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USDA Submits GPEA Progress Report

On July 1, USDA submitted their latest report detailing the Department's progress in complying with the Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA), which requires government agencies to provide, fully-electronic options for all of their transactions with the public when practicable. With less than three months remaining before the October 2003 deadline, agencies from across the federal government are scrambling to design and implement new tools and systems to meet the law's requirements. USDA's latest statistics suggest that the Department will offer electronic options to its customers for 35% of its transactions. While much of the discussion to date has focused around the need for reliable and secure eAuthentication solutions, there are a number of other steps that individual agencies within USDA must take if they intend to meet the targeted deadline in October.

The GPEA deadline comes at a time when citizens have become accustomed to interacting with private organizations electronically and are increasingly expecting the same of government. For example, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently saw its new national "Do Not Call" registry Web site (see accompanying article for more information) overwhelmed by individuals looking to register their phone numbers online rather than through the telephone number that had been established to serve the same function. Many IT professionals from around the government suggest that the FTC example points to the need for rigorous testing of new applications and Web sites to make sure that they will be able to handle the strain of widespread usage and avoid poor response times and other problems that could lead to disappointed customers. As agencies prepare to launch their GPEA applications, they should perform all necessary testing to ensure that citizens will want to use the new tools. Last month's eGovernment newsletter details many of the attempts by various USDA agencies to solicit customer feedback in the design of the applications.

Additionally, the FTC example highlights the need for government agencies to market their eGovernment applications with key customer groups. In order to fully reap the efficiencies and cost savings associated with GPEA, agencies must make sure that their customers are familiar with new electronic access tools. Well-timed press releases and other marketing materials heralding agency GPEA solutions and providing customers with an understanding of their potential benefits will help spur momentum over the coming months and encourage greater online interaction with USDA.

For more information about the steps associated with successfully complying with GPEA, please contact the eGovernment Team.

eLearning Initiative Continues to Move Forward

Thanks to the hard work of the cross-agency USDA eLearning team, all USDA employees will soon gain access to GoLearn.gov, the Federal provider of online courseware and other eLearning services. Over the past few weeks, employees have received introductory emails announcing this new online training resource. Following an initial memo, a secondary message will be sent to users providing further GoLearn.gov registration steps and login information. To date, 53% of USDA employees are already taking advantage of the free online courses provided by GoLearn.gov with more users joining each day. These government-wide courses will be supplemented by additional content purchased by USDA agencies. Once implemented, the eLearning effort will provide employees with new training opportunities not previously available and with greater accessibility.

Continuing to support the Presidential Management Agenda for eTraining, the eGovernment team plans to implement a new USDA enterprise-wide Learning Management System (LMS) in FY 2004. An LMS Evaluation Team of agency and staff office representatives have just completed a thorough eight-week evaluation of LMS providers available through GoLearn.gov for this implementation. In coming weeks, the eLearning team will be announcing the selected LMS provider and begin planning for the LMS implementation.

To aid in both the purchase of additional online courseware for agencies and the implementation of the USDA enterprise LMS, a liaison of contact will be identified within each agency to support these efforts. The liaison will help each effort by understanding and communicating their agency's needs around eLearning to help USDA develop a solution that works for all employees. Agency liaisons will be critical in identifying the key agency representatives to be involved during the design and roll-out of the new LMS. In addition, the liaison will act as the communications link between each Agency and the eGovernment team.

For more information about the eLearning initiative, please contact the eGovernment Team.

Usability Testing: GSA's Lessons Learned

As the Internet increasingly becomes the primary means for Federal agencies to interact with each other and the public, users' low tolerance for poorly designed, hard-to-use Web sites has translated into negative assessments of these sites' owners. Further, as users more frequently access Web sites expecting to accomplish specific tasks, it has become more important to measure the quality of users' experiences when engaging with a system.

A recent usability test conducted by the General Services Administration found that citizens are looking for a number of features on government sites, including government news, means for contacting elected officials and other personnel, online transactions, and online community forums.

To evaluate the effectiveness of new content features and functionality, GSA has found usability tests to be valuable to measure the efficacy of site navigation, simplicity of terminology, and whether users are able to find information on the Web site. Once these performance issues have been successfully addressed, Web users will more likely return and explore other components of the site. Subsequently, the volume of inquiries to the agency via phone and e-mail will decline. In addition to the detailed content analysis provided through usability testing, GSA believes that it is also important to understand users' work processes and goals as well as to gather functional requirements through focus group testing. Because this technique focuses on users' intentions, it provides further insight to improving their interactions with sites. Moreover, individual usability testing and focus groups can be combined to reveal both specific site problems and broad themes across users. This approach offers the benefits of both structured, one-on-one input and the creativity that emerges in group settings.

