



TOWN OF WEST SPRINGFIELD

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

In August of 2015, the Town of West Springfield entered into a [Community Compact agreement](#) for Citizen Engagement as an Information Technology Best Practice. In the summer of 2016, a team from the [Office of Municipal & School Technology](#) (O.M.S.T.) began researching the Town's efforts around citizen engagement and online transactions, focusing largely on their recently deployed kiosk. Town leadership requested assistance, through the [Community Compact Cabinet Program](#), in brainstorming how to best leverage their kiosk to engage residents and promote its functionality. The purpose of their initiative is to provide an alternative way for citizens to interact and conduct business transactions with the Town.

DEPLOYING NEW TECHNOLOGY

Today, many organizations rely on technology to carry out their daily business operations. It's important to have a plan in place so that certain factors, such as human resources, are not overlooked during the decision-making process. In West Springfield, municipal staff and residents regularly interact with the Town's systems; therefore, their input should be well-incorporated when choosing a solution. Change is never easy but below are general guidelines the Town can apply to their future technology initiatives to get the necessary buy-in for a successful deployment.

DEVELOP A PLAN

It's no surprise that plans are an essential part of deploying technology successfully. A plan provides general guidelines and a framework for the project at hand. Depending on a project's scope, a well thought out strategy can increase the likelihood of a smooth execution. As a result, organizations are able to effectively leverage the functionality of a new technology solution. Here are some key considerations¹ to think about when developing an initial deployment plan:

- 1.) *Set Measurable Objectives* - Identify what the organization hopes to accomplish with the adoption of new technology. Determine what the steps are necessary in order to achieve those goals. What workflow changes could be measured as a result of advanced computing?
- 2.) *Develop a Roadmap/Timeline* - Capture the organization's vision and build out the project framework. Estimate the time needed to complete each step.
- 3.) *Perform Risk and Cost Analysis* - An important step in developing a technology deployment plan is to identify potential problems that could undermine the success of the initiative, and then identify steps that can be taken to mitigate the risks identified. In addition, it helps look at the total cost of ownership when deploying a new initiative. When you look at total cost of ownership, you want to consider the startup costs, operational costs and retirement costs of the

¹ Insurance Innovation Reporter. [5 Best Practices for Successful Technology Deployment](#). March 7, 2014.

initiative. Some of the key considerations will be initial and ongoing hardware and software costs, user training, staffing and administration and migration or archival of data when the solution reaches end of life.²

BUY IN

When leadership is considering the procurement of a new technology solution, they should work with municipal staff to select the best product possible. Reassure staff that their concerns are a priority and that the input they provide will help move the organization forward. Ask them to identify any pain points that exist within the current system and document which functions are absolutely essential for their workflow. Give pertinent staff the opportunity to gather information on other products or services that could potentially enhance Town Hall's business operations. Once this is done, Town leadership can make an informed decision that best fits the financial and technological needs of the organization. Incorporating input from municipal staff early on in the decision-making process makes implementation easier as well. Employees who have invested their time and expertise may feel motivated to learn about and utilize the new technology they helped select. By communicating with staff early in the process, Town leadership can be confident that the final solution will meet their expectations.

CLEAR & FREQUENT COMMUNICATION

Before the deployment process starts, leadership should broadcast plans to upgrade the Town's technological capacity. The technology deployment may result in changes to policy, accountability and liability that could largely impact members of the organization. Therefore, it's important to place attention of the positive aspects of the transformation such as new technology features and functionality and/or cost savings through improved service. Clearly explain how the new system would benefit each department and address any budgetary or productivity concerns. Proactively communicating through press releases, employee memorandums, and social media platforms can mitigate uncertainty within Town Hall and in the community. Instead, the message will focus on building enthusiasm and creating an image of positive change.

