



The art of business process automation at city hall

Reimagining planning & development applications

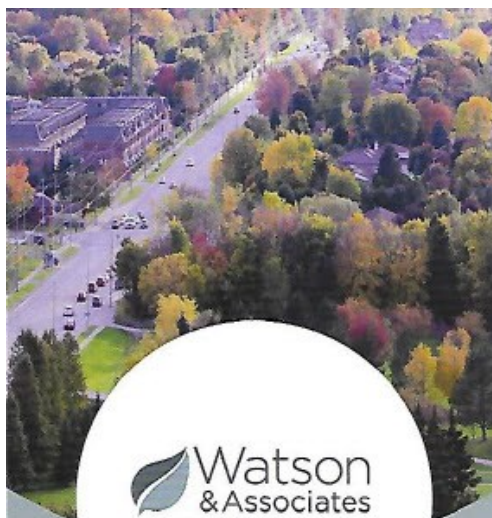
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Is there really an app for everything? In many municipal governments, effort and resources are being used to continually improve their business processes by way of increasing efficiency and improving the quality of services provided. In this age of ideas technology, the first solution that often comes to mind is to automate the business process by creating a mobile app. Business process automation seems to be the “end all and be all” for solving business problems, and mobile apps are frequently touted as the best business process automation tool.

There Should Be an App for that!

If there is a business process deserving of an app in municipal government, it is the planning and land development application process. Any land development or land use changes (minor or major) done on a property requires regulation by the municipal government. They alone provide this service, which means that there is no other choice for the public. As a result, this business process is one of the most frequently used interactions between municipal government, the public, and the business community.

Local government’s zoning and land use application processes must continually respond to new trends in the marketplace. For example, these processes will be thoroughly tested when the new cannabis legislation becomes law this summer, and they will need a strong, flexible, user-friendly process in place to deal with the abundance of new land use applications associated with this new business opportunity. This process is ripe for business process automation, thus,



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making this the perfect opportunity to discuss how the marriage between the planning application process and innovative tools and technologies creates an efficient and effective solution to the changes being made, which will, in turn, change how local governments conduct their business.

Due to the inherent issues the public encounters using the process and the lack of ease local governments have in managing the process, the land development application process is an ideal candidate for change. Despite its frequent use, this process is still intimidating, confusing, and time consuming for the public, as well

- The application process generates significant revenue for local government (with application or process fees being incurred by the public).
- The process is complicated, tedious, and the administration of the process is manually intensive.
- A more transparent process is needed.

The workload division of labour was one of the most significant findings from the survey. Planners spend approximately 70 percent of the time on administrative tasks and 30 percent on the business of urban planning. The majority of the municipalities would like to reverse this division of workload

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as being manually and administratively heavy for local government. The quality of information provided by the government and gathered by the public, determines the quality of the service provided.

A Environment Ripe for Change

In a recent survey of 10 Canadian and 10 American municipalities, with populations ranging from 10,000 to one million, all 20 municipalities agreed that, in the last 10 years, their land development/planning application process has not changed procedurally, and that there has been a significant increase in the number of applications processed.

Other important information was also revealed by the survey:

- The land development application process occurs frequently.
- Information needed by the public is in the hands of local government, is very specific, and requires expertise that's not usually found by the general public.
- Information included in the application process crosses multiple government departments.

tasks to improve the quality of service provided and improve their performance/workload cost effectiveness.

The survey indicates that municipal governments are looking for a process that is efficient and that accurately gathers 90 percent of the information required to successfully process the application. They also want a "cool" app that makes them look hip, technology savvy, and professional - the opposite of what their current processes make them look like now.

The following is a roadmap framework to a more efficient process workflow:

- Streamline the review process.
- Use technology and tools that will automate the application processes and manage the application data.
- Increase staff capacity for land development review and approval processes.
- Create short and efficient separate application processes for expedited application categories.
- Standardize general application processes.
- Keep application processes simple and user friendly.

Business Process Automation 101

Business process automation aims to make processes more efficient and effective in organizations through the use of appropriate technologies, integration of information and systems, and workflow control, creating the possibility of real-time monitoring, reliably and securely.¹

information being gathered should also be directly associated to the municipal government's back-end workflow process. Part of this task involves creating an automated system to streamline communication between the different municipal governments, the public, and all other internal and external stakeholders. By doing this, a single source of information is created, and

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An advantage to organizations adopting business process automation is the by-product of conducting business requirements analysis of current business processes to ensure it's still valid, useful, and efficient. There is no advantage to automating bad processes.

Effective Process Automation

Business process automation is sometimes used as a new-age technology buzz word to describe the hype of automating or "digitizing" documents. Truth be told, there is more to it - if done intelligently and with a comprehensive understanding of the business process being automated. Regardless of the business requirements of the process, there is a standard that should be followed to measure the effectiveness of the automation to ensure the process is better, useful, and does what it's supposed to. The following are some tips for effective automation.

Streamline communication

Streamlining communication should be the first task in business process automation. Using the land development application process as an example, communication should be clear about what information is required for the application process, and be easily understood by the public and formatted in a way that makes the information easy to access. The

different types of documents and communication pieces can be generated from this single source of truth. Furthermore, automated workflow enables process owners to focus on individual tasks and get things done in a simple, streamlined way.

Enforce accountability

When a business process is automated, a process owner is created for each step of the process. All phases such as intake, processing, routing, approval, and rejection are monitored and controlled by an individual with specific expectations for their roles and responsibilities. Enabling that level of information transparency in your business process enforces accountability to all stakeholders. Moreover, business process automation provides performance metrics for the process. Local government will also be in a better position to identify which tasks take the longest or most frequently bottleneck the process.

Minimize costs and manual errors

Automating business processes minimizes administrative labour costs. Costs can be reduced by substituting tasks that have a higher human error incident with the accuracy of electronic automation. An added bonus is that more accurate and useful information is being gathered by the process, which reduces the amount of personal consultations through telephone or email.

Monitor business process for efficiencies and continual improvement

Business process automation affords you a holistic view of how you are doing business and whether or not you are succeeding at meeting your business objectives and goals. The status of your process is just a click away, and access to all of your data is easily generated from the automated system. Analytics and metrics are easily accessible and trackable to accurately monitor; your automated process provides a real-time look at how you are doing business, pinpointing what areas of the process are most efficient, and which tasks are taking the longest. This is information needed to continually monitor and improve the process.

Possible Future for Business Process Automation

Automating the land development application process has inherent advantages, but sometimes knowing what to do does not always translate into effective solutioning. An app is one possible solution to address this challenge, providing an online application process that would ask all the right questions and provide the required information so municipalities know exactly what the applicant wants and what is needed in order to respond. Additional functions might include: a planner toolkit so the planner can have all the information at their fingertips to quickly and efficiently work a land development application file; the ability to automatically circulate the application to other departments to send and receive comments; the ability to generate customized content within the app to publish for the general public; public access to the application processing workflow to get status information; quickly and easily generating meaningful business and performance metric reports to make sound business decisions; and of course, looking modern and current with a professional looking interface so users want to come back.

Land use application processes really are ripe for business process automation. Municipalities that spend the time and effort upfront to set the automation process right stand to reap a wide range of benefits - not the least of which is improved service and efficiency. [MW](#)

HEFLO, "Process Automation," <https://www.heflo.com/blog/process-automation/>.