

The old jokes about the Army's filing everything in triplicate just don't hold true anymore. In fact, Personnel Command for the U.S. Department of the Army (PERSCOM) does not do much filing at all - not since 1997, when they began imaging their officer and academic evaluation reports (OERs and AERs, respectively). The application they chose? OCR for Forms™, information capture software designed by Microsystems Technology in Tampa, FL.

According to Department of the Army Computer Specialist Ann Varano, the Alexandria, VA-based operation was receiving some 200,000 double-sided forms from all over the world every year. Five employees worked full time keying names and Social Security Numbers into a mainframe. However, no other data was being captured electronically; the information on the forms - that is, the part that included the actual evaluation - wasn't accessible except in the physical location where the form was filed. Any time this data was needed elsewhere, it had to be located and pulled from a filing cabinet, then faxed to wherever the information was needed. And because forms get misplaced and faxes don't go through or get lost, the process was extremely inefficient.

Varano affirms the Department of the Army's continual search for new ways to automate its current systems. The Army tested several information capture products to see how they handled one OER and three AERs, and OCR for Forms performance was far ahead of the other products. Once the Army had decided on OCR for Forms, they began working with Howard Spicer, a technical support specialist with Gaithersburg, MD-based Input Solutions, Inc. to implement the system.

### System Setup

Spicer set up one of Varano's computers, and she took care of the other seven. The facility's eight workstations involve Hewlett Packard computers. PERSCOM relies on Bell + Howell 6338 scanners, plus one flatbed Fujitsu. The unit batches its 1,500 documents per month in groups of 50.

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“Yes, I got them started,” says Spicer. “As they became confident with the software, however, they took over.” He personally trained Varano on OCR for Forms for three days in Alexandria. Afterward, she herself trained the people who had been keying data - a formidable challenge, she admits, because they didn't even know how to use a mouse, much less navigate in a Windows® environment. A week with each individual resulted in workgroup mastery of OCR for Forms, and the staffers are “very happy” that PERSCOM has enhanced their careers, says Varano.

“This is a really busy form for optical character recognition software,” she reports. She's referring to the OER, which not only captures 110 fields but also contains descriptive paragraphs regarding performance and potential for promotion. Some of the information fields (such as name, Social Security Number and report date) must be verified, and OERs are eventually cross-referenced because two people, an “intermediate rater” and a “senior rater,” evaluate each candidate.

### Implementation Challenges

“The biggest hurdle with the new system,” says Varano, “was dealing with different versions of the same form, some of which were of poor quality.” The Department of the Army has an official,

updated form for OERs, of course, that's available electronically. However, smaller Army units in some states might not have the hardware or software to access it, forcing them to improvise - and maybe, for example, mail in a form they generated themselves on their own PC. OCR for Forms offered a simple solution to this problem with its ability to use multiple masters to accommodate the variations.

The information that's captured with OCR for Forms is used several ways: Most importantly, OERs are used in evaluating officer performance during a given rating period; the forms are fundamental in determining promotions. In addition, some of the data is captured for analysis in statistical reports. Finally, the imaged documents are utilized as archives in an Oracle database.

And these uses constitute the advantages of OCR for Forms for PERSCOM. The imaged documents, which simply weren't available before OCR for Forms, are significantly more accessible and save a tremendous amount of filing space. (PERSCOM uses PowerBuilder to restrict access to the confidential information.) Also, the amount, accuracy and type of information that's now gathered electronically are immensely superior.

### The Sincerest Form of Flattery

"The Department of the Army was satisfied with OCR for Forms - to the point that they ordered the same system for a second site," boasts Spicer. After the Alexandria installation of OCR for Forms, the Department of the Army sent Spicer to St. Louis, MO, to repeat the process there. In what amounts to a duplicate of the Alexandria facility, the U.S. Army Reserves scans and collects data for its own OERs.

### The Form of the Future

"It's a much better way to process these documents," declares Varano. And she looks forward to implementing even more advanced technology. In the future, PERSCOM's forms are likely to be found in the same place as the forms of many organizations and companies: the Internet. While Varano sees nothing imminent on the horizon, she looks forward to web-based OERs and AERs that will result in even greater consistency in information capture.

As the Army upgrades its information capture technology, it looks like "filing in triplicate" is becoming a thing of the past - and so are the jokes.



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