TRAINING

Providing customized training to internal staff is a crucial part of deploying any new product or service. For employees who are not comfortable with changes in technology, training is one way to resolve feelings of frustration or intimidation. Switching to a new information system can be challenging so it's okay to be open and honest with employees. Let them know that it is normal to expect minor issues and reassure them that they will be trained to handle any mishaps. Teaching non-technical staff to independently operate the new system will help them feel empowered to utilize it effectively, which ultimately boosts productivity. Ideally the Town's IT and Human Resources departments are engaged in

² CIO.com. [Calculating the total cost of ownership for enterprise software](#). November 19, 2015.

these training initiatives, even if they are largely handled by a third-party. If the technology has public facing components, municipal staff should be able to confidently teach constituents how to use the tool. This process creates a shift in the organization's culture as it builds a more tech savvy, technology-friendly environment.

TESTING

For quality assurance purposes, any new technology product or service should be tested before it is launched. For software installations, use a sandbox environment to test run the Town's daily functions and other common business operations before going live. Experiment with negative and positive test cases to check for defects. For hardware implementations, look for any obvious physical defects internally and externally. Test for hardware failures³ and document the results.

LAUNCH & ANALYZE RESULTS

Once the technology deployment is complete it's time to analyze the results, track progress, and fix any glitches or inefficiencies that arise following the launch. Create comparison charts to assess similarities and differences in the data that reflect old and new processes. Highlight key indicators of success such as time, number of defects, and volume of user traffic, such as requests or submissions. Determine if these numbers have increased, decreased, or remained constant. Each bit of new information means something and could help the organization progress.

ONGOING SUPPORT

Even after deploying the new system, have support on standby to handle any unexpected technical issues. Set expectations for responsibility by providing staff with contact information of the vendor's support center in case internal support staff are out of the office or extra training is needed. With proper planning, support and training, organizations can increase their odds for successful technology deployment and have an enthusiastic staff ready to navigate it.

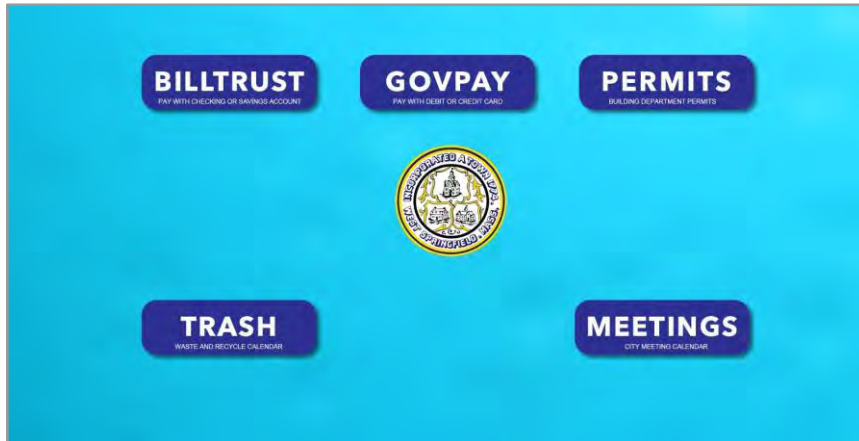
ONLINE SERVICES STRATEGY

Kiosk Background Information. In 2016, the Town of West Springfield purchased a Justified Automated Collections Kiosk (J.A.C.K.) from AdComp Systems, which has been operating since February 16th, 2016. The kiosk's original purpose was to promote electronic permitting to the Town's

³ Computer Hope. [How to Test for Hardware Failures in a Computer](#).

