



**THE MODERNIZATION OF CONSULAR SERVICES**

**LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY WITHIN  
A NEW CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS:  
THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE**

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## THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

### The Modernization of Consular Services

#### Concept of Operations

Governments are under increasing pressure to provide improved and increased consular services. Growing foreign travel and residency, increasing danger in many parts of the world, the expectation of citizens and the speed by which information now transcends time and space have come together to create urgency for governments to act.

This urgency comes at a time when the cost of providing services in foreign countries is increasing and when fiscal caution and reductions at home are standard policies for most governments. As such, there is a requirement for careful consideration of the means and mechanisms that are used to improve and increase services. Improved services at a time of fiscal restraint are not incompatible, as the Canadian experience over the past ten years has demonstrated.

#### Canadian Experience

In the early 1990s Canada faced many of these same issues. More Canadians were travelling and their ages were lowering at one end while increasing at the other. They were going to more esoteric places with fewer local services and in many places they were facing new dangers. In Canada, the media was filled with stories based on the assertion that the government was not providing the level of service to its citizens that this changing environment required.

The governmental response was based on two factors. First, the demand for improved and increased services had to be met using roughly the same level of resources and any new resources had to be funded by the clients of consular services. The second factor was the assertion that the achievement of improved services could only be made on the basis of increased productivity. At the time, it was concluded that increased productivity could be achieved by improved

communications and the development of specialized computer work programs that would maximize the efficiency of the existing work force.

#### Consular Work Model

The work model prior to modernization was one where most consular services were provided through Canadian missions overseas. As such, services were provided in the most expensive environment within the model. Very few services were provided through headquarters staff that correspondingly was the least expensive part of the system. It was concluded that the repatriation of services to headquarters to the maximum extent possible would permit the reorientation of overseas staff to those tasks that could only be performed in that environment.

At the same time an analysis of consular work was performed. Based on this analysis it was determined that there are three significant interacting elements which constituted governmental responsibility to its citizens overseas and the expectation of its citizens.

- Providing authoritative, accurate and current information on conditions in foreign countries and advice as to what steps citizens could take to safeguard themselves before leaving home and when overseas;
- Providing those services that could only be done by government at all possible locations where citizens encountered difficulty; and
- Leaving to the private sector those services that did not require government intervention, especially when they entailed no danger to the well being of the citizen.

It was concluded that the first element – the provision of timely information and advice – could be carried out almost exclusively by staff at headquarters. On the second element – direct services to the citizen overseas - it was determined that many of

these requirements could be performed by staff at headquarters and where necessary missions could be supported by timely intervention by headquarters staff. On the third element – the shedding of some existing services - it was concluded that this had to be carefully presented to the travelling public so as to avoid the suggestion that this would result in a significant and substantial reduction in services.

### Relationships

The examination also concluded that consular services were an important element in the international travel industry. As such, it would be mutually beneficial to cooperate closely with various elements of the industry. This was considered important in areas such as:

- Travel medicine, medical insurance and travel insurance
- The distribution of security and safety information; and
- The development of new vacation destinations.

### Information Management Technology

Central to the modernization of consular services was the development, implement and deployment of dedicated information management technologies. More than any other aspect of the strategy, it was with improved information management that productivity was increased significantly and the barriers of time and space overcome. Equally important, information management systems provided the detailed data on which management resource decisions were made on a more accurate and realistic basis.

In late 1992, Canada decided to implement an aggressive strategy to develop information management tools to increase productivity that, in turn, supported improved and increased consular services over the past decade. This strategy, developed in close cooperation with WorldReach Software Corporation (up to 1998 with its parent AMITA Corporation), continues to be the foundation on which Canadian consular

services are provided.

### New Work Philosophy

Before there were any discussions with information management specialists, consular professionals thoroughly analyzed all aspects of consular work and determinations were made on how best to improve and increase service delivery through technology. This was not a ‘business case’ but rather the detailed itemization of the philosophy that would surround the move to technology. The philosophy included the following key objectives:

- **Information.** The core of consular work is the exchange of information between clients and officials. The move to technology had to store, transmit and protect this information so that it was available in real-time to all officials who provided consular services. The system would retain all information online with expansion in storage capacity as and when necessary. All information would be backed-up to disc at appropriate times in order to meet mandated archival standards.
- **Users.** Access to the system would be centrally controlled. All consular employees, centrally or locally hired, irrespective of location, would have access to the system. The system would be fundamentally intuitive to maximize acceptability without dictation and to minimize training. Employees would be allowed to ‘come-to-the-system’ at their own speed and comfort level within an overall time window.
- **Security.** Risk management was the key. The nature of the work and those involved dictated that a balance had to be struck on security concerns and the achievement of an acceptable level of performance. The assertion was made that it was not necessary to include highly sensitive information within the system in order for services to be provided. In the rare instances when there was a need to transmit and store highly sensitive information then this could be best done outside of the system rather than hobble it with ‘worst-case’ security

considerations.

