



Using Low-Code Automation to Improve Public Services and Government Operations

For the public, submitting documents to government agencies tends to be time-consuming and frustrating. For agency staff, managing these documents is fraught with bottlenecks and manual processes.

Fortunately, a new generation of document management automation tools is easing the strain on agency staff while streamlining government services and reducing the workload for IT departments.

This brief explores how applying low-code automation to document management can drive strong results for state and local jurisdictions. We open with real-world examples that illustrate the potential of this kind of automation. We then explore some challenges for agencies to address when embracing low-code automation and close with best practices for successful implementations.

Proven Use Cases for Automated Document Management

Agencies implementing public service programs to ease the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic found that low-code automation helped them eliminate time-consuming, repetitive processes. The net impact: faster relief for people in need.

Low-code automation allows everyday users to quickly assemble online applications in an easy-to-use drag-and-drop interface. "It's been a lifesaver for us," says Debbie Brannan, former area manager of innovation for Cabarrus County, which serves about 226,000 people northeast of Charlotte, North Carolina.

For instance, low-code automation helps government agencies easily create online forms for residents to automatically enter data and upload documents. A low-code app can manage the entire data and document approval workflow, sharply reducing agencies' development timeframes and paperwork volume.

"We're constantly looking for ways to improve automation and remove paper from the process when possible," says Ryan Drake, senior IT analyst in Santa Clarita, California, a suburban city of about 230,000 north of Los Angeles.

Both Drake and Brannan saw the benefits of low-code automation first-hand when their jurisdictions needed fast, effective ways to distribute federal rent assistance funds to families during the pandemic. The Emergency Rental Assistance Program made up to \$45 billion available to state and local governments. Once the money became available, low-code tools allowed Drake and Brannan (and their colleagues nationwide) to spin up data submission forms that could be optimized for mobile devices. "We knew a lot of people didn't have access to the internet on other devices," Brannan explains.

The apps sped the process of verifying individuals' documents and personal data. Cabarrus County also implemented a chatbot that asked applicants questions to make sure they were eligible for assistance. This prevented people from filling out pages of forms only to find they were ineligible.

Low-code automation also helped with case management, payment workflows and payment confirmation. The tools removed choke points and prevented misuse while ensuring those entitled to benefits got them.

Low-code platforms democratize development because they let agency staff do their own programming, which eases the strain on IT and frees agencies to automate many more everyday processes and workflows. Moreover, IT teams and agency staff gain more time to focus on big-picture challenges because they have fewer manual processes bogging them down.

Indeed, low-code applications are ideal for any busy government department that has an abundance of time-consuming manual processes that are ripe for automation.

Top Challenges for Agencies Exploring Automation

Low-code platform providers design their software to be easy to use for people with little or no formal technical training. Those people are called "citizen developers" because they are the department users who need their work automated and can do it themselves with a

low-code platform. Apps can be up and running in days without having to route requests to the IT department. "The most important benefit is the flexibility to respond to changing conditions," says Kurt Rapelje, director of strategic partnerships with Laserfiche, a leading provider of low-code tools to government agencies.

Rapelje says that with a little effort, agencies can address some common challenges when embracing low-code automation, including:

Integrating third-party data and applications. A low-code application may need to pull data from other departments or coordinate with software for enterprise resource planning and other capabilities. Appropriate controls should be in place for enabling and limiting access to that data through low-code apps. Deploying robotic process automation (RPA) can empower citizen developers to make the integrations they need. RPA uses user-interface interactions to automate manual activities. The "bot" watches the user copy and paste data between applications to learn how to integrate those applications. Using RPA, citizen developers are able to create integrations themselves without needing IT to write code that uses the APIs of the applications.

Partnering with IT. Do-it-yourself development may require working together with IT teams to do things like utilizing APIs for communicating with legacy backend systems. The best low-code platforms include support for calling APIs when needed with minimal configuration required of the citizen developer.

Training and encouraging adoption. Rapelje notes that people may find it surprisingly simple to build low-code applications and processes — especially digital natives who have been immersed in digital technologies for years. Still, some training may be required to help people take their first step. And agency leaders may need to set aside time to motivate their people to adopt the technology.

In Cabarrus County, some agency staff were slow to embrace low-code applications like automated data-submission forms — until COVID-19 restrictions forced them to put more services online. "When the pandemic came, those particular people were wanting their digital forms right now, so our demand certainly increased," Brannan recalls.

Best Practices for Implementing Low-Code Automation in Document Management

To draw the full potential from low-code platforms, agency leaders must use sustainable development practices while encouraging innovation.

Rapelje recommends these best practices:

Document your efforts. Professional coders create documentation to explain their programming decisions and provide guidance to future developers who may have to manipulate the code. Robust low-code platforms have similar options for do-it-yourself developers. "Having that documentation there really makes it easier for other people to understand the app and to build upon it," Rapelje says.

Build a community. Large application providers often have a global community of citizen developers who share their ideas with their colleagues. Government agencies can apply the same concept locally. An agency might create a wiki or convene meetings for people to show off new processes they have built and get feedback from their peers. "That really helps build momentum for doing this kind of process automation," Rapelje adds.

Curate the app catalog. Some agencies get so adept at low-code automation that departments start to duplicate each other. Thus, it helps to curate the catalog of processes and applications by staging quarterly reviews to avoid redundancies.

Keep IT in the loop. Low-code automations can evolve into key components of crucial public-facing applications. Thus, agency IT departments must maintain oversight of low-code automation throughout the government. "IT oversight is an important step to reduce the chance that processes unintentionally break in a way that interrupts public services," Rapelje cautions.

Making Automation Work

Low-code automation can improve services to the public while streamlining workflows within agencies. This can be done with minimal participation of IT departments, ensuring rapid implementation and agile responses to the needs of an ever-changing populace.

Drake in Santa Clarita sees a bright future with low-code technologies, which give his agency an incentive to scrutinize manual processes and optimize them when it's practical. "We won't hesitate to make those things digital or fully automated."

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