The European Court of Human Rights

Open Text eDOCS Improves Access to Human Rights Knowledge Around the World

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) deals with allegations of human rights violations against the Council of Europe's forty-seven member states. It is legally obligated to publish its judgments and make information concerning its activities available to the public. Making human rights violations public is an important part of the Court's work because the deterrent effects of the publicity helps to promote more effective human rights protection at a national level. Faced with a massive increase in the volume of applications (500 percent over seven years) and limited budgetary resources, the Court's primary objective was to speed up the processing of cases and optimize the human resources available to it by introducing efficient, labor-saving and stream-lined procedures.

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>
> *John Hunter,*
> *Head of IT Division*
> *for the ECHR*

The ECHR has been implementing an integrated document and knowledge management system from Open Text™ eDOCS DM and eDOCS KM, for a decade now and it has become an indispensable tool for the accomplishment of the Court's mission. The IT system not only streamlines the business processes of the Court to enable it to deal with the ever increasing number of applications, but it also provides a public service via its Internet sites to the citizens of the greater Europe and indeed the world. Since its roll-out, the system has acquired an international reputation as ground-breaking technology and best practice in the relevant domain.

Content Chaos - A Human Rights Violation

The ECHR is part of the Council of Europe, an international intergovernmental organization that was established in 1949 after the Second World War to promote political democracy and human rights, social progress and European cultural identity continent wide. Currently, the Council is made up of 47 member states which have all signed up to the system of human rights protection under the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court itself has a jurisdiction over a European population of some 800 million people.

Prior to 1997, the ECHR manually processed thousands of documents every week. Research was performed manually, and the public had a hard time finding what they needed. Access to this information by applicants, governments, lawyers, the media and the general public was far from easy and these difficulties were aggravated by the growing caseload.

"The Court's caseload has exploded over the last few years but the increase in resources has not kept pace," says John Hunter, head of the IT division for the ECHR. "The number of applications to the court has increased significantly each year. For example, in 1997, we had 14,000 applications, in 2007 it grew to 54,000 applications and for 2008 we expect to see 58,000 applications."

An efficient IT system was critical to cope with this exploding caseload. Without an effective IT system the Court would have absolutely no chance of getting on top of the workload. The Court recognized it was time to streamline internal processes, and improve accessibility and distribution of its case-law and related human rights documents to the outside world.

Industry
Legal/Government

Customer

EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

Business Challenges
- Improve manual business processes
- Improve access to public information
- Work within a limited budget
- Speed up the processing of cases
- Improve productivity

Business Solution
- Open Text eDOCS DM
- Open Text eDOCS KM

Business Benefits
- Rapid return on investment costs
- Substantial ROI
- Streamlined internal business procedures
- Ease of use improved overall productivity
- Creation of a flexible, multilingual work environment
- Set new standards in document management

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The ECHR's new IT system had to be powerful, productive, intuitive, and it also had to be easy-to-use for a wide range of clients that ranged from the general public to court judges.

In 1998, the Court rolled out the Human Rights Documents project (HUDOC), deploying Open Text eDOCS DM and eDOCS KM as part of their overall Court Management Information System (CMIS).

eDOCS – The Mission-Critical Solution

The HUDOC project and CMIS enabled the Court to process cases faster by creating a Web-based document and knowledge management system that could support over 700 internal users, and millions of external users worldwide. The HUDOC project, along with CMIS, proved mission-critical in making an important contribution to the proper administration of justice in Europe by providing access to the Court's jurisprudence for national courts, practitioners, academics and the general public.

The ECHR rolled out their new IT system in three phases. First was the creation of the HUDOC Web-based document management system, which allows users to search across the Court's collection of jurisprudence, and to easily publish documents and relevant information to the Court's Internet site. Phase two was the creation of a Court Management Information System (CMIS), which provided an integrated case-file and document management system to handle the operations of the Court more efficiently, and cope with the increasing number of applications to the Court. Phase three was the creation of a new Website based on portal technology that combined both HUDOC and CMIS systems, and opened up these elements for public consumption.

"The open architecture and flexibility of the Open Text software supports the diverse range of applications that the Court utilizes on a day-to-day basis - Microsoft® Exchange and Office, SQL databases, plus workflow, scanning and publishing applications. What I like about the document management system and the software is that it is extremely easy to install and once installed it runs well and we've had very few issues with it. We find that the eDOCS solution has been very robust and we're very happy with it. The solution was cost-effective, and one that worked within the Court's conservative IT budget," says Hunter.

Compliance was also of the utmost importance. The Court needed to ensure that vendor selection was consistent with the procedures laid down by the procurement policies stated under the Financial Regulations of the Council of Europe. The Court is required to comply with the Tenders Board procedure for acquisition of services and vendor solutions.

Open Text ECM technology helped the Court develop their HUDOC/CMIS Web-based solution. Given the complex, multilingual nature of the Court's many member states and the broad scope of the project, the deciding success factor for the Open Text technology was its ease of use. "Training on the document management system only takes two hours maximum and HUDOC requires a fraction of this. That's one of the advantages of the Open Text user environment—it's so intuitive. If you can use Microsoft Word, you can use our systems," says Hunter.

