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Legal Aid Agency

Toplevel helps the Legal Aid Agency cut turnaround times with e-Claims processing solution

A claims processing solution from Toplevel is helping the Legal Aid Agency (LAA) to pay some legal aid claims more quickly and is improving communication between the LAA and providers of legal aid services. The solution allows providers to submit claims electronically through the LAA's online portal and provides caseworkers with workflow management tools that help them manage forms through the assessment and approval process.

The solution has allowed the LAA to cut its service level agreement for the time taken to process these claims by half, from 20 days to10 days, while reducing the number of claims that have to be resubmitted because of errors. Caseworkers now take 60 per cent less time to process forms and supervisors find it easier to allocate cases and report on key performance indicators.

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The Legal Aid Agency (LAA) runs the civil and criminal legal aid schemes in England and Wales.

It works in partnership with solicitors and not-for-profit organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureaux to ensure information, advice and legal representation is available to people who need it.

The LAA embarked on a project to improve the way it handles legal aid claims submitted by providers. It wanted to reduce the costs of administering legal aid by streamlining its own processes and making them more efficient. At the same time, it was looking to deliver a better service to providers by processing and paying claims more quickly.

The project involves a phased approach. The first step has been to introduce a system that allows providers to submit some claims forms electronically and gives the caseworkers processing those claims a suite of workflow management tools that help them manage forms through the assessment and approval process. This is delivering short-term efficiency gains for the LAA, helping to reduce the number of forms that are rejected and allowing it to pay claims more quickly, while getting providers used to submitting forms electronically. It is also preparing the ground for a second phase based around a major rewrite of the LAA's case management system for civil claims.

Toplevel was selected to develop the system for the first phase based on its ability to meet the LAA's needs, deploy rapidly and offer the best value on cost grounds. The Toplevel business process automation suite provides the flexibility to apply different business rules to each kind of claim, both when carrying out validation checks when claims are submitted and when routing them through the process once they've been accepted. In addition, the Toplevel solution will help the LAA more easily make the transition to electronic submission by allowing providers to, not only, submit claims completely electronically but also to continue to either submit on paper or to submit the claim electronically but provide supporting documents on paper.

These documents can then be scanned by the LAA and matched up with the claim in the system. "We liked Toplevel's approach to development" says Richard Bourner, Business Systems Manager at the LAA. "It was very collaborative, with lots of interaction with a wide range of people within the LAA."

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VALIDATION AND VISIBILITY

The Toplevel solution allows providers to submit payment claims electronically for four kinds of civil and criminal legal aid claims, with the first online form going live within three months of the contract being awarded to Toplevel and the remainder over the following six months. Civil advance payment claims make up the bulk of the workload by volume, with over 7,500 claims currently being submitted electronically each week, representing more than half of all of this type of claim submitted. "Electronic submission isn't mandatory, so we've focused on marketing the system to our largest providers of civil legal aid to get the most impact" Bourner explains. "Already, more than 1,300 providers have used the system at some point to submit a claim electronically. And even though we haven't actively promoted the solution to providers of criminal legal aid, we're already seeing 20% of crime applications for prior authority for expert services processed electronically."

A key feature of the Toplevel solution is seamless integration with the LAA's other online portal services, allowing providers to access the solution through a single login and make use of the LAA's existing secure authentication. The solution itself is compliant with the HMG Security Policy Framework and HMG Information Assurance standards for confidential data to IL3 (Restricted), while Toplevel has achieved the ISO27001 security accreditation for its operations. Other security measures provided by Toplevel include quarterly penetration testing to ensure there are no vulnerabilities, an audit trail that tracks all user actions and granular access control that appropriately restricts access to information within the system based on roles and responsibilities.

Another vital aspect is validation and guidance within the forms to help providers fill out forms correctly, reducing the number of forms that are rejected because of errors or missing information. "Because of the validation checks, caseworkers don't have to spend as long checking forms and are able to concentrate on making a decision on whether to approve the claim as submitted, adjust it before approving it, or reject it." Bourner points out. "Caseworkers can also more easily contact providers through the system to ask for more information, and providers can track the status and progress of their claims through the online portal. With the old paper process firms had no way of checking their applications' progress without increasing the workload for a very busy processing team."

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EFFICIENT WORKFLOW HANDLING

Once claims have been submitted, the integrated workflow solution developed by Toplevel helps the LAA manage claims through the approval process more efficiently. "With paper forms, we have to physically take them to people. With forms submitted through the Toplevel solution, we can direct cases immediately to the desktop of someone with the right skills" Bourner points out. "Once a caseworker has processed a claim, the system then automatically forwards a percentage on to senior colleagues for quality assurance checking and allows staff to electronically sign forms they've approved."

Meanwhile, supervisors can more easily view and manage work queues, make best use of the available skills and knowledge in their teams, and balance workloads between teams based at different offices without having to transport paper applications around the country, to other processing sites. Reporting tools built into the Toplevel solution also help supervisors report more quickly and accurately on KPIs such as how many forms have been processed and how quickly.

"We've been able to reduce initial handling times by approximately 60 per cent, from four minutes down to one and a half minutes per form."

"Previously supervisors had to manually count stacks of paper forms to get those figures" Bourner says. The solution is delivered as a managed service which includes provisioning of hardware in a secure data centre as well as ongoing comprehensive application management and maintenance. This allows the LAA to benefit from guaranteed availability of the system – with current uptime exceeding 99.9 per cent – without the management headaches of running the solution itself.
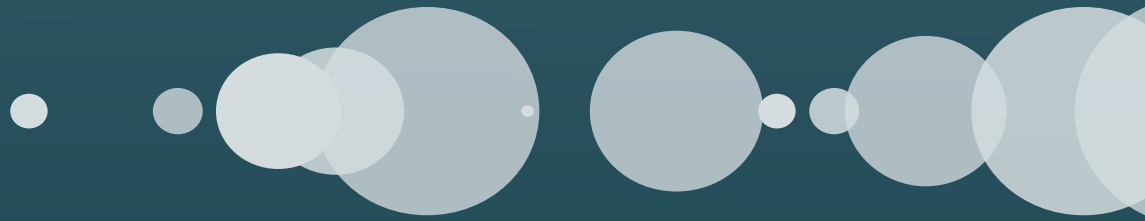
FASTER TURNAROUND, FEWER REJECTIONS

Following the introduction of the system, the LAA has been able to cut its service level agreement (SLA) to completely process a claim and make a decision by half, down from 20 days to just 10 days. "In fact, we're now generally able to turn around forms submitted electronically in just three to four days" Bourner says. "We also have internal standards for the speed at which forms should be processed and we've been able to reduce initial handling times by approximately 60 per cent, from four minutes down to one and a half minutes per form." These efficiency gains have allowed the LAA to redirect staff to other priorities, enabling it to do more.

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