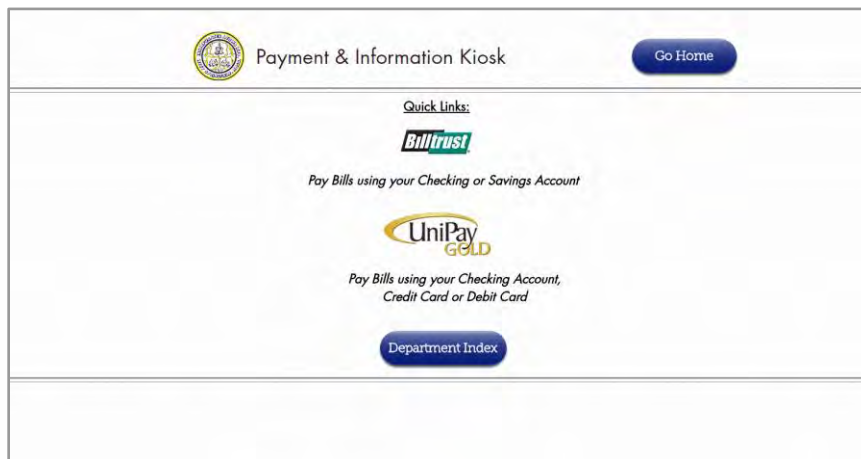
residents, but highlighted a number of commonly used services and provided easy access to commonly requested information, including: Town website

- *BillTrust* - Online bill payment using a checking or savings account.
- *GovPay* - Online bill payment using a debit or credit card.
- *Permits* - Download permits in PDF format, manually print and fill them out before submitting them to the Building Department.
- *Trash* - Schedule for bi-weekly collection of curbside recycling.
- *Meetings* - Schedule for Town Council Meetings.



Screenshot: Original "Kiosk Mode" taken May 17th, 2016

Current State of Kiosk. Due to limited customer traffic the kiosk was moved from the 2nd floor, where it was previously located opposite the Building Department, to the 1st floor lobby where it is currently available 24 hours a day. Due to shifting priorities, the functionality of the kiosk has also changed and is now focused on bill payment options.



Screenshot: Current "Kiosk Mode" taken April 3rd, 2017

DETERMINE WHAT YOU WANT TO IMPROVE

When thinking about the next iteration of your citizen engagement strategy, it can be helpful to bring Town leadership and IT staff together to review the Information Systems at Town Hall to identify opportunities to improve Town processes.

EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ONLINE SERVICES

Advantages of self-service.⁴

- *More time for high value tasks.* With municipal staff putting less energy towards administrative tasks, they can refocus their efforts on more pressing issues at Town Hall.
- *Less paper and searching.* Switching from a manual paper process to an online solution has the potential to reduce cost, can be more environmentally friendly and has the potential to reduce the time it takes to track down records.
- *24/7 Access.* One of the biggest advantages of self-service, or e-payment, is the ability to access the system remotely during all hours of the day, better aligning Town services with the schedules of residents.

Disadvantages of self-service.⁵

- *Transaction fees.* Some online solutions include transaction fee charges. This can be an ongoing cost, and while the benefits generally outweigh the costs, it is important to analyze what all of these small transaction fees add up to, particularly when the argument is based on a reduction in staffing needs, given that financial benefits based on staff are unlikely to be immediately realized.

Leverage the kiosk to boost online engagement.

- *Develop a plan.* The Town can develop a plan that leverages the kiosk to further Town efforts to promote online services alongside the website redesign. While a kiosk can generate great buzz, the goal probably shouldn't be to bring residents into Town Hall to complete transactions on a

⁴ Government Technology. [How Constituent Self-Service Helps Government Save Money and Improve Services.](#)

⁵ Government Technology. [The Economics of E Government Services are Far From Simple.](#)

computer. A kiosk can be seen as a tool to bridge the gap between residents completing transactions in Town Hall and residents completing transactions online from home or work.

- *Get Town staff involved.* Make sure Town staff knows how to use the kiosk and encourage them to inform residents about online options. Before collecting the excise tax payment, ask, “did you know we now accept excise taxes online?” If a resident is open to the idea or slightly intimidated by technology, staff can offer to walk them through the process on the kiosk, so next time they’ll be comfortable trying it from home.

