

Microsystems Technology Shows Pennsylvania the Money

Every citizen cares about laws that affect his or her life, but few make it their profession. Lobbyists, however, are paid to influence those who make the laws. Many companies and organizations hire these professionals to convince legislators to vote for laws in favor of their clients and, conversely, defeat laws adverse to their clients. Even though all this is perfectly legal, some question the practice and the methods used. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year on this activity with little or no accountability. Concerns from individual citizens and political watchdog groups have begun a groundswell to keep track of "where the money goes."

The state of Pennsylvania knew it had a problem tracking money expended on lobbying related activities. With one of the weakest lobbying disclosure laws in the nation, it was almost impossible to keep track of how much money clients were spending to influence state lawmakers. Common Cause of Pennsylvania, a political watchdog group, reported that out of 848 lobbyists in their state, only 161 reported any of their spending. Things needed to change.

In response, the Pennsylvania State Legislature passed The Lobbying Disclosure Act, which was to go into effect August 1, 1999. This tough, new law required all lobbyists and Principals (or Clients) to register with the State Ethics Commission and file a form every quarter detailing the amount of money spent in a variety of categories. Detailed records of spending were not only going to be completely disclosed; they were also going to be made fully accessible as a public record.

Cheers rose up as a victory for the common man was achieved and everybody lived Happily Ever After. The End. Well not quite... now that the law

was passed, someone had to actually do the work. Very soon, thousands of these disclosure forms would be flooding the office of the State Ethics Commission (SEC) and they had to be ready.

To meet the requirements of the law, the SEC turned to Perry Kurlander of Computer Document Management Systems, Inc. (CDMS) in Harrisburg, PA. CDMS designed a solution for the State Ethics Commission, utilizing Tampa, FL-based Microsystems Technology's OCR for Forms™ and Uni-Form™, the industry-leading information capture software and form design software. Microsystems' software was used for all the form design and data capture from paper and electronic forms; Eastman Software handled long-term storage and retrieval.

In a forward-thinking mood, the Pennsylvania State Legislature agreed the disclosure forms could be submitted on paper or by electronic means over the Internet. Kurlander knew immediately the answer

to at least one of the SEC's problems could be solved with Uni-Form. Uni-Form was used to design all four of the online forms to be filled out on the SEC's web site: <http://www.ethics.state.pa.us/>.

"In order to help the SEC standardize form design, CDMS designed all of them with Uni-Form," explains Kurlander. By using Uni-Form to design not only the online forms but also the master forms used in paper capture, CDMS was able to develop drop-out ink forms which worked flawlessly with Microsystems' information capture product for paper, OCR for Forms. Using Uni-Form to design the form meant it was unnecessary to design a separate template for the form when it was read into OCR for Forms. Uni-Form

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does it all in one easy step. And because the SEC controls the form design, any future changes can be implemented quickly. Uni-Form not only makes it easy to fill out the online form, but secure too. Kurlander adds, "With the added security built into Uni-Form, the lobbyists' forms can be electronically 'signed' right on the web site."

John Contino, executive director of the State Ethic Commission, believes the implementation has gone well. "The system has provided us with a very efficient report submission and processing solution. Since the law was passed several thousand quarterly expense forms have been submitted. The electronic reporting and imaging system enables us to process this information in a matter of just a few days and provides easy access to serve the public interest. This solution has played a critical role in our ability to execute the

duties of this commission under the new disclosure law without requiring additional tax dollars for administration. Kurlander adds, "CDMS was able to commit at the beginning of the project to meeting the requirements of the commission and the law."

Kurlander concludes, "Other states have tried and failed at implementing this type of system. As the various states start to do more of this type of work, CDMS stands poised to make this the standard on a national level." And with Pennsylvania as the working model, Microsystems' software is the keystone product in helping interested states achieve their goal.



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