

# How eService Creates a More Accessible Government

*Six Ingredients for Meeting the Government Challenge:  
Doing More with Less.*

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## ***Executive Summary***

### ***eGovernment's Challenge***

Providing huge volumes of rapidly changing information to a large number of people is an enormous challenge to government agencies.

The Internet created new information channels to better serve citizens. The formation of these channels while providing unlimited reach and easy access to information also produced unintended consequences, which are straining rather than relieving staff and budgets.

Internet-ready citizens expect government agencies to be fully versed and up-to-speed on the information superhighway. As a result, web site visitors have high expectations for information quality. While many sites attempt to provide relevant information, most fall short as the volume of changing information can be overwhelming and unmanageable. As a consequence, if they do not find satisfactory information on a Web site, citizens flood the agencies with emails and telephone calls.

In an environment of needing to do more with less the Internet has strained both departmental and IT resources. Increased requirements stretch staff resources to handle inquiries through these new channels. In the meantime, citizens remain frustrated with slow response times and the inability to quickly track down the information they are seeking.

### ***The Answer***

Balancing constituency satisfaction with staff demands and budget requirements is a trick for government information professionals. There is a solution. Agencies can "give power to the people" with an *easy-to-implement, affordable eService solution that will cut costs and reduce workloads.*

Proven and dependable eService technology powering effective online "citizen support centers" is available and now used by more than 1,100 private and public sector agencies, businesses and industries. Citizens find the information they need in a self-service environment, 24/7, in lieu of contacting the government office or call center with expensive, labor-intensive interactions.

Given the opportunity, citizens are happy to serve themselves. In fact, independent research by Doculabs, an analyst firm based in Chicago, reported that the self-service index for government agencies using RightNow Web was approximately 84 percent in the first quarter of 2001. In other words, those visitors to government

Web sites found the information they needed without human intervention 84 percent of the time without having to send an email or call for assistance.

Along with self-service comes a corresponding cost savings. In the private sector, according to Forrester Research, providing service via the telephone costs \$33 per incident and answering email costs \$10, web self-service is a bargain at \$1/incident.

For example, the Social Security Administration (SSA) received more than 65,000,000 calls and 132,000 emails a year. The agency's eService strategy makes routine but timely information about Social Security more accessible in order to better serve citizens, while reducing the flurry of inbound calls and emails, and increasing staff costs.

With an eService solution in place, site visitors can easily find answers to most of their questions and even ask the SSA to automatically notify them if a solution is altered. And with Web-based self-service helping more citizens with most of their queries, the SSA handles 12,500 fewer calls each day and is expecting a daily savings of \$62,500 – more than \$16 million annually!  
<http://ssa-custhelp.ssa.gov/cgi-bin/ssa.cfg/php/enduser/home.php>

## ***Six Key Ingredients for Citizen Satisfaction and Cost Savings***

Other government agencies using Internet eService technology include the Administration for Children and Families, the Air Reserve Personnel Center, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the US Postal Service and Army Knowledge Online (the US Army's intranet service).

These agencies are meeting the challenge of providing superior citizen service with limited financial resources by applying six key ingredients essential to an effective eService strategy.

***1. Accurate and Timely Information:*** Local, state and federal agencies have a large quantity of information to be delivered to sometimes millions of people, so giving citizens what they want when they want it can be nearly impossible – especially in an environment as urgent as the Internet.

Traditionally, agencies made information such as service descriptions, phone numbers, calendars and news releases available on the Internet, but an information dump is not very effective. The needs of such a vast audience are complex and varied requiring the ability to provide specific content on an individualized basis.

The most precise, compelling and meaningful information is dynamic in nature and continually updated. Leading eService solutions use knowledge bases that “learn” with each citizen inquiry. Updated information, such as a policy change, is then automatically organized based on citizens interactions. No staff time is required to update or organize the information. Meaningful information is given higher priority and easier access, while less relevant items can be stored away or eliminated completely.

Constituents easily find quality information in a timeframe that is convenient. Empowered to serve themselves at any time day or night, information seekers are no longer bound to government business hours. Visitors can make inquiries according to *their* schedules.