- *Leverage existing communication channels to promote services.* Use West Springfield’s [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) presence to draw attention to services that address resident needs and improve operational efficiency. The more visuals the better, post pictures of citizens using the Town’s technology. Highlight the value the technology provides customers such as shorter wait times and reduced late fees. Best practice would be to post to Facebook 1 - 5 times a month⁶, perhaps using a scheduling tool. However, this timeframe can be shortened if there is exceptionally compelling content available. Ultimately, the goal of posting to social media is to connect with constituents.
 - Best times to post on Facebook:⁷
 - 12pm - 1pm (Saturdays & Sundays)
 - 3pm - 4pm (Wednesdays)
 - 1pm - 4pm (Thursdays & Fridays)

 - Best times to post on Twitter:⁸
 - 12pm - 3pm (Mondays - Fridays)
 - 5pm - 6pm (Wednesdays)

- *Sample Posts for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram:*

⁶ Hubspot, [How Often Should You Post on Facebook? \[New Benchmark Data\]](#), April 20, 2015

⁷ Hubspot, [The Best Times to Post on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn & Other Social Media Sites\[Infographic\]](#), January 6, 2016

⁸ Ibid



- Next time you're at Town Hall say hello to EDDIE! Our bill payment kiosk. [Insert link to kiosk page]
- Did you know you can pay your bill online? Check out the services on our website:
<https://www.townofwestspringfield.org/>

- *Make sure the service is easily accessible.* Some recommendations from the [U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division](#) include:
 - **Describe all links.** Similar to images, the visually-impaired require specific text to let them know where to click and what the link will take them to. For example, if you are linking to the Building Department's page on the Town website, avoid saying "[Click here](#) to access permitting information." Instead, write something like, "To access permitting forms, go to the [Building Department's page](#) on the Town website."
 - **Select friendly colors.** A common pitfall in design is that certain colors are difficult for many people to read. The following links are tools that recommend swatches vibrant enough to be seen by individuals who struggle to interpret certain colors. The higher the contrast ratio, the easier it is to be seen. This tool is useful for print or web media and allows information to be accessed by a wider audience.
 - <http://leaverou.github.io/contrast-ratio/>
 - <http://contrast-finder.tanaguru.com>

- **Use machine-readable files whenever possible.** Whenever possible, include text directly in a web page. If a document must be a PDF, ensure that you are able to highlight and copy/paste text; if you can't, a person will not be able to have their computer read the content to them. This may require re-typing old, scanned documents, but this will go a long way to improving accessibility for everyone; in addition to assisting text readers, it also increases the chances that anyone's search will help them surface the document.
- **Put periods in all abbreviations.** Screen readers will not pronounce an acronym properly unless there are periods between the letters. If C.I.A. is spelled "CIA," it might be pronounced like the singer Sia.
- **Keep copy simple but contextualized.** Whenever adding new text to a website or posting to social media, keep the language as simple as possible. This makes it conducive to all reading levels and even translators. On the other hand, it's important to make this information understandable.
- *Loyal customers make good spokespeople and focus group.* Proactive citizens who regularly visit Town Hall are similar to loyal customers at local businesses. They do more than just complete business transactions, they also hold conversations with the employees. This is a great opportunity for the Town to learn about constituent needs while also informing customers of recent updates at Town Hall. For example, when citizens come into Town Hall to complete a transaction, briefly ask for their feedback on the online services and how it could be improved. They'll feel personally invested after they've had a positive interaction with technology and may be willing to help promote the service by word of mouth.
- *Analyze your data.* Determine ways to analyze the click data from the website.. A website redesign is the perfect time to develop or update metrics. Look at current and past data to see trends over time. A good analytics plan be extremely helpful in understanding constituent needs and prioritizing content on the new website.

CONCLUSION

The Town of West Springfield has seen significant change over the past year and is in a perfect position to further develop their strategy for engagement and deployment of online services. Thoughtful collaboration with Town staff and constituents has the potential to help streamline internal processes and become more responsive to resident needs.