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UKPS rated highest for customer service by Comparisat®

Faster applications, better service

When the UK Passport Service needed to find a way to upgrade its IT systems and improve its service to the public at least cost, it chose Siemens to deliver it.

In 1997 the Passport Service (now the Identity and Passport Service - IPS) needed to replace its ten year old, legacy IT systems in order to make them Y2K compliant and provide the Service with the tools for more efficient operations. The Passport Service knew that it needed to improve the ways in which it served the public and that their systems would have difficulty coping with new types of passports. Planned legislation on child passports that would significantly increase the number of passports in use was also a concern

The solution was to award Siemens a ten year, £100M, PFI (Public Finance Initiative) contract to deliver a new IT infrastructure and to provide services to capture and validate passport application data.

Today, the infrastructure implemented by Siemens Business Services copes with an 80% more applications compared with 1997 and provides the public with greater flexibility and faster turnaround times. As a result of their collaboration, the IPS has been recognised as a leader in customer service and satisfaction.

Meeting the challenges of increased security

Over 70% of British adults hold a passport. Renewals, replacements and new applications mean that the Identity and Passport Service has to issue over six million passports every year. And those passports are changing to improve border controls in the face of threats from terrorism and cross-border crime.

Handling passport applications efficiently is made more difficult by peaks and troughs in activity, with the number of applications ranging from 30,000 a week to over 170,000 a week at busiest times. New passport technology also demands changes in the way applications are handled, including capturing biometric data to be held in a chip that forms part of the passport.

A seamless process

The Siemens solution to the problems faced by the Passport Service was to develop new IT applications and, at the same time, to take over the initial parts of the application process.

The new systems automate the flow of work so that Siemens can handle applications from receipt to the point at which complete, accurate, validated data could be presented to the IPS officials.

The new system, known as PASS (Passport Application Support System), helps Siemens staff to capture, validate and enter the passport application data. It uses document scanning and character recognition to reduce the levels of manual intervention needed. Once data has been captured and checked, PASS routes the data to IPS staff who decide if a passport application should be granted. PASS then continues tracking the passport until it is issued.

Transferring the clerical parts of the process to Siemens allowed the company to use its skills in process re-design. Siemens used techniques from its experience in manufacturing processes. Involving staff in the re-design of processes also brought productivity improvements. Siemens introduced new working practices combining permanent staff with a pool of security cleared, previously trained, contract staff ready to work on a part time basis when needed to cope with peaks in demand. They introduced technology to make bottlenecks visible, to warn of the impact of staff sickness or holidays and to provide team leaders with information for capacity planning and management.

These measures reduced the effort needed to handle applications and speeded turnaround times, raising the average number of passports per hour handled by staff from 10 to 25.

Other developments have included creating Internet based solutions for passport applications on-line; the development of new finance and reporting systems providing IPS with management tools; and the development of anti-fraud measures such as the Lost, Stolen & Recovered database and links with external information resources in both the public and private sector.

The benefits of partnership

Working with IPS, Siemens has delivered substantial benefits both to IPS and to the public.

IPS has been able to reduce their operational staff by 20%, saving management costs. IPS copes with an 80% increase in work without additional costs for that part of the process. The Siemens service has helped IPS cope with new Government initiatives such as implementing support for biometric passports and interview based authentication of applicants. Siemens has also allowed IPS to improve anti-fraud measures through better links with other UK government departments (such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Interpol.

For the public, passport application has been made easier through on-line applications but more important is the reduction in waiting times. Today 99% of passport applications are processed and returned within 10 days, compared with typical delays of up to 50 days in 1997.

Taking a long term view

The collaboration between Siemens and IPS has made been successful in improving services but at first it looked as though the project was anything but a success.

In the early stages of the contract, delays increased as Siemens came to grips with the problems of taking over the work from IPS. However, both organisations worked together to solve the problems, taking a long term view. They avoided confrontation and finger pointing. Siemens invested in additional resources to help clear backlogs and IPS agreed to re-planning the roll out of systems to incorporate lessons learned.

Together IPS and Siemens turned the situation around so that, in July 2006, the Home Secretary felt able to point to IPS as an exemplar, describing it as "a shining example of transformation and what can be achieved".

Today customer satisfaction is high. Recently 97% of applicants expressed themselves very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the service received from IPS. This level of satisfaction allowed IPS to win the CompariSat customer satisfaction awards for three years running in competition with contenders from both the public and private sector.

Siemens and the IPS together, have managed to deliver significant change in the handling of passport applications. Today the public has choices from a service that offers a standard turnaround in 10 days, fast-track passports in 5 days or urgent, over-the-counter applications handled in only 4 hours. In July 2006, Bernard Herdan, Chief Executive of the UK Passport Service, acknowledged the role of partners in his annual report. "Our strategic objectives can only be achieved through working in partnership," he said. "I wish to express appreciation for the outstanding support we have received this year from Siemens Business Services."