

Technology

Technological Choice

As mentioned earlier, OSBR is a business registration system built on an Oracle database. The first phase of OSBR in 1996 was based on a modified version of the Mosaic browser that enabled two-way communication between users and the government. Next an interface for data entry was developed. The start-up process was rather slow. Initially, the terminals were used to produce and fax the forms filled out at a kiosk. Form processing is expected to become increasingly electronic, with XML.

Some users complained about the slowness of the existing Internet system and that the terminals froze when a user did not wait long enough for system responses. Nonetheless, the vast majority of comments in the survey at the end of a registration session indicated that the best feature of the system was its simplicity. This feedback leads one to believe that the target clientele wants to be able to carry out the same procedure through the Internet at home instead of having to go to a kiosk.

Moreover, the kiosks we visited are often in very busy public places, making it hard to concentrate while filling out the forms. Those in municipal offices appear to be particularly poorly located. On the other hand, those in the offices of government agents are in quieter locations where users can get help from government officials.

This choice of very simple technology has begun working against the project. With the public making increasing demands on government services, this lack of technological sophistication is viewed as a shortcoming. Many users expect a more sophisticated version of the software that can be used at home. The organizations involved in the partnership also expect the system to be upgraded. In brief, more technological sophistication will give the project more credibility. The technology made progress possible. Its upgradeable nature is essential. OSBR can easily be integrated into the technological progress of Internet-based government services.

Officials see the technology as a way to eliminate tedious tasks. One of the people responsible for the technology concluded that it has to remain a means; that the project should be driven, not by technology, but by program content.

Technical Support

A help hotline was installed so that system users could get immediate answers to their questions. This led to improvements in the wording of the questions on the electronic forms as queries arose. Each kiosk is equipped with a phone directly connected to a centre from which calls can be forwarded to the government agencies concerned if necessary because of a specific question.

OSBR is very limited in terms of technology because it originally established an electronic service for clients and officials who were not necessarily computer literate. The rather quick replacement of text mode with software that involved using a mouse was considered a tremendous advance by everyone, which provides some insight into the stress many people felt when facing a computer. The advantage of the kiosks in this regard was that users could get help from government agents or officials of the nonprofit organizations housing the kiosks.

The help hotline was also frequently praised. Each kiosk has a phone with a direct line to an OSBR employee who answers user questions. At present in British Columbia, this can be done by one person. Each opening of a new kiosk brings a fresh wave of questions and problems. Employees throughout the province praise the efforts of this individual who helps them provide better answers to user questions.

The technical support and constant interaction made it possible to continuously improve the program. For example, the training provided was inadequate at the beginning but has been adjusted since. Employees in the field get the impression that their suggestions are being listened to and lead to improvements. The technical support truly is one of OSBR's strong points.