

# Carving a High-Tech Path Through a Paperwork Bottleneck

The city of Buffalo, NY, takes parking seriously. Ticket revenues represent a consistent and lucrative revenue stream of millions of dollars annually, so the city's Bureau of Parking Violations is aggressive in pursuing payment for parking violations. For many years, however, the bureau was saddled with older computers and an inefficient data entry system. The result? A mounting paperwork bottleneck and substantial lost revenues. But thanks to the progressive administration of Buffalo Mayor Anthony M. Masiello, Bureau Director Leonard Sciolino got a green light to seek a high-tech solution. Buffalo-based Biel's Information Technology Systems, a systems integrator, delivered the best proposal, which suggested introducing an innovative software to speed up information capture.

Biel's Norm Baker was sent to assess the situation. He identified the problem immediately. Efficient data entry and document management were critical to recovering this key revenue stream for the city. Yet, "it was very difficult to use the existing database," remembers Baker. The bureau's data entry was still done by hand, as was all the document filing. The process was cumbersome, labor-intensive and difficult to organize.

He recommended implementing a new system built around OCR for Forms™, a user-friendly, innovative information capture software system developed by Microsystems Technology of Tampa, FL. The software reads information from a scanned or faxed document and converts it into ASCII text in a computer database. It has the capacity to process information automatically from documents — such as case tickets, hearing requests, vehicle registration and ticket dismissal notices — in hand-printed, machine-printed, bar-coded or check-boxed form. Baker believed this was the way to go for the bureau, with a few custom applications he would build into the system.

## The Test Drive

Prior to installing the new software, the bureau manually input all information on parking violations into a database of approximately 20 fields using a batch system. To retrieve information, data entry personnel would have to locate the ticket number, then find the batch and search it manually. Says Baker, "retrieval was a real nightmare."

The pilot focused only on parking enforcement. Baker began installing the first phase of the new software program in 1997, allowing parking tickets, vehicle registration information and even envelope postmarks to be scanned directly into the bureau's database, thus eliminating countless hours of manual entry and filing.

Biel's has given the bureau a lot of support in tailoring the product specifically to its needs. Calling the company "our right hand," Sciolino notes, "there's a number of companies that will sell you the software, yet the majority of them can't give you this kind of support." Even Microsystems pitched in, sending training professionals to Albany for a comprehensive training session for key bureau personnel.

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## A Paperless Paper Trail

Thanks to the new software, a paper-intensive practice has been transformed into a virtually paperless operation. That was the goal, according to Baker. Using the software, the bureau has eliminated its old documentation method, one that involved cramming manila folders with slips of paper clipped together. "The bottom line of what we're trying to do is to eliminate paper anywhere we can," Baker explains.

These days, when a respondent pays a parking ticket, the paid ticket, including the envelope's postmark, is scanned into the new system and the computer generates a unique number and

assigns it to that ticket — creating a file. Having the postmark on hand is critical to proving whether a ticket was paid on time and whether late penalties can be billed. If a respondent contests a late fee, the bureau has immediate and visual proof of the postmark date literally at their fingertips.

When a question arises about a ticket, all the documentation is grouped together and easily retrievable from the database. Only the identification number generated during the initial scanning of the ticket is needed. The product allows the database to be searched by that single number and pulls up a complete picture of the ticket and its status.

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## Extra Mileage from OCR for Forms

But not everyone pays his or her parking tickets and the bureau's system for tracking the reluctant ticketholder down and billing for payment wasn't effective. Not so any more. One of the customized applications Baker created is a new and efficient way for the bureau to access the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) mainframe in Albany to retrieve current vehicle registration and owner mailing addresses.

In the past, the bureau had to send a request for information up to DMV, which then compiled a tape of registered owners in the requested area. It would take the bureau's data processing center about two days to review the tape and extract the names of persons issued tickets and then verify address and registration. "It was ridiculously time-consuming, data processing was screaming at us, our billings were brutal," says Sciolino. In fact, the process was so labor-intensive the bureau could only access DMV tapes a couple of times a year.

These days, OCR for Forms performs an address look-up for every license plate that was issued a ticket the day before. The owner information is downloaded into the bureau database for future billings. Another plus is that the only license plates that are stored in the database are the plates that received tickets. Albany's master tapes would supply everyone in the nearby counties, regardless of whether or not that information was needed. "Anybody in this business understands this is a really big thing," says Sciolino. "If you can't get the address, you can't collect."

Baker says Biel's continuously massages the system to get extra mileage. They even introduced Microsystems' Uni-Form™ to redesign forms to ensure maximum scanning accuracy. Uni-Form is a sophisticated, easy-to-use forms design tool. In the future, Uni-Form will be used to create Internet forms for the bureau.

## A Green Light for Collections

Today, the bureau processes thousands of forms daily, compared to a mere 750 forms with the old system. At \$20 for the average parking ticket (late fees can push it up to a maximum penalty of \$155), the potential for additional revenue from the more efficient system is significant.

OCR for Forms has created other savings by enabling the bureau to significantly reduce the data entry workload and save hours of manual filing. And the level of customer service in a government agency that drivers love to hate has improved dramatically. Using the OCR for Forms software, the bureau can handle 155 calls a day, more than twice its former capacity. Says Sciolino, "Government offices have a reputation for being disorganized, but not ours."

The bureau reported \$5.5 million in revenues in 1998. The greatest revenue streams include parking tickets, booting and towing, and vehicle registration suspensions. And Microsystems' product helped by greatly improving the chances for collection on each ticket or vehicle suspension. Since the system was installed in late 1997, and the degree of customization prolonged the implementation phase, the actual revenue boost directly attributable to the new software will not show up until 1999 revenues are calculated. But Sciolino sees impressive revenue savings down the line. "It hasn't come through yet, but it will in next year's revenues."

## Down the Road

Because of the dramatic improvements resulting from OCR for Forms, the bureau won't be stopping with just one application. Future plans call for additional phases to streamline and automate the city's active boot-and-tow program, as well as the hearing process. Baker is currently working on another custom application for hearings. This application would enable the bureau to scan in a hearing request, setting in motion an automatic process for creating a hearing docket, extracting a summons number and a license plate number on the automobile ticketed, scheduling a hearing date, and sending out a notice to the defendant. There's still great potential for the bureau to achieve additional efficiencies from the software.

Sciolino recalls when the new system was first discussed, employees were a little uneasy about the high-tech equipment and concerned about job security. "This is a pretty progressive office, but there was always that little fear among us that we didn't know exactly where this was going." Now, Sciolino says everyone has embraced the new way of doing things. The system has made everyone's job a little bit easier, the bureau a lot more organized, and employees happier. "I don't think anybody in the country has gone this far in automating the parking violations systems. We're really a kind of pioneer in this."



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