Convenience and answer access just a few mouse clicks away mean that self-service rates for well-designed eService solutions reach 70 to 90 percent, meaning additional costly and labor-intensive assistance is not needed. Disabled, elderly and homebound citizens, too, are better served by governments, which make themselves more open and accessible via eService self-help solutions.

**2. Customer Driven Content:** Many knowledge bases are manually constructed and maintained, meaning that each item in the knowledge base is created and organized by a subject matter expert. This effort takes an enormous amount of time and financial resources, and constant vigilance is required to keep the information from becoming obsolete. Manual knowledge items typically are based upon what the agency deems important to its constituents, conversely, customer driven content typically has a higher relevancy equating to a greater self-service rate.

Self-learning, self-maintaining knowledge bases are sensitive to current, high-priority issues. For example, if many citizens are going to an agency Web site for a particular piece of useful information, that information will be more *visible because of the real interest of Internet users as measured by their interactions, not because government experts determined what should be accessible.*

For example, in January 2001, Pitney Bowes customers were most interested in how the USPS rate hike was going to affect them. The two to three days following the increase, Pitney Bowes, known widely for its postage services, received almost 90,000 visitors on

its site – nearly 1,000 percent more than when postal rates went up previously. In the past, call center inquiries would have languished with that kind of traffic increase, but Pitney Bowes, with experience from the last rate increase, seeded the site with anticipated information. Because postal increase questions were of primary importance *to customers at that time*, the information was made highly visible on the Web site. Customers were happy to have immediate answers, and the call center staff was greatly relieved of repetitive queries. The savings to Pitney Bowes in one day of deflected phone and labor costs was estimated at \$206,000.

Government Web sites using high-quality eService solutions put citizens in control, allowing them to choose their own paths for finding meaningful data. According to a paper recently published by the META Group on electronic government strategies, “the confidence a constituent feels while transacting with government is in proportion to the level of independence exercised.”

**3. Easy to Administer:** Government agencies may thoroughly understand the need for a Web site that is responsive and provides quality content, but perceive that staff and financial resources are too limited to reach those goals.

Innovative eService solutions can be quickly and seamlessly implemented at considerably less expense compared to less-automated applications. Citizens have the immediate advantage of serving themselves while the agency enjoys the benefit of avoiding costly updates and maintenance.

The Social Security Administration implemented a self-learning knowledge base with 284 seed items, and within two weeks, more than 200 new items were captured and added based on visitor inquiries. The result was an extremely rapid, low-cost knowledge base that effectively met the needs of a very large user population. In addition, because citizens typically have the same questions when they visit an agency site, the Web draws from a central repository of information to provide immediate solutions. Thousands of inquiries can be answered simultaneously.

To reduce the impact on government IT resources when installing eService solutions, agencies can use external hosting services of the software vendor. Hosting reduces the demand on IT staff and provides the agency with upgrades and maintenance. Web-based self-service software can also be leveraged as a tool for internal agency communications and as a way to consistently and thoroughly train employees.

**4. *Must Free Up Time:*** Clearing out the backlog of phone calls and emails with the help of leading eService solutions gives agency employees more time to focus on more specialized citizen inquiries.

Although the vast majority of queries are dealt with via the easy-to-access, powerful knowledge base, less predictable matters are addressed through special features such as managed email. With managed email, an auto response is instantly sent to the citizen. Meanwhile, a tracking system using configurable workflow rules routes the question to the most qualified staff person for follow-up, saving tax dollars and time for both the agency and the citizen.

The Colorado Department of Revenue (CDR) recently deployed Web-based eService to help reduce long wait times and allow people 24/7 access to important tax information. Before installing eService software, the agency relied on staff to field calls, and set up an email junction to respond to the 2,000 to 3,000 annual online queries. Callers, often with basic questions, waited for assistance, and email backed up waiting for manual responses.

Within a week of implementation, CDR shifted staff energy and limited resources to the more individual needs of citizens contacting the office. Avoiding traditional routes for addressing a significant number of queries meant that the CDR resolves many issues in weeks rather than months. Resolution is accelerated with the help of incident tracking features of the solution, which means citizens don't repeat their problem or question when they talk to staff.

