

## Case Study:

### How Government Agencies Can Automate Document Workflow and E-filing: The Postal Rate Commission's Award-Winning Web Site

Even in tech-savvy federal agencies, the technology systems that combine as threads of a coherent, integrated information management policy can eventually fray into interoperability, leaving frazzled ends and frustrated users.

The Postal Rate Commission, an independent federal regulatory commission responsible for the oversight of U.S. Postal Service rates, fees, mail classifications and other mail services, was burdened with a disjointed, inadequate and inefficient data management system. The Postal Rate Commission typically handles millions of pages of documents generated from legal hearings on proposed postal rate increases, mail classification changes, post office closings, rule-making cases and customer complaints. In the course of these legal proceedings, hundreds of thousands of documents are filed by, and must be shared between, Commission members, staff, and interested parties. This sharing of information eventually results in formal hearings and then in recommendations, made by the Postal Rate Commission to the Governors of the U.S. Postal Service.

Documents covering the same issues are stored together in a docket. The Dockets Database holds information about opinions and recommended decisions, orders, proposed and final rules, testimony, motions, rulings, interrogatories, answers to interrogatories, library references, copies of public comments on proposed rules, and additional related information. To illustrate the logistical challenges of managing dockets in paper format, consider these metrics. The official set of papers explaining the facts of a particular case, together with supporting legal arguments can include up to 35,000 pages of documents, all of which are tied to one or more dockets. In the course of being distributed to all

interested parties, if the documents were strictly in hard-copy format, the originals might be physically duplicated up to 150 times. With just one case, this photocopying process could inflate the physical quantity of paper associated with that case to over 5 million physical pages – a nightmare in document distribution, sharing and management. The Postal Rate Commission estimated that its investment in the new system would save up to \$150,000 per year, quickly paying for the cost of the system in savings.

Over time, the Postal Rate Commission had automated its Dockets Database, producing a large electronic repository containing digital images of paper documents as well as documents already in electronic format. The database, however, was fractured into several components: a large legacy database containing documents of cases filed prior to January 1996 and amounting to several hundred thousand pages; a newer, post-1995 docket tracking system; and a Web-based database with considerable redundancy within multiple systems. The four main problems with the overall system were an inefficient document workflow, redundant storage of documents between multiple databases, inability to conduct simultaneous multi-database searches, and unreliable software resulting in unacceptable downtimes. In addition to facing an ever-increasing volume of documents to handle, the Postal Rate Commission was plagued by workflow inefficiencies and concerns over data accessibility, quality, completeness and consistency within the existing docket management system. Additionally, like other federal agencies, the Postal Rate Commission was required to modify its operations in accordance with the 1998 Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA). The GPEA requires that federal agencies

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allow the option of submitting information or transacting business with an agency electronically. The deadline for implementation of the electronic option had been set as October 21, 2003.

Faced with these problems, the Postal Rate Commission decided to break the work down into two phases. The first phase was providing access to stored docket information via the Postal Rate Commission Web site ([www.prc.gov](http://www.prc.gov)) to all interested and, in some cases, authorized parties, while reducing overall operating costs associated with maintaining the docket management system.

In the second phase, the Postal Rate Commission would implement an electronic filing system to provide a front-end interface on the Postal Rate Commission's Web site for adding documents to the docket management system. The key requirement in this project was to create a system that would not cause undue financial burden or complex computer configuration requirements on the part of interested parties external to the Postal Rate Commission. Parties would have the option of postponing switching to the new system to a future date, at which time compliance would be mandatory. By reducing the routing of physical documents between interested parties, an updated efilg system would also assist the Postal Rate Commission in fulfilling its obligations under the terms of the GPEA.

IE Discovery, Inc., an information management consulting and document automation software company based in Austin, Texas, responded to the Postal Rate Commission's Request for Proposal. As an application service provider (ASP) and independent software vendor, IE Discovery offered a number of years of experience in the areas of document imaging, document workflow management, and database and Web applications development. IE Discovery proposed to design and build a custom Web-based application to meet the Postal Rate Commission's requirements. After reviewing the IE Discovery proposal and evaluating alternatives that included

upgrading to new Web services offered by current docket management system vendors, the Postal Rate Commission decided to award the phase one docket management automation project known as Operating Online to IE Discovery.

