class**

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## Executive Summary

“Next generation” e-government strategies at both federal and state levels are pushing agencies to rationalise and streamline their data collection practices.

In the first wave of e-government, agencies were quick to replace paper forms with online, but essentially static, formats. With mature technology solutions now available, it is time for agencies to consider the benefits of dynamic electronic information capture for e-service delivery. These benefits include “pain minimisation” for those required to provide information, and major business process efficiencies for agencies.

Seven critical success factors which agencies can use to make their e-service programs best practice have been identified. These can help agencies plan their next moves in this area and ensure their e-government obligations are met.

## E-Government – The First Wave

Many public sector agencies need to collect extensive data about their clients – to assess applications for benefits or grants, check compliance, develop policy and make decisions. Typically this data is collected via forms.

Many people hate completing government forms, finding them too complicated or taking too much time. Many also resent providing the same or similar information many times to different agencies or even to the same agency. A further overhead is the cost and time involved in collecting the required information and filling out the form, particularly for small businesses and community organizations.<sup>1</sup>

Rationalising and streamlining data collection processes has therefore been a priority for e-government strategies, both in Australia and overseas. An early step was the conversion of paper forms to electronic formats available on the Internet (typically an Adobe PDF document). Clients benefited from improved access to forms and agencies were able to reduce overheads associated with maintaining and distributing stocks of paper forms.

These kinds of forms were, however, essentially static in nature – they could not be returned online, offered users no “smarts” to help them with completion, and had to be processed by agencies in the same costly and labour-intensive way as paper.

## E-Government – The Next Stage

The benefits of moving to dynamic online information collection have long been recognised. Since 2002, Federal government agencies have been expected to provide forms on the Internet, as part of their [Online Information Service Obligations](#) (OSIOs). The policy encourages agencies to review their forms and application processes regularly “so that online completion can be introduced as soon as it is feasible and appropriate to do so”.<sup>2</sup>

The “next generation” e-government strategy [Responsive Government A New Service Agenda](#), announced by Special Minister of State Gary Nairn in March 2006, set more ambitious targets. By 2010:

- The number of forms will be halved

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1999, Federal government forms used by small businesses (less than 20 employees) must contain a time box indicating how long it took the user to complete the form, to monitor this overhead.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government Information Office *Online Information Service Obligations* Point 11 Forms for Public Use April 2002

- Dynamic forms will replace static forms, whether electronic or paper
- Forms will be available from a single entry point
- Information held by other agencies can be automatically entered
- Clients can complete the form electronically
- Clients can track progress online<sup>3</sup>

These targets will be a major challenge for many agencies. What are the secrets of success?

## **Seven Steps to Success**

### **1. Make it easy for your clients**

If the form is awkward or unclear you are more likely to capture incomplete or inaccurate data and end up with a frustrated client.

While no-one is ever likely to enjoy filling out a government form, the user experience can be made much less painful.

- Provide prompts at each point and help appropriate to the context to ensure that users are never confused about what to do next.
- Give immediate feedback to users through data validation when information is entered incorrectly or is incomplete.
- Use e-form “smarts” to guide the user through the form and, based on previous responses, present her/him with only those questions which need to be answered - what you see is what you answer.
- Pre-fill the form with information already held, allowing clients to check current details and eliminating the need to enter the same information over and over.
- Allow users to save the form to their own PC for completion and return later. Many users find it difficult to complete a form in a single session, while businesses and community organisations may need to involve a number of people in collecting the information and completing different parts.

### **2. Capture only what you need**

Make sure every field in your form is required and relevant to the way you use the data.

- Every piece of data is a cost, both to the person who provided it and to the agency. Be mindful of the effort involved in providing, collecting, storing and updating each piece of information. Will it be worth the time and trouble?
- Trace each piece of data to its application in the business process. What is it being used for and why? If you find that it is peripheral or irrelevant, consider whether you should continue to keep it.
- Don't collect information “just in case”. It irritates users (yes, they know) and may make them suspicious as to why the information is wanted.

