



EXTENDING IT SERVICES TO BUSINESS PROCESS AUTOMATION

Howard County uses an IT management platform to create a services portal and streamline IT and business workflows

What started as a goal to improve IT support and service delivery has now become a vision for streamlining many work processes — including citizen requests — in Howard County, Md. In 2016, the county chose cloud-based ServiceNow software to replace a mix of on-premises applications, spreadsheets and documents used to manage IT projects and support cases.

Initially the county wanted to automate internal IT processes. But technology leaders realized they could also use ServiceNow to automate the county's business processes. The county is also creating a public web portal for citizen requests.

“At its core, there are things that ServiceNow does extremely well, and you can take those building blocks and create all of these other systems,” says Tom Yeatts, Howard County's deputy CIO. “Automated workflows aren't just for IT. The same thing can be applied to human resources or customer relationship management. Once we show a department the benefits of using a single automation platform, we can help it streamline workflows — the return can be almost exponential. It's really exciting to see what the possibilities are.”

Howard County is already seeing these results. As an example, the county now needs just one afternoon to complete an activity that used to take four to six weeks.

Automating IT Processes

The first task for the Howard County IT team was to standardize and enter information about infrastructure elements and services into the ServiceNow configuration management database (CMDB).

Each service relies on interacting IT components, including databases, physical and virtual servers, networks and cloud services. By mapping both the infrastructure and the business services, the team could clearly see the relationship between the two. With one system of record replacing multiple applications, spreadsheets and documents, they can readily

understand the health of their environment, quickly evaluate service impacts and proactively fix problems.

“The business service mapping allows us to see the impact of infrastructure service problems on specific user communities, which means we can target alerts and status messages instead of sending a broadcast message to everyone for every incident,” says Yeatts.

With the configuration database in place, the county focused on automating IT workflows and processes. The first IT processes automated included requests for system access, password and account lockout resets, and routine or specialized equipment. This effort prompted IT staff to analyze and document existing processes, define approval and activity flowcharts, and identify where exceptions might apply.

“There's a benefit to simply clarifying a process and making it repeatable, so we can easily adapt it for other workflows that handle similar tasks,” says Yeatts.

Once these IT processes were defined and automated, the team saw tremendous gains in productivity and in their ability to meet or exceed service level agreements.

Automating Workflows Beyond IT

Yeatts also saw the potential to automate paper-based business processes. To demonstrate this potential, his team chose to automate the highly visible process for contract approvals.

Multiple people must review and approve a county contract in a specific sequence, including the department head, finance director and the county executive. What once took four to six weeks as a manual process can now be completed in an afternoon because of the automated workflows defined in ServiceNow and integration with digital signature software.

In addition to the contract workflows, the county also automated processes for employee on-boarding, transfers and off-boarding. As of late 2017, the IT department has automated more than a dozen business processes and expects to automate more than 200 in the coming years.

Snapshot: Howard County IT Department



200 applications and systems managed by IT



200+ projected business workflows suitable for automation



3,500 county employee users



85 IT employees

“We are initially automating high-impact processes,” says Yeatts. “But we’ve also given our IT liaisons an open invitation to submit paper-based processes that hinder productivity in their departments.”

A One-Stop User Portal

Howard County leaders also created a single place for county employees to access IT and non-IT support. The county developed what they call SNAP (ServiceNow Application Portal), which interfaces with the ServiceNow platform. SNAP gives users a one-stop site to find answers, and initiate and track requests. Workflows in the portal are clearly defined in an online service catalog maintained in the ServiceNow software.

“Most people initially look at ServiceNow for incident reporting and IT operations management,” says Yeatts. “But when we add the service catalog, our clients will see that we are building a central point for requesting and reporting anything related to IT and, in the future, to many other departments. We want to encourage employees to start using the SNAP portal now so it’s familiar as we add services.”

To encourage users to try the new portal, the IT department hired an outside marketing agency to develop a SNAP logo and visual brand.

“We wanted to get some buzz going among our users and interest them enough to explore the portal, then spread the word with their coworkers,” says Yeatts.

A planned public contact portal within the ServiceNow customer service management (CSM) platform will help connect the county’s citizens to their government. The Howard County constituent relations team will use the portal to forward a citizen’s request to the appropriate department, then track the request status and response. A single portal and automated workflows will make it easier for citizens to initiate requests, improve responsiveness and productivity, and increase citizen satisfaction with county government.

Tips for Success

Based on Howard County’s experience with a user portal and automated processes, Yeatts offers several insights for other public sector IT departments.

Implement in IT first. The initial focus of a service management solution should be to automate IT processes. This allows IT teams to gain experience and build capabilities that other departments can leverage. During this process, IT can involve department stakeholders to help them understand the value of automating their workflows.

Start with high-visibility processes. Look for processes that have a high level of awareness and require significant time and effort.

Cultivate executive sponsorship. Plan to involve key executives from across the organization to help choose processes to automate.

Look for repeatability. Develop processes in a way that allows IT to save development time and effort by adapting defined workflows to handle similar tasks.

Understand work roles. Some processes require specific people to participate, while others require only a particular role. For example, many public safety processes require notification or approval by the person who is serving as commander for the current work shift. The process definition should accommodate these variations.

Establish robust ITIL knowledge. Howard County sent its IT staff to train on Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) principles to gain background knowledge for the ServiceNow implementation.

Finding Value Beyond Automation

By automating workflows with ServiceNow, Howard County gains another valuable but unanticipated advantage: capturing knowledge that may exist only in an employee’s head. The analysis to define workflows often brings out this knowledge so it can be retained and built upon for improvements in other areas.

Says Yeatts: “We hold conversations that take institutional knowledge, organize it and put it into a system of record so we can standardize repeatable processes — and that benefits the entire organization, other departments and soon citizens requesting information or services.”

Now, with the ServiceNow System of Action,[™] every employee, customer, and machine can make requests on a single cloud platform. Every department working on tasks can assign and prioritize, collaborate, get down to root cause issues, gain real-time insights, and drive to action. Your employees are energized, your service levels improve, and you realize game-changing economics. Work at Lightspeed.[™]

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