The first step in the project was generating a detailed, exhaustive document flow diagram to capture as many specifics as possible about the paths and procedures documents went through in the course of being filed, processed, distributed, archived into and retrieved from the Postal Rate Commission's docket management system. This diagram provided the foundation for the two critical and complementary pieces of the total solution:

1. a representation of streamlined workflow procedures designed to improve the productivity of Postal Rate Commission staff and improve the public accessibility of information stored in the docket management system
2. specific technical requirements forming the design blueprint for a sophisticated new, database-enabled docket management system interface at the Postal Rate Commission's Web address, [www.prc.gov](http://www.prc.gov)

Developing and testing a pilot Operating Online application was the next stage of the process. The Postal Rate Commission's docket management system project presented a number of constraints and technical stipulations. A core function of the new docket tracking database was storing references to every document in the system, unifying the Postal Rate Commission's legacy databases. Other requirements included diverse search mechanisms (full-text, indexed, proximity and fuzzy search), an interface for browsing documents, and the ability to print the complete source document directly from the Postal Rate Commission's Web site. The new search interface provided one easily accessible entry point to all documents across the entire document management system, with greatly improved speed and accuracy. The pilot was required to launch on a strict timetable, to provide a fully functional, stable implementation in

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time for a critical upcoming postal rate proceeding on the Postal Rate Commission's schedule. The pilot application developed by IE Discovery was tested with a selection of cases and launched on time, within budget.

The success of the phase one docket management system project was measured by the pilot application's performance in the context of the Postal Rate Commission's next rate case. With the new system in place as a final solution, the Postal Rate Commission awarded IE Discovery the second project: development of a new, electronic filing system to be known as Filing Online. The Filing Online application was conceived as a means of satisfying the paperwork reduction goals of the GPEA, as well as reducing the cost and increasing the efficiency of participation for interested parties involved in Postal Rate Commission proceedings. Significant savings would result from eliminating two time-consuming and costly steps, digital imaging and optical character recognition (OCR) of physical originals, from the document filing workflow. Additionally, a Web-based electronic filing interface would allow filings to be posted without confusion or delay, with SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) data encryption and additional safeguards protecting the system against unauthorized access.

IE Discovery designed a secure Web interface, accessible from the Postal Rate Commission's Web site, to allow authorized users of Filing Online to log into the system, initiate a new electronic filing tied to one or more dockets, provide additional details about the filing (such as document title, comments, etc.), and finally, upload the document to be filed. Each file uploaded is electronically branded to indicate its "Submitted" status, as well as the date and time of the submission and a unique identifying number. Upon review and acceptance of a new filing by Postal Rate Commission staff, the source document is made available on the Postal Rate Commission's Web site, and both bibliographic information and the full text of the document are searchable. When all of the filings for a day have been completed, an email notice is

automatically distributed to those Filing Online system users who have requested notification. Document Alert users can request notification of documents fulfilling their rule requirements, distributed at thirty-minute intervals. January 7, 2003, was the effective date for making electronic filing the standard procedure for filing official documents.

For its initiative in tackling a difficult document automation project with a well-designed, cost-effective solution, the Operating Online system earned the Postal Rate Commission a Government Technology Leadership Award.

Subsequently, when the U.S. Postal Service undertook the automation of their paper-based rate case litigation process, the development of a custom Web-based Rate Case Management System (RCMS) was awarded to IE Discovery. Because the majority of documents destined for the U.S. Postal Service's new RCMS originated from the Postal Rate Commission's document repository, IE Discovery was a logical choice as the solution provider to build an electronic data interchange gateway between the two entities' document repositories, as well as a number of additional document workflow and automation systems for the U.S. Postal Service.