2011 TLG/FCCMA Case Study Application

Case Study Title: "My Training" Online Employee & Citizen Training Software

Jurisdiction Name: Alachua County, FL

County Manager: Randall H. Reid

Project Leader – Primary Contact

Name: Ryan Evans

Title: Applications Manager, Alachua County Board of County Commissioners

Phone Number: (352) 337-6213

Email: revans@alachuacounty.us

Address: 26 NE 1st St. Gainesville, FL 32601

Presenting Team Members

- Ryan Evans, Application Manager
- Graham Peel, Project Manager

Synopsis

The Business Problem

The Supervisor of Elections Office ("SOE") in Alachua County, FL wanted to improve their poll worker training program by using an online training system to more efficiently train poll workers before each election. State law requires a minimum of three hours of training for all poll workers before those workers can work for an election. The SOE began investigating a way to provide a portion of the required training in an online format, as an alternative to labor-intensive lecture-style sessions.

Their initial forays into online training applications were disappointing at best. They discovered an excellent software package from a private company, but the software would have cost at least $15,000 per year to license, plus about $7,500 to install. This was simply not feasible in their budget. They also tried to implement an existing open-source application. This effort lasted a short while and is listed in more detail under the section titled "Previous System In Place."

At this point, the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners Information & Telecommunication Services ("ITS") Department approached the SOE office about creating a solution for them. The ITS Department sat down with SOE and came up with a plan to create a custom, web-based, training software package for free, to provide to the SOE office. The SOE stated emphatically that they needed the most user-friendly training system that ITS could develop.

Software Solution Features & Benefits

The software developed by the ITS Department works by an SOE staff person accessing the online training system and entering text-based chapter information for a course, and then attaching supporting files as needed. Word files, PDFs, spreadsheets, images, movie files and more can be attached. Each course can hold as many chapters as needed. Also, at the end of each chapter, the SOE staff enters test questions and answers. They create "sessions" for these courses, which start and stop on a specific date and can enroll specific poll workers in each session. When a session "opens," the workers review the text material and supporting files online at their own pace, and are required to take the online tests at the end of the various chapters. Their test scores are saved in the system, and the poll workers see their test scores at the completion of the exam. The chapters and tests can also be organized into Lesson Plans by the SOE staff, offering more flexibility to the process.

Software Technology

The Online Training Application is a Microsoft .NET Framework Web Application which stores its data in a Microsoft SQL Server Database and is hosted on Microsoft servers.

Previous System In Place

Prior to working with the ITS Department, the SOE Office found a free open-source package, installed it and used it for one election's poll worker training. Unfortunately, this free software was both confusing and cumbersome. Poll workers had a difficult time logging in. They first had to create an account, then notify the SOE Training Staff about the new account. Then the staff would have to assign courses and re-notify the poll workers. This confused a great number of the poll workers, who then simply declined to use the online software. The software was simply too complex and confusing. Also, SOE staff had a hard time getting reports out of the system for the poll workers who did use the software.

Business Process Improvements

After a few short weeks of development, the ITS Department delivered the new software to the SOE Office in time to be used for the Primary Election. Right off the bat, the software started proving itself as a useful and effective tool. Here's an early comment that came in from a poll worker:

> *"I wanted to compliment whoever it was who designed the online training. Usually stuff like that is problematical - slow, or drops you out, or freezes up, or doesn't give clear directions - but your web training site was really smooth and well-done. Such a nice change! Catherine (Kate) Lee"*

This comment was fairly typical of the reaction the poll workers had upon using the software during this first election. With the online software, the training was self-paced, meaning that an experienced poll worker could quickly refresh themselves on information they had previously learned. The tests at the end of the chapters ensure that the poll workers know the required material. All poll workers must attend a role specific class. Those poll workers with roles requiring more than 3 hours of training per election can now meet their requirements by attending a single role-specific class, rather than driving to two or three separate classes. The number of poll workers reporting that they couldn't access the online system dropped from 20-30 under the complex, open source package down to just 2 with the new system from the ITS Dept.

The SOE personnel are seeing excellent time savings as well. Also, the SOE staff can access much more comprehensive reports through the online training application. This means that they can track the success rates of specific questions to identify weak points in their training, and then adjust accordingly. Likewise, they can filter out consistently poor-scoring poll workers, in favor of worker who demonstrate better knowledge of the important election laws.

Economic Benefit & User Benefits

The SOE Office has not had to purchase a vendor product for their training needs, which is a savings of several thousand dollars a year. The commercial software package that was first looked at was priced at **$15,000 per year**, plus **$7,500 in start-up costs**. These costs have been avoided entirely. The training expenses per election have been reduced as well. During a typical large election, the main staff person in charge of poll worker training now saves around **20 hours of lecture time**, because they have been able to reduce the number of lectures provided. The poll workers can use their time efficiently by using the online training system, and then attending 1 to 4 hour role-specific trainings. Also, they can keep their work schedules as normal and take the online training on their own time instead of taking time off from work.