The ECM Strategy for End-User Acceptance

Upon roll-out, the ECHR immediately migrated over 500,000 documents into CMIS over one weekend, and completely transformed the Court's processes for handling incoming and outgoing information. Over 2,000 forms and model letters were developed allowing staff to automate the majority of the case management processes. As a result, the Court was able to achieve substantial efficiency gains estimated at 60 per cent. The effective and simple-to-use CMIS system was rapidly adopted by Court employees allowing them to process the increasing applications and case load, creating better customer service to citizens within the 47 member states.

"With the creation of the document management system and the HUDOC system, users could not only find documents with ease, they could also link documents to specific case-files," says Hunter. "For example, users can search documents based on general or specific search categories related to a case. The system also automatically indexes all documents, which allows users to perform full-text searches, reducing search time previously spent looking for documents in a conventional filing structure."

CMIS was a natural progression from HUDOC. The system manages all incoming case applications through automatic registration and status tracing for all case-file documentation since 1953, and for tens of thousands of new cases each year.

The portal-based Website removes barriers to information by allowing external users to easily search for documents and information. With streamlined internal processes, decisions and documents related to them are now posted and available via the Internet on the day of delivery. Today, CMIS and HUDOC support over 700 internal users and millions of users worldwide.

Setting New Standards for Document Management

Within eight months of the HUDOC roll-out, use of the system was so successful that project costs were fully recovered. It was estimated that the cost to the Council of Europe of mailing the same amount of information would have been $7.9 million Euros a year.

By implementing a cutting edge IT solution, and committing to continual innovation of the solution, the ECHR has become a trailblazer in document management for other international organizations and government bodies. "The eDOCS technology has de-institutionalized access to the Court's information and positioned us to effectively handle rapid growth," says Hunter. "It has helped set a standard for how other government bodies and large organizations efficiently manage large amounts of information."

The system has helped the Court to process and adjudicate cases more efficiently for each and every individual who applies to the Court. It also provides access to a shared corpus of case law on human rights protection for 47 European States, which the Court has built up on the basis of common values and standards in human rights. It has helped the Court to diffuse as widely as possible to the outside world—the parties, the media, the universities, the legal professions, the national authorities, and the public at large.

"This system has helped us deal with the exploding caseload and it also helps us to render justice effectively to the citizens involved, and that's a very important aspect of it," says Hunter. "The fact that we can diffuse it easily via our internet site makes it available to everyone. In addition, it is very helpful for other lawyers throughout the world who are looking for information on human rights—they come to the Court's site, see our judgments and they may be able to use some of these arguments in submissions to their own courts."

The CMIS Knowledge Portal has allowed the Court to continue its mission of protecting human rights throughout Europe, while the impact of its work reaches out beyond Europe's frontiers—and into the future. "The Court's integrated case/document/information management system using the CMIS Knowledge Portal plays a crucial role not only in terms of the Court's internal processes and increased efficiency, but also because it makes it possible to amplify the effects of the Court's work by rendering its decisions readily accessible throughout the wider Europe and beyond," said Roderick Liddell, Director of Common Services at the ECHR. "As such it is a formidable and very practical instrument for improving human rights protection worldwide."

Lessons Learned

Hunter shares key lessons he learned during the deployment that other IT professionals should consider if they are planning on introducing new technologies or processes into their organizations. "When you take on a project of this size, it's very important that you conduct extensive research; you plan in advance; and you clearly define your business objectives. We've always said 'start small, but think big,' and I really do recommend that. It's very important as well to get your end users and top level management involved, as well as external developers that have experience in measured developments. We also think that it is very important to not be afraid to get your hands dirty because it helps in team building. I've been heavily involved in all of the projects which entailed coming up with the initial specifications all the way down to quality testing the products."

Another important lesson is involving end users early in the process. "I think that it's very critical that you conduct end user interviews to ensure that their needs are met—but also be prepared because this will be a lengthy process. For example, for our document management system, we spent six months interviewing users to ensure that when the system went live the existing documents were migrated into the system and proper meta data rules were propagating the document profiles we established. So, user requirement gathering was the most important phase of the system development for us," says Hunter.

Future Plans

According to Hunter, the Court is embarking on a number of exciting IT projects in 2008. "We recently installed a workflow module using Microsoft SharePoint services workflow foundation. This helps manage the approval process for certain documents and then automatically converts the word document into PDF and adds in an electronic signature. We're also going to introduce an archive module which will go on top of our recent acquisition of the Open Text archive solution for email."

Conclusion

"The world is a changing place with many problems world wide related to human rights issues. I think the fact that the Court can publish its judgments quickly and deal with its caseload more efficiently is a benefit to society as a whole," concludes Hunter. "The fact that our judgments are published online means that lawyers in other countries that help victims of similar violations of human rights can refer to our case law and hopefully get their own domestic courts to deal with it. So the fact that we can publish our judgments and make them widely available means that lawyers and applicants in all the 47 member states can actually refer to these cases and hopefully get justice done in their own country."

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