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<sup>3</sup> Responsive Government A New Service Agenda p.9

### **3. Support e-service with the right skills and processes**

Identify and resolve any internal issues that will hinder efficient and effective use of the client data you capture.

- Design your data capture processes as part of the bigger, end-to-end business process. This will enable you to see where data could be shared or otherwise leveraged more effectively across the agency.
- Collect data at source, in the right standards and formats, to feed downstream business processes and back end systems efficiently. Assist users with drop-down selections and other aids for consistent data entry.
- Provide for human contact through a help desk or enquiry point to coach users through the process, if necessary. A small investment in support and training can encourage quick adoption and successful use of e-services.

### **4. Keep data current**

Making it easy for clients to update data, and for internal users to access and use will enhance the integrity of your data.

- Move to “self-service” for updating client information, wherever it is secure and practical to do so. Clients are best placed to know when their circumstances change and it is generally in their interests to ensure that information held by agencies is correct.
- Provide “one-stop” updates for information that is shared across the agency, such as addresses (sometimes described as “tell one, tell all”). This ensures that all areas have access to the most recent update.
- Assist clients to review and update their information during transactions. When displaying information already held by the agency, provide prompts to confirm that the information is correct. If the information needs to be changed, make it easy for the client with prompts, help and feedback.

### **5. Streamline for efficiency**

Make sure that all your supporting processes are cost effective and efficient so you deliver best value for money.

- Streamline forms design and deployment by using one of the new generation e-form tools. Business people can now be directly involved in the design, refinement and testing of these dynamic forms, with benefits in timeliness and quality.
- Link data collection with workflow management, routing service requests to the right business process for action, and then tracking progress through the system. This approach will be essential to meeting e-government obligations in the future.

### **6. In-house vs. outsourced**

If the capture and use of this data is core business keep it in-house. If not, consider outsourcing.

For many agencies, forms and business process design for data collection is not core business.

- The need to collect data may be intermittent or periodic, such as a grants campaign or survey.
- Staff are likely to be experts in their fields, focussed on business outcomes. They will not be knowledgeable in designing forms and the business processes for dealing with them efficiently and effectively, nor skilled data entry operators.
- IT support may be limited and unable to offer new or specialised technologies or support multiple IT platforms.

Data collection exercises can be a costly headache for these agencies. Based on its experience providing data capture services to government agencies, iContact has found that the full lifecycle cost<sup>4</sup> for a form ranges between:

- \$10 to \$50 each for a paper form;
- \$1 to \$5 each for an online web form managed in-house; and
- 20 cents to 50 cents each for an e-form solution managed by iContact.

As well as dramatic savings, outsourcing can be expected to deliver a superior service and solution to in-house delivery. This is because the service provider, operating in a competitive marketplace, can achieve economies of scale, optimum use of technologies and efficient use of expert staff not available to agencies where these activities are not core business.

### **7. Security – Priority 1!**

Holding client data opens your organisation to risk from security breaches. Make sure your security measures protect you and your client.

- Security risk multiplies when more and more information is collected and kept in more and more places, whether on paper or in computer systems. Rationalising your information collection and holdings reduces risk in reducing the number and variety of potential points for security breaches.
- New generation e-form tools provide built-in security measures and integrate with electronic signatures, user authentication and identity management systems, allowing agencies to “step up” security protections.

## **iContact Australia**

iContact Australia provides fully hosted and managed business services, including data capture and processing. Based in Canberra, iContact Australia has particular expertise in meeting the specialised requirements of government agencies, such as security and privacy.

As well as professional and competitively priced business services, iContact Australia offers design and consulting services, including paper and electronic forms and business process design.

Give us a call on 02 6271 0111 to discuss how we could help you achieve best practice in the collection of client information.

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<sup>4</sup> Encompassing all aspects of production, storage, distribution, receipt and processing