Fast and Secure:
Supercharging digital government services with e-signatures

At the heart of digital services is e-signatures. Without the ability to sign and process a document electronically, remotely and — above all — securely, organizations could never embark on the kinds of digital transformation efforts that are crucial in today's hybrid work environment.

Digital services are changing the way state and local governments do business. They're enabling agencies to provide constituent services faster and more effectively, in a way that meets evolving consumer needs and demands. And increasingly, digital services are helping organizations better manage their own internal processes and making government more efficient.

"We are starting to see agencies building new capabilities to better manage their own operations," says Mary Ellen Power, vice president of marketing at OneSpan, which provides secure customer journey solutions to private and public organizations. Digital services and applications, Power says, "are helping provide better services for customers and businesses."

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Legacy paper-based signatures are time-consuming, decentralized and inherently inefficient. Organizations waste incalculable time tracking down relevant participants and bringing documents to their attention. Fragmented, siloed systems mean there's a risk of documents being lost or delayed.

The right e-signature technology allows agencies to properly sign, process and manage permits, financial information, personnel records, contracts and other important documents no matter where constituents and employees may be. E-signatures streamline workflows and future-proof these processes against any crises or disruptions that may occur.

BEFORE GOING PAPERLESS
The following are important points for any organization to consider when adopting an electronic signature solution:

Find an experienced provider. With dozens of companies offering e-signature solutions, finding a provider is not hard. But it's important to work with a vendor you can trust. Look for a company with a proven record of success.

Work in the cloud. A cloud-based solution is vastly more flexible and scalable than software installed on premises. Cloud tools also are more reliable and resilient during disruptions, and they more easily support software revisions and security updates.

Look for group signing capabilities. An e-signature platform should make it easy for a single representative to authenticate on behalf of a work group. In the paper-based world, organizations often have work groups of half a dozen people, any one of whom can represent that group and sign off on a document. Digital signatures should support this same capability.

Insist on role-based security. Find a solution that allows you to control user access based on specific job functions. Limiting access ensures individuals can only see documents relevant to their positions.

Communicate easily en masse. With repeated processes, such as annual forms all employees must sign, organizations should not have to manually create a transaction for each individual. Rather, a one-time action in the system should create that workflow automatically.

SUCCEEDING WITH AN E-SIGNATURE SOLUTION

The state of Michigan recently adopted an e-signature solution from OneSpan. In a remarkable stroke of fortune, after two years of development, Michigan launched its new e-signature capability in March 2020 — just in time to meet the unprecedented remote-work demands of the coronavirus pandemic. Suddenly, paper-based processes were no longer just inefficient, they were essentially impossible.

"Remote work meant that people stopped getting the internal mail at their physical address," says Richard DeMello, the e-signature administrator with the Michigan Department

of Technology, Management and Budget." This was a new challenge that was added onto the situation that we really didn't see coming."

Core to the state's implementation was the development of a "service charter," which spelled out the basics of the new system, who could use it and how. Employees across state government were asked to sign onto the charter as a first step toward participating in the system. To ramp up engagement, DeMello rolled out internal marketing in the form of a newsletter and email campaign to various government offices and agencies. He also put together a number of "ease of use" demonstrations to help generate buy-in and increase employees' comfort level with the mechanics of e-signing. Michigan also implemented virtual training for new users, in 15- and 30-minute blocks, and provided a help desk for any problems.

In its first nine months, the system processed more than 9,600 transactions. At least 15 state departments are using the solution, including Central Procurement.

Michigan has seen significant cost savings, according to DeMello. Streamlining signatures "can reduce mailing costs as well as labor costs, because people hopefully can spend their time on something better than running around getting signatures."

Processes requiring signatures have also become measurably faster.

"The speed-to-sign is amazing," DeMello says. "In a lot of cases, business stops until the document is signed. Now they can get stuff back much more quickly."

Electronic signatures intrinsically support an audit trail, with the automatic creation of PDF verifications — a vast improvement over tracking paper documents.

Crucially, e-signatures enabled Michigan officials to keep business moving during the

unprecedented disruptions of the pandemic. And the system will provide greater resilience and business continuity in the event of any future crises.

LESSONS LEARNED

For other government organizations interested in adopting e-signatures, DeMello offers a few important pieces of advice.

First, he says, leaders in charge of implementing e-signature systems should make a point of using the new tools themselves. That not only helps managers understand any potential pain points or challenges, it also encourages greater buy-in across agencies.

It's important to train on the fundamentals. While e-signature systems may have a variety of bells and whistles, "we focus our initial training on the basic features that are used 90 percent of the time," DeMello says.

Michigan's thoughtful implementation has helped make e-signatures an effective tool in support of more efficient government processes, says OneSpan's Power.

"They set out a set of best practices," she says. "They listened to their customer, which was the government employee. They put together an incredible set of resources and templates, and they really focused on how to make this easy."

With the right approach, as Michigan has shown, e-signatures will become an indispensable part of digital transformation efforts for any government organization. The solution offers an auditable, secure and cost-efficient way to process vital documents, streamlining public sector workflows and making state and local government operations more effective.

This piece was written and produced by the Government Technology *Content Studio, with information and input from OneSpan.*