The new online software has been used for several elections in Alachua County. At this point the software has been thoroughly tested and has been found to be very beneficial and helpful to everyone that uses it; both the SOE staff and the poll workers love it.

The poll workers save time and transportation costs when they use the online system. Having the application work online means that a larger number of individuals can become poll workers. The SOE staff has seen massive productivity gains since they can reduce the number of lecture classes they have to offer and they have been able to use the reports from the online training system to improve their training, by focusing on questions that are commonly missed in the online tests. SOE staff workers have been able to identify poll workers who potentially are failing to understand and pass the tests, and have then been able to coach these workers or release them if necessary.

Software Solution Usage

During the first election that the online poll worker training was offered, about one out of six poll workers signed up to take courses online. However, less than 3 elections later, that number has doubled, to one out of every three poll workers signing up for the online courses. To this point (Aug 2010), there have been 400+ volunteers trained online instead of in person.

Additionally, other county groups have used the same online training software. The Alachua County Department of Public Safety now uses the system to train and test all of their staff on emergency procedures. There are currently (Aug 2010) 200+ employees receiving their training online at this department.

Returning poll workers are asked to select the type of training they wish to receive: either in-person lectures, or online training through this solution. More and more workers are selecting the online training, especially among the growing number of younger workers. The SOE office gets a large number of poll worker applicants from the University of Florida, and these young adults expect online and electronic training materials.

Screen Shots

- http://elections.alachua.fl.us/images/mytraining/1.png
- http://elections.alachua.fl.us/images/mytraining/2.png
- http://elections.alachua.fl.us/images/mytraining/3.png

Software Solution Governance & Funding Source

The project was undertaken and managed by the ITS Department. ITS worked with the SOE staff to identify the needs of the software and developed the software. The SOE staff reviewed the work to make sure the functionality delivered worked as the SOE staff has suggested. The ITS team is funded from the portion of the county budget already allocated to the ITS department. No additional funds were needed.

Awards

In July of 2010, the "My Training" software received the Florida Local Government Information Systems Association Technology Achievement Award for 2010 for jurisdictions with populations over 80,000. This means that Alachua County beat out any and all submissions from the much larger jurisdictions in the state (Orlando, Miami Dade, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, etc).

Presentation Components

1) Innovation/Creativity

How did the program/project/service, etc. improve the organization?
Inside the Supervisor of Elections Office, staff training times have been greatly reduced. Approximately 20 hours of lecture time has been saved per election as the number of training lectures has been greatly reduced. More hours of overhead for each lecture have been eliminated as well, as there are many less lectures to schedule and plan.

Were new technologies used? If yes, what methods and/or applications did you implement?
Existing technologies were used in new ways. The ITS team had not created an online training software package before, but was familiar with the software techniques and infrastructure used to plan and create the solution.

Was a private consultant used?

No private consultants of any kind were used. Only local government resources went into the planning, development and deployment of the online training software.

2) Outcomes Achieved

What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled?

Community Elections Volunteers need to have their training conducted quickly and efficiently was met by the system. Volunteers can now become Elections Poll workers much easier than before, and (almost more importantly) volunteers are now able to come back and participate in elections again and again, in a much easier manner. This means that better trained volunteers are available to run the polling centers during local elections.

Has service delivery been enhanced?

The service provided by the poll workers to the voting citizens during elections has been enhanced, mainly because the poll workers are better trained, and can come from wider demographics than before. Since the training software is online, larger groups of people can, and are choosing to become poll workers. Likewise, the workers themselves are becoming better trained, and are returning to participate in elections more often than before. This increase in the competency of workers translates to the massive volumes of citizens voting on Election Day to have a better experience when they interact with these poll workers.

Did the initiative improve access to your government? If yes, how?

Access to the local government has increased mainly among younger people, or full time workers who can now choose to become poll workers since they won't have to miss work or school to attend the mandatory trainings.

3) Applicable Results and Real Word Practicality

What practical applications could you share if selected? How applicable is the project/program/service to other local governments?

We can show the software to the group if selected, and the software could be easily provided to other groups. The software solution is highly applicable to any other local government that needs to deliver electronic documentation to users and then test the users on that documentation afterwards. Any employee, citizen or government partner can access and use the software to receive training, documentation or other instruction. The software currently serves training to groups with vastly different backgrounds and goals. It works fine for any group that can use a computer, mouse and keyboard.

What results/outcomes will you be able to share?

We can present the total number of users currently using the service at the time of the presentation. We can provide numbers on the hours of training time that have been saved by the different groups using the software. There are currently (Aug 2010) over 600 users of the software receiving online training.

4) Case study presentation

In the presentation, we will walk through how the software solution works. This will include setting up a course & session and loading the training documents into it, as well as a demonstration of how the end user access the training materials and completes their online test. We will show some report samples that are generated from the system to display the kinds of data that can be collected after user tests are turned in.