

Miami-Dade County Clerk of Courts Online Case Search System 2016 NACo Achievement Award Application

Abstract of the Program

Miami-Dade Clerk of Courts implemented our in-house developed Online Case Search system in two phases in 2015, allowing for electronic court records and documents to be viewed by the public, Bar and governmental agencies free of charge 24/7. Constituents are now able to search for, view and print electronic court documents from their own home or office. Public access needs versus privacy issues were carefully programmed into the system in accordance with Florida Supreme Court administrative orders.

The system was developed to allow for dynamic viewing and printing of information and to transition previously registered users to utilize a system which is role-based with secured access to documents. This included the acceptance and online processing of notarized access agreements and a new self-registration process. Methodical conversion processes required development of extensive communications plans to make a smooth transition for previously registered users.

Miami-Dade Clerk of Courts has demonstrated benefits to the community in reduced impacts to air quality given the need for fewer cars required to drive to local courthouses, and reduced public wait-times due to a reduction in the number of people waiting in-line. This was substantiated by the millionth document viewed online occurring after 2 months in operation!

The Problem or Need for the Program

The Online Case Search System was developed to satisfy three needs. These needs are:

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- 1) to promote access, transparency and convenience for the public, Bar and governmental agencies through a pleasant, easy to use and free of charge interface;
- 2) to develop an online self-registration process while minimizing impacts to existing registered users through detailed conversion and communication plans; and
- 3) to comply with the provisions of Florida Supreme Court Administrative Orders (AOSC) 14-19 and amended 15-18.

Since 2008, Miami-Dade Clerk of Courts has provided Internet access to court records and documents solely to registered Bar members for family cases via Tyler Technologies' Odyssey Public Access system. Bar members were able to view Probate cases in Odyssey Public Access as of 2012. The general public still needed to travel to the court house to view these court records and electronic documents. With AOSC 14-19 and 15-18 being issued, the conversion of the remainder of the Civil Court divisions' case information and documents to the Odyssey system, and in support of paperless operations, we launched development of a new system to meet all stated needs.

The Description of the Program

In order to facilitate public access, the Clerk's Office needed to identify not only the civil electronic court records and documents that would be available online but also associate them by access level for different types of users such as anonymous, registered, attorney, and governmental agency. Once these user types and document access levels were identified, a method was needed to verify and process each user.

The Clerk's Office team designed a complex database structure to keep track of the Access Security Matrix (ASM) as defined by the AOSC 14-19 and 15-18. The ASM maintains the relationships of the various case types, the user roles that

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have access to them, and what type of access level each are allowed to have. By having the ASM in a database structure, the Clerk's Office has the flexibility to control access for different user roles in the system globally and to be able to react to changes in the ASM with minimal coding required.

With the ASM structure in place to control document viewing rights, the next challenge was user authentication and user profile management. The Clerk's Office was able to leverage the use of the existing user registration system, called Premier Services, and expanded its functionality. Premier Services was originally developed to register users for the purpose of viewing official records. The Clerk's Office re-engineered the system to support multiple user types, check user profile permissions against the ASM, and expand the viewing capabilities to include electronic court documents from all Civil Court divisions.

Users are able to search for cases by a "Standard" search which restricts criteria to: 1) local or state case number; 2) party name; or 3) hearing date.

"Advanced" searches are limited to only those users who have registered with the Clerk's Office and expand the search criteria extensively, including new search fields such as Bar number or recorded book/page and docket filters such as type, second party name, filing date range, judicial section or case type.

The system supports both anonymous and authenticated users. If a user is not logged-in, they are treated as an "Anonymous" user. In accordance with the ASM Anonymous users are limited to only "Standard" searches. If a registered user logs into the system, they are identified by their user profile and have access to "Advanced" searches. When a user accesses a case file, the system checks each document against the ASM for the user's role. The ASM will determine what information the user role is authorized to view for the selected case type, such as case style, parties, dockets, documents, etc. If the user is an attorney trying to access documents that are restricted to the "attorney on record", the system will then compare the user's bar number to that of the bar number(s) for the

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attorney(s) on record on the case file. Without a match, the attorney would be restricted to the access level granted to any registered user.

All registered users need to pass a verification process to confirm their identity. Once a user registers on the system, they are prompted with a message which explains the provisions of AOSC 15-18, requiring that all registered users submit a notarized Registered Access Request form. The user is provided with a link to a pre-populated form from within the account manager function. Requestors are treated as “Anonymous” users until the notarized form is submitted and accepted by the Clerk’s Office. Once a requestor notarizes their access form, they may upload the completed form through the online account manager function, which is accessible upon logging into the system.

In order to manage the processing of the thousands of notarized forms that were being submitted, the team developed a specialized application called “Plus Manager”. When a requestor uploads their notarized form, the processing team is notified via email with a link to the user’s profile within “Plus Manager”. The processing team can view the access request form and verify that the form was properly filled out and notarized. Once verified, the user is then assigned their user role based on business rules. If the requestor is an attorney, the system will verify the attorney bar number against a file downloaded from the Florida Bar on a daily basis to make sure the requestor is an active attorney and that the information from the Bar matches the requestor’s information. Once the verification process is completed, the requestor will receive an automated email notifying them that their account was approved and is now active. If the requestor does not pass the verification process, they will receive an email with the reason their account was not approved and their access will remain that of an anonymous user.

Finally, communications with user communities were vital to this project. Information regarding this program was published via the Internet, via newspaper articles and via target emails. Over 12,000 emails were sent to local Bar members

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and staff of governmental agencies. User Guides and answers to Frequently Asked Questions were developed and published on the Clerk's Portal. A link on each document image allows system users to identify issues with image quality or inadvertent release of confidential information. Training was conducted internally to ensure that the Clerk's Office was able to handle user queries and requests for assistance on a timely basis.

