Going Paperless in the Public Sector:
How Agencies Can Ensure Business Continuity

In an unpredictable scenario like the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens are more reliant than ever on services from state and local governments. What is not always as obvious in these situations is the same disruptions that challenge individuals also pose serious obstacles for government agencies — especially when it comes to business continuity. In the public sector, it's hard to get citizens the help they need if you can’t efficiently process applications, gain approvals or collect signatures. In this Q&A, Andrew Kok, Regional Delivery Manager, Professional Services at DocuSign, discusses the challenges governments face in unexpected circumstances when they rely heavily on paper. He also explains how digitized processes help ensure operations remain running in difficult times.

During an unplanned event, how do paper-heavy processes keep governments from carrying out their missions?
The biggest challenge is not being able to fulfill your obligations. Think of the people who lost their jobs in the wake of COVID-19 — they went for weeks without unemployment benefits because their states couldn’t handle the deluge of claims. Think of the time it takes to process contracts, liability waivers and NDAs when an agency procures supplies and services for disaster response. You need to act quickly, but paper slows you down. On a smaller scale, what happens if there is a fire, and a room full of paper documents goes up in flames? Can the government continue business as usual without those records?

Paper also increases expenses. On average, it costs $36 to conduct a paper transaction, including printing, copying, mailing, getting documents signed and other activities.1 And that doesn’t even include the cost of storage. For example, the state of North Dakota calculates it costs $520.73 per year to maintain just one drawer in a five-drawer file cabinet.2

How do digital systems for document management help governments fulfill their missions during a crisis or unexpected scenario?
When you replace paper processes with digital ones, you can quickly get aid to the right people, direct supplies to the right places and make necessary payments. You can also streamline internal processes. We have seen this during the current COVID-19 pandemic. With so many people working from home, something as simple as mail distribution has created serious delays. Someone must go to the office to collect the mail. Then it has to be distributed somehow so people can perform their jobs — sending invoices, getting approvals for payments, signing contracts. When you digitize those functions, employees can access the documents they need and complete their work from virtually anywhere.

If a government agency wants to eliminate paper processes, what are some good first steps?
It’s best to start with the simple changes that bring benefits to as many people as possible and can be implemented quickly. Timecards are a good example of this. By digitizing that process you can eliminate the need for employees to fill out paper forms, pass them around for signatures and turn them in. Digitizing contracts also makes it much easier to procure items from vendors. On the citizen-facing side, digitizing unemployment claims would have a positive impact on many people, as would digitizing the process for obtaining various kinds of permits. In an emergency, you don’t worry about creating the perfect scenario for digital adoption. By accomplishing a few quick wins, you can start building a foundation for future change.

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