CDR's replacing some of the mystery of the government information maze with transparent, easy-to-use solutions is reflected in positive citizen feedback and a dramatic decline in complaints.

With pleased citizens, government workers' job satisfaction rises and they feel like they are providing more value. Staffers who have the time to achieve the objectives they were hired to accomplish instead of answering repetitive phone calls and emails throughout their workdays are more likely to stay with their jobs and work harmoniously with others.

**5 *Cost-Effective Two-Way Communication:*** As citizens use a government Web site to ask questions and find information, the agency learns more about how to better serve its constituency. This feedback gleaned from email content and published questions/

answer pairs, gives agencies a much-improved idea of where to focus efforts and resources. What used to be random and haphazard is now proactive and focused since inquiries and information searches are easily "trackable." A greater understanding between citizen and government begins to take root as the constituency feels "heard" and the agency sees public information needs with more clarity.

**6. Security and privacy.** Government agencies are acutely conscious of their mandate to protect the privacy of Web site visitors. Citizens using Web self-service have a legitimate expectation that they can communicate anonymously, and that their communications will not be used for secondary purposes, such as outbound marketing or email surveys. Software vendors selling hosted customer service applications to the government must demonstrate that they have in place security systems and protocols limiting database access on a strict "need to know" basis.

### ***Efficiency and Cost Savings***

As citizens embrace Internet capabilities to satisfy their inquiries, transactions move down the cost curve by converting in-person visits or call center contacts to Web site queries or Web-based self-service.

Constituents are pleased when they are self-determining in their information search, and in the much-shortened process, agencies can save or redirect funds.

According to the META Group, an IT research and consulting firm in Connecticut, "more than 30 percent of government administration costs ... support direct, usually face-to-face interactions requiring government involvement. Despite these enormous expenditures, citizen satisfaction with their interactions with government remains substantially lower than corresponding ratings from private-sector activities. The private sector, by moving to Web self-service, is reducing customer interaction costs by an order of magnitude while achieving measurable improvements in customer satisfaction."

## ***Conclusion***

The Internet can be either a communication nightmare or a channel for increased dialogue between agencies and their constituents. eService solutions are available and have been implemented by many departments that put agencies in control of the information they deliver via the Web. Timely, cost effective and resource conscience, these solutions create an avenue of letting citizens find answers to their own questions. Effective eService solutions adopting the six key ingredients summarized above help agencies streamline the support process. All of the ingredients have the core goal of improving citizen satisfaction, which translates into a reduced outflow of inefficiently used tax dollars and to a more contented, responsive government workforce.

## ***About the Author***

Greg Gianforte is founder and CEO of RightNow Technologies, a global provider of web customer service systems. Greg holds a BE in Electrical Engineering and an MS in Computer Science. Greg co-authored Reducing the Cost of LAN Ownership and the Business of Running a Network published by Von Nostram.

## ***About RightNow Technologies***

RightNow Technologies is a leading global provider of field-proven Internet customer service solutions that deliver rapid return on investment. RightNow Technologies was named the second fastest-growing software company in 2000 by Softletter, an industry newsletter that publishes an annual ranking of the top 100 independent PC software companies in the U.S. RightNow's comprehensive solution included Web-based self-service, chat, email management, and customer metrics. This solution features integrated product architecture, highly intuitive user interfaces and centralized workflow management – all based on a proprietary customer-driven, self-learning knowledge base. RightNow customers include the Administration for Children and Families, Social Security Administration, the Air Reserve Personnel Center, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the U.S. Postal Service, HCFA/Medicare, Army Knowledge Online, Air Canada, Ben and Jerry's, Black and Decker, Motorola, Nike, Nortel, Pitney Bowes, Sanyo, Sprint, and more than 1,000 other organizations in a wide range of vertical markets.

Founded in 1995, RightNow is headquartered in Bozeman, Montana and has offices in Dallas, London, Munich, and Sydney. The company's products are available in 14 languages through worldwide distribution channels.

RightNow can be reached at 877-363-5678 or [www.rightnow.com](http://www.rightnow.com).