The Use of Technology

The Online Case Search system was developed using cutting edge technology that was available to the Clerk's Office. One of the main priorities was to make the user experience as pleasant as possible. The Clerk's Office used the JQuery library which provided the ability to manipulate the HTML document as well as handling each event on the client side in order to increase the speed of the response time and relieve stress from the servers on high volume requests. On the front-end, HTML 5 was enabled to utilize more elegant forms, improve accessibility across browsers, and have consistent code across the application and client-side databases in order to store temporary user related information. To make the application scalable from phone to desktop using the single code base, the Bootstrap framework was used, which also supported keeping a uniform appearance through the entire application.

The application is hosted on a load balanced server farm in order to distribute the load between the two web servers. These web servers are running Microsoft Windows Server 2008 R2 with IIS 7.5.

The data layer is running on Microsoft Windows Server 2008 R2 and Microsoft SQL 2008 R2. The database contains a series of stored procedures that handles the processing of data and sends the application the result.

Server-side web application ASP.NET framework 4.5 and C# (C Sharp) were used to produce dynamic web pages.

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Finally, security was introduced into the system through several means:

- use of “CAPTCHA” for anonymous users to prevent “bots” from data mining;
- use of forms authentication to ensure that URLs are unable to be cut and pasted into a browser without logging in as a registered user;
- use of IP address logging for all users viewing court documents to quickly identify those who may be attempting data mining; and
- use of firewall rules to limit access to database and application servers.

The Cost of the Program

This project was fully developed in-house. The software licenses and hardware support for running the database platform and the developer .Net toolkit were previously purchased for other development projects and excluded from program cost estimates. The application developed for the program is hosted on the same server as the current Clerk of Courts web page. The estimated costs for this program were based on programming personnel hours. There were a total of 2,447 hours spent by the project team. The total development team cost, based on a standard hourly rate, was estimated at \$177,760.00.

There was a single purchase of an online document viewer in order to display multipage .TIF and .PDF documents. The cost for this software was \$1,800.00.

The production support of the application is currently handled by our Service Center that was trained with a small demo of about two hours. There was no need to hire more personnel in order to support this new project. The total personnel cost for the training was estimated at \$1,000.00.

The development cost of the project was estimated at \$180,000.00 including the personnel resources, software and additional materials used for demos, training, and meetings. This estimated cost does not include administrative effort required to review implications of AOSC 14-19 and AOSC 15-18 for the Clerk’s

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Office, or the costs of the prior software development of the Premier Services system on which the self-registration component of the Online Case Search system was built.

The Results/Success of the Program

In just over 2 months from the release of the Online Case Search system on the Clerk's website, 1 million electronic documents had been viewed. Since the release of the first phase in June 2015 and the second phase in November 2015, over 4.5 million documents have been viewed as of March 2016. Over 80,000 individual anonymous users have viewed documents since the system's initial release. Imagine the challenges for the Clerk's Office, if an additional 80,000 requests needed to be handled in person? Imagine the effort required if 4.5 million documents needed to be printed? Imagine the number of trees it would take to supply the paper?

If each of the anonymous users referenced above needed to park for 2 hours (at \$1.50/hour) at one of the Courthouse locations in order to request documents, the Online Case Search system saved them over \$240,000. If a ream of paper costs \$4.00, the Online Case Search system has saved the Clerk's Office well over \$36,000 in the first nine months of implementation.

In supporting registration requests, almost 9,000 notarized forms have been received since the system's initial release. Of noteworthy mention, most of the notarized forms have been processed within 1-2 business days. The Clerk's Service Center was trained on procedures to support attorneys, staff of governmental agencies and members of the general public who may have had issues with the Online Case System. Calls to the Service Center have been minimal with issue resolution on a same day basis.

One objective of the Clerk's deployment was to minimize the inadvertent release of confidential information. Through use of online redaction software, extensive

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internal testing and document quality assurance efforts, since the initial release of the system in June 2015, the percentage of instances of inadvertent release against the number of images viewed remains statistically at zero percent.

Finally, the flexibility designed into the system allows for configuration to support any changes issued by the Florida Supreme Court with minimal coding required. In 2016, a new user role has been identified by the Florida Supreme Court and the effort to support this new role will take minutes to implement, with less than one week required to test and approve the new configuration.

The Worthiness of the Award

The introduction of the Online Case Search system gave the public, Bar and governmental agencies the ability to view court case information and electronic documents from their own home or office, bypassing the need to come to a local courthouse to get the information. With AOSC 14-19 and 15-18 providing the legal authorization to proceed, Miami-Dade County Clerk of Courts' implementation expanded access to the general public with a focus on a pleasant self-registration process and dynamic viewing and printing experience, while allowing for flexibility to swiftly support future directives from the Florida Supreme Court.

By creating two separate search paths, users are able to find individual cases as provisioned by AOSC 14-19 and 15-18. However, by also enabling advanced search criteria for registered users, the Clerk's Office is able to support expanded searches of interest to attorneys and governmental agencies.

By developing a complete user request management process, notarized forms have been successfully processed with the majority within 1-2 business days of receipt. This allowed for swift delivery of access to registered users. By developing User Guides and other documentation made available on the Clerk's Portal, users may learn the system on their own, but may also call to receive

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assistance from the Clerk's fully-trained Service Center with any issues that they may have with the system.

By implementing an extensive communications plan with a significant target population, users were kept informed through emails and web publication using a phased approach.

Cost savings to both the public and the Clerk's Office are already substantiated. In nine months of operation, constituent savings exceeded the development cost of the project.