- **Paper.** There were no assumptions made with respect to whether or not the system would reduce paper use. It was left to the users to determine what level of paper retention was necessary for their own comfort level. It was assumed that over time, as confidence in the reliability of the system and completeness of the information content increased, users would reduce the need for paper and this has happened.

### Technical Specifications

These work performance requirements established various technical specifications for the software system that would be developed. These continue to surround the use and evolution of information management technologies:

- **Reliability.** The system must be available very close to 100% of the time (except during scheduled maintenance).
- **Accessibility.** The system must be available to all employees, both overseas and at headquarters. It should permit access for employees external to the normal place of work using available communications systems and appropriate security access controls.
- **Communications.** The system would initially use proprietary, departmental communications facilities but as the technology and security features improved, fully capable of exploiting the ubiquitous INTERNET.
- **Expansion.** The technology should permit for the expansion of the system to new users and new points of service without the need for basic change to the system.
- **Upgrading.** The development and operational tools and systems should be assessed as to their expected commercial endurance and only those with long life expectations used (Microsoft technologies selected).
- **Inclusiveness.** The technology should be capable

of supporting the full range of consular functions ranging from case management to the provision of travel advice to the registration of citizens and be integrated both at a data level and for ease of user access at the desktop.

- **Centralized Data.** All data would be stored centrally and would be available to users in real time and on line. There were some suggestions for data replications at overseas locations but this was rejected on the basis of unnecessary complication without any resulting benefit and due to significant support and technical cost implications.
- **Performance.** The system response time was to be within normal industry parameters for a global system (typically at headquarters 5 to 10 seconds and overseas 10 to 15 seconds for most operations). This was considered one of the most important requirements as it more than any other provided user confidence. This was not achieved initially due to bandwidth limitations at some locations overseas. However, it has remained a system requirement and today has been fully met. Performance continues to improve, as greater bandwidth is available at declining costs.
- **Data Convertibility.** The system had to be capable of converting and storing information received in other formats (imagery, facsimile, scanning, copied text from other documents) and making it available system-wide.
- **Data Conversion.** Initially it was believed that data already available in an electronic format could be converted into the new system. However, it was soon discovered that the cost of doing so and the unreliability of the resulting data lead to the decision not to pursue this objective. Rather old electronic data (mainly registration records) were left outside of the new system. Data was added as current cases to the new system by case officers in a start-up activity partly as a training exercise and when there was an operational requirement to do so. It was found that within a short period of time

the old data was overlaid with more complete current data in the new format in the new system.

- **Data Entry.** Detailed rules were established in order to standardize data entry and where appropriate detailed 'picklists' were included. These picklists became an essential element to ensure data comparability and analysis across time and place for reporting and analysis as well as reducing data entry time.
- **Report Generation.** A key objective of the system was to provide users and program managers at the mission and headquarter levels with sufficient reports detailing key aspects of work. These reports, identified as 'operational' (Who are the Canadian arrested in the United States and Where are they located?) and 'managerial' (How many prisoner cases were there world wide and in what countries?), quickly became a valuable and essential feature of the new system in order to analyze workloads and resource requirements. In addition, due to the real time on-line access and previewing capabilities for reports, the need for printed copies of reports reduced.

### Conclusions

The resulting system (called COSMOS by Canada's DFAIT) has now been in use for over ten years. The total costs during that period for all aspects of development, operations and hardware is very modest compared to similar global applications (often at 1/10th of the cost). The ongoing costs remain modest when compared to other systems and the derived benefits. The success of the system based on performance has been outstanding. Central to this achievement has been the willingness, over time, of employees to use the software and support the system. COSMOS is now fully accepted as part of the Canadian consular management culture. The current challenge is to ensure that the system does not degrade through inattention and remaining current with new technological advances (recently completed migration to a

web-based architecture).

Looking back over the past ten years it is difficult to envisage how Canada would have coped with its consular responsibilities without the support provided by technology. The improvements have been significant. These are:

- **Standards of Service.** These have improved both quantitatively and qualitatively. More Canadians now receive consular services and surveys demonstrate that there is a high level of satisfaction;
- **Work Satisfaction.** A by-product of the use of technology has been a significant improvement in employee morale and job satisfaction.
- **Management Control.** The use of technology for operational work provides managers with enormous amounts of data that is used to understand work patterns, work levels and resource requirements. Trend analysis over many years is now possible to support resource allocations and when needed substantiate funding submissions to central authorities or justify user pay fee structures. In today's world these are essential requirements for consular managers to maintain support for their important activities.
- **Cost Avoidance.** With growth in international travel continuing almost unabated for the last 10 years, there have been significant cost savings due to efficiency improvements that have allowed the department to avoid new hires where otherwise older methods would have required.

For more information on modernization or a business case outline visit [www.worldreachsoftware.com](http://www.worldreachsoftware.com) and select consular then reference and presentations.



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