GSA's selection of test methodology depends on the purpose, scope and objectives of its projects. Because these tests can be costly and time consuming to execute, GSA recommends taking advantage of low-cost resources from other agencies, such as usability labs at the National Cancer Institute and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Documentation for testing and reporting procedures should include performance metrics such as time to complete scenario and success rates. Once the findings have been gathered, GSA's new design requirements and implementation work plans strive to maintain a balance of usability recommendations, Web team input, customer feedback, and stakeholder priorities. Regardless of the testing method chosen, the key for GSA to facilitate a more successful Web user experience is detecting and overcoming site problems at an early stage in the development process.

In The News: National Do-Not-Call Registry

The Federal Trade Commission's (FTC's) 'Do-Not-Call' program allowing citizens to opt out of receiving unwanted telemarketing calls has quickly become one of the highest-profile examples of leveraging eGovernment.

The decision to implement the National Do Not Call Registry was the culmination of a comprehensive three-year review of the Telemarketing Sales Rule. After holding numerous workshops and meetings to solicit feedback from interested parties and considering over 64,000 public comments, most of which favored establishing a registry, the FTC modified the telemarketing rule to offer consumers a choice regarding telemarketing calls.

Under the supervision of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, this new system will collect the telephone numbers of individuals who have informed the Commission that they do not wish to receive telemarketing calls. The agency plans to compile these records in a secure electronic database designed, developed, operated and serviced by agency (or contractor) personnel bound by the restrictions of the Privacy Act of 1974. In addition to providing online registration for the new list, FTC is using a dial-in telephone system that relies on interactive voice response (or "telephone menu") technology to answer incoming calls from individuals, and caller identification technology to verify the telephone number from which an individual is dialing before adding that number to the registry.

The FTC, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and state officials will begin enforcing the National Do Not Call Registry on October 1, 2003. Individuals who register after that date should notice a reduction in the number of telemarketing calls they receive within three months of their registration. If telemarketing calls persist after registering a telephone number, consumers may file a complaint with the FTC, either electronically or by phone. With the exception of calls from political fundraisers, charitable organizations, and survey calls, which are exempted from the registry, telemarketers who disregard the registry could be fined up to \$11,000 for each call.

As of July 28, 2003, consumers have registered a total of 28.7 million telephone numbers in the National Do Not Call Registry. 23 million (or 80%) of those registrations have been made on the Internet, and 5.7 million (or 20%) have been made via telephone.

For more information on the National Do Not Call Registry, please visit: www.donotcall.gov

Changing Conventions with eTravel

Federal agencies spent approximately \$10 billion on airline tickets, hotels and car rentals in FY2002, an increase of 12% over FY2001 travel expenditures. Part of the Presidential eGovernment Initiatives' Internal Efficiency and Effectiveness portfolio, the eTravel effort, particularly its automated travel booking engine, is aimed at re-engineering current government travel practices to streamline processes, simplifying travel planning for employees while reducing travel processing costs. Indeed, this system will generate significant cost savings of 50-60% in processing costs, reduce the cycle time of processing voucher claims by 70% and provide a "one-stop" travel service for Federal employees.

The past few months have included some of the first major steps for the booking component of the eTravel project. With the selection of Fed-Trip, an on-line booking agent, users will have 24-hour access to reservations, itineraries, and profiles. In addition to being more convenient than previous methods, the system gives travel planners access to travel policies, special rates for hotels and airfares, and car rental agreements. The self-service booking system will be available anytime, anywhere and can be accessed electronically through PCs, laptops or handheld devices.

By utilizing best practices learned from other industries, the government-wide eTravel initiative will implement proven methods to improve government travel planning. The changes will centralize all government travel planning and management, making travel planning easier to use for employees and more cost-effective for agencies. The effort, led by the General Services Administration (GSA), is mandated to begin deployment by December 2004 and move towards full implementation across all government agencies by September 2006. In preparation for full implementation, Federal Travel Regulation guidance and mandates have been issued to standardize eTravel usage, and employees can now use an interim system that will further prepare them for the new Web-based solution.

For more information on any of these topics, or for general comments or questions, contact the eGovernment Team at:

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