OCR *for* Forms™ Part of Big Plans "Down Under"

These days, Australia has one of the fastest turn-around times for processing and issuing a passport of any nation in the world, thanks to a passport-issuing system that includes Microsystems Technology's OCR *for* Forms™.

Passports Australia, a division of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, interviews applicants, reviews, and issues passports. They can have a passport in the hands of a citizen deemed to have an urgent need, in half an hour. On average, the typical applicant receives his or her passport in 10 business days once all required documentation has been submitted. This speedy service occurs in a geographically large country with a good-size population. Australia's territory is roughly the size of the continental U.S. Its population is 20 million—and growing.

Planning for the Future
It was that growth which spurred Passports Australia to begin exploring alternatives to the manual system that had been used since the Government Passport Act of 1938.

In 1997, a Passports Australia study predicted application requests would grow from 700,000 to more than 1 million by the year 2000—an almost 50% increase in workload. In fact, reality outstripped expectations. In 2000, Australia processed more than 1.1 million passports. Anticipating the passport explosion that was soon to come, Passports Australia management began casting about for a more automated system to replace their existing system.

The system they envisioned had to allow Passports Australia to:
• *Electronically process application forms;*
• *Share workloads electronically to meet peak processing requirements;*
• *Offer improved and additional services to border control agencies;*
• *Improve customer service while keeping overall operating costs constant; and*
• *Better its current 10-day passport turnaround for customers.*

> "You simply cannot do an application of this size without great support and Microsystems provided it."

Passports Australia engaged Solution 6, an Australia-based systems integrator, to design a solution. What Solution 6 came up with was a multi-million dollar system to deliver high-volume, integrated forms processing capabilities using Microsystems Technology's OCR *for* Forms, as well as Optika's eMedia for imaging and workflow.

The situation Solution 6 initially faced wasn't as simple as fixing something that was broken, recalls Alan Bennett, Solution 6 business consultant. In fact, Passports Australia's manual workflow system was very efficient. "We went and looked at it and said, 'What can we do to make this great system better?' It was a little scary," Bennett admits. "Customers already expected fast, efficient service. Our challenge was to maintain the high level of customer service *and* keep production costs constant with a system that could handle the anticipated additional volume."

Separate But Equal Installations
Solution 6 got the nod to proceed, and had the systems design completed by November of that same year. The pilot phase lasted for five months and after a review, the system was completed in February 2000.

"We succeeded in bringing in a wide-area application on-time and on-budget. That's something to feel good about," Bennett says. He credits much of the success of the overall implementation to OCR *for* Forms, calling it an "ideal prototyping tool."

Initially, all passport-related forms were redesigned to achieve maximum accuracy from OCR *for* Forms' processing capabilities. Passports Australia opted to establish stand-alone capabilities at each of the 10 processing sites, one in each state capital city, as well as Newcastle. Each site contains one scan station, one form ID station, one data extraction station and one verifier. "In effect, each installation is

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largely a stand-alone operation, capable of building passports on its own," explains Bennett. "If one aspect of one installation becomes overloaded, we can shift that operation to another facility." Monitoring of the 10 sites is from a central office, located in the country's capital city, Canberra.

The handwritten application forms are processed at each site using OCR *for* Forms, as well as Optika's eMedia imaging and workflow. In addition, the system includes a range of software for specialized functions such as auto-fax and mainframe integration via MQ Series messaging. Data is transferred to Passports Australia's PICS centralized database, which holds biographical data on passport holders. Workflow software then delivers casework electronically to the desktop of an eligibility officer for application assessment.

Once received, passport application forms are scanned into the system for placement in permanent storage. Currently, there are 10 years worth of passport information—more than 50 million pages of photo, signature, date, *etc*. information—stored on two Hewlett-Packard 1.2 terabyte optical jukeboxes in Canberra. The whole system operates on Microsoft NT servers, with the 10 sites connected on the wide area network running Microsoft IIS 4.0 and Microsoft SQL Server for distributed software. Another server acts as a distributed jukebox server and a central image repository, connecting branch sites to the central site.

No Local Paper Trail Needed
After 30 days, all traces of the electronic passport application are removed from the local office and stored at the central office in Canberra. Terry Hartmann, Passports Australia's IT Manager explains, "The paper trail just disappears locally." So, what happens if someone loses his or her passport? The Canberra office takes the request, pulls the archived information and shoots it electronically back to the local office where the request was made. "It happens fast, efficiently and there's no need to return to paper," Hartmann notes.
Asked if this technology freed up storage space for Passports Australia, Hartmann responds: "We

had warehoused paper documents for 11 years. Each year had seen between 500,000 and 1.1 million passport applications, each of which is 3-4 pages. So work out the math and you'll see the cost of storage."

Passports Australia's new application delivered high-volume integrated forms processing, production imaging and powerful workflow capabilities. They are also able to do more with fewer staff and obtain better empirical data. Hartmann observes, "You simply cannot do an application of this size without great support and Microsystems provided it. I have no fear of contradiction when I say Microsystems Technology is the best in the business."

Uni-Form & the Internet
Most recently, Passports Australia has extended their system to assist overseas offices for citizens living abroad. Future priorities include finding ways to "do more and better" background security checks—a critical issue these days.

And, of course, there's the Internet. Microsystems' e-form design and data capture solution, Uni-Form™, has already been purchased for prototyping Passports Australia's ability to handle applications for lost passports and renewals online. "We liked what we saw in Uni-Form, so we bought it. Now we can proceed with detailed research and development with a view to providing government online facilities to our customers and building a new generation of passport client interaction over the web," concludes Hartmann.

All passports in Australia are issued by Passports Australia, part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. OCR for Forms is used to process all of the applications for passports. Passports Australia utilizes Oce's Reco Star Pro and voting engines for enhanced handprint recognition.

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