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Ohio Links Businesses with Self-service Filing Portal

News Story by Steve Ulfelder

MARCH 15, 2004 ([COMPUTERWORLD](#)) - In late 1997, Ohio's state legislature passed a bill ordering government agencies to streamline convoluted processes in the areas of workers' compensation, employer tax withholding and tax filing.

The legislators were, admirably, responding to businesses' concerns about the amount of time required for these administrative tasks. But they didn't address details such as funding and project ownership, and so Ohio House Bill 202 made little headway for two years.

When Gregory S. Jackson signed on as Ohio's CIO in 2000, he made meeting the demands of the unfunded mandate an immediate priority because, Jackson says, he agreed with the legislature that a more user-friendly system was important for the state's employers. The resulting portal, dubbed the Ohio Business Gateway, has exceeded demands at every turn. Small and medium-size businesses use the portal's single interface to transact with the state taxation, workers' compensation, family services and administrative services agencies; the time they spend on such tasks has dropped 36%, state studies show.

Jackson concedes that gaining the agencies' initial cooperation was the toughest part of the project. Gartner Inc. analyst John Kost isn't surprised. "The main currency of government isn't income or wealth. It's power," he says. "So creating a multidepartment portal is viewed by those agencies as diminishing their power. That's going to affect their behavior."

In 2000, Jackson says, he told a group of outside consultants who were evaluating state processes that "we were having trouble getting traction" with the project. Those consultants recommended that a director from an affected agency be persuaded to own the project. "That way, it would clearly be an agency priority," Jackson says, "not just another IT project within each agency."

At that point, Jackson got some help when Ohio Gov. Bob Taft became involved and requested that the Ohio Department of Taxation director take on sponsorship. "That was an amazing turning point," Jackson says. Not only was the project kick-started, but the ensuing discussion expanded the gateway's scope. It was originally planned as a mere registration tool, but Jackson and the new sponsor agreed to make it a more ambitious transactional portal.

The next challenge was to fund the project. Jackson carved out \$1.25 million for initial development, and in early 2002 a large-scale pilot was launched. The Ohio Business Gateway became fully functional in 2003; program director Joe Zapotosky estimates ongoing operational costs at \$1.5 million annually.



Gregory S. Jackson, CIO of the state government of Ohio

By all accounts, the gateway was an immediate smash hit. In addition to the 36% time savings enjoyed by Ohio businesses, the state itself has reduced transaction costs for the affected agencies by 42%, according to Jackson. "Ohio deserves great credit for putting this together," Gartner's Kost says.

Jackson says that if he regrets anything about the project, it's that because of time pressures, "we didn't spend as much time on the IT architecture as we might have liked to." The state made some use of Web services, he notes, "but there wasn't a lot of time spent thinking about how [the portal] is going to play out in five years." In particular, Ohio used a Microsoft-based architecture but did the bulk of its development without exploiting the vendor's .Net.

Among the state's next steps are possibly shifting to .Net and adding an XML interface, Zapotosky says. Already, Jackson's team has expanded the Ohio Business Gateway to the local-taxation level, and the state is working with the Internal Revenue Service to allow Ohio businesses to pay federal taxes at the portal, too.

Small wonder that the portal has been widely imitated by other states.

Ulfelder is a freelance writer in Southboro, Mass. Contact him at sulfelder@charter.net.

State of Ohio

www.state.oh.us

■ **Organization:** The 34th largest state by land area in the U.S., Ohio covers 116,103 square miles. Its state capital and largest city is Columbus.

■ **Project champion:** Gregory S. Jackson

■ **IT department:** 2,000

■ **Project payback:** An investment of \$1.25 million for initial development has returned 36% time savings for Ohio businesses and a 42% drop in transaction costs for the state agencies involved.

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