An Online Application System for Civil Service Employment

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2013 CACUBO Best Practices Award Program

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Abstract:

Eastern Illinois University (EIU) had been using a manual paper-based process to manage applications for civil service employment. In addition, manual review of employment applications by the Office of Human Resources (HR) was required to ensure compliance with various hiring regulations. These manual processes were prone to error and created frequent backlogs. HR staff, with help from technology support staff, developed a new online application system to automate much of the civil service hiring process, resulting in reduced processing times, better customer service, and larger, more diverse applicant pools.

Employment/Examinations staff, along with staff from the University's Center of Academic Technology Support (CATS), conducted a major review of applicant tracking and the recruitment process at EIU. This review ensured that the new online system would comply with state rules and regulations for civil service employment and generate the information that HR and hiring departments need to assess job applicants. A modular design makes the online application system easy for applicants to navigate and helps them verify that their applications are complete and accurate.

Recruiting the right candidates for the right jobs can be costly and time consuming, and inefficient manual processes can drain the time and energy of the recruiting professionals. In this competitive climate, universities as well as other organizations are looking to streamline their business processes with the aid of effective technological solutions. This initiative was developed to address the ongoing recruitment needs of the various campus departments. The resulting benefits have been many: significant reductions in paperwork and the time spent to search, scrutinize, and select candidates, easier creation and updating of employment registers, improved reporting and tracking of applicant status, reduced foot traffic to the HR office, and increased numbers of qualified applicants.

Introduction to the Organization

Eastern Illinois University (EIU) is a residential, master's-level public university with more than 10,000 FTE students. Its 320-acre campus sits within the city limits of Charleston, Illinois, and the University enriches the community with cultural and athletic events, service activities, and economic benefits. The University's mission is to offer superior, accessible undergraduate and graduate education. Students learn the methods and results of free and rigorous inquiry in the arts, humanities, sciences, and professions, guided by a faculty known for its excellence in teaching, research, creative activity, and service. The University community is committed to diversity and inclusion and fosters opportunities for student-faculty scholarship and applied learning experiences within a student-centered campus culture. Throughout their education, EIU students refine their abilities to reason and to communicate clearly so as to become responsible citizens and leaders.

The University's vision is to be a premier comprehensive university, global in its reach and impact, where personal connections with faculty and staff support students' academic success. The University is implementing a strategic plan that focuses on six key areas: academic excellence, global competition and changing demographics, emerging technologies, campus and community life, financial sustainability, and marketing and communication.

EIU, like most universities, faces multiple pressures that impact hiring: greater competition for top talent, impending retirements, budget cuts, and increased accountability. This project was designed to improve the effectiveness of the University's civil service employment processes and to allow Human Resources (HR) staff to communicate with both applicants and hiring units faster and more efficiently.

Statement (Restatement) of the Problem/Initiative

At Eastern Illinois University, the Human Resources Employment/Examinations unit's practice was to only accept civil service applications in person. We had occasionally mailed or later emailed a .pdf application to our applicants, who then had to return it via email, USPS, or in person to our office for evaluation. As applicants came to our office, HR officers sat with each applicant to review their application, advising them of questions they had failed to answer and telling them if they were qualified for the position for which they had applied. We would then schedule them to take the appropriate civil service exam.

This process resulted in:

1. An office crowded with applicants waiting to be reviewed.

2. Complete disruption of any other work that may need to be done.

3. Applicants who had to be able to leave work and be physically present in order to submit an application. This meant that applicants were generally limited to those within driving distance, unless they were able to email their application.

4. All applications on file were paper with no data storage on who had applied for which positions.

    a. We could not search for applicants for a specific classification.

    b. We did not know how applicants heard about jobs.

The initial employment application process was paper-based and lagged behind the general methods and procedures that are common in today's industry. The online application process represented a critical element necessary in order to have the best possibility of attracting quality employment candidates.

The problem simply is that EIU Employment/Examinations unit was inefficiently processing applications due to the manual nature of the paper process. This created an environment where other important HR tasks were delayed or set aside to allocate time to keep the inefficient process functioning adequately. Staff did not have the time or resources available to them to advance the HR practice as a whole. They were operating in catch-up mode on a daily basis, which created uncalled-for emergencies.

Prior to implementing the online application process, the hiring process was completely manual, thus subject to errors. The hiring process must also comply with the rules and regulations of the State Universities Civil Service System (SUCSS), the agency charged with overseeing employment relationships between the Illinois public universities and their auxiliary and support employees. Some of the concerns were not getting applicant scores on registers fast enough and/or misfiling applicant scores, thus increasing the possibility of the applicant not getting an interview and then having to redo the interview process because of this error. The manual process also created delays in responding to applicants and hiring departments due to the manual workload.

The Employment/Examinations unit enlisted the help of EIU's Center for Academic Technology Support (CATS), which took our manual application and meshed it with the best of the various applicant-tracking systems on the market and adopted those practices into our own unique system. As we continue to evolve and automate our processes, reliability and the expediting of applicants will enhance our ability to attract, hire and retain a qualified, diverse workforce.

Design

Employment/Examinations worked with the campus CATS department to design an online application process that would be unique to EIU and would reflect its institutional brand. The initial design for the process came, as most do, from our paper application and processes; however, one of the best ideas actually came from releasing control of the product. A Graduate Assistant in the CATS department was assigned the project. He was handed our application and asked to create an online process that would be the easiest for the applicant to navigate. Since Graduate Assistants are prone to frequent many job application sites, he knew what designs to avoid and what designs worked best based on the needs of Employment/Examinations. He was able to incorporate best practices into the applicant side of this system.

Ultimately, we opted for a modular design. Applicants are guided through the key sections of the application form, beginning with personal information, followed by additional background information, military service, education and training, and employment history, ending with the opportunity to upload supporting documentation like resumes, transcripts, and discharge papers. Applicants have the opportunity to save the information entered and return to any section of the form at a later time. The modular design both makes the application process less intimidating for applicants and improves the accuracy and completeness of the information submitted.

The online application process was customized to match the requirements of the State University Civil Service System and the campus community based on what was learned through questioning and problem identification. The Employment/Examinations site is loaded with all current job openings, recruiting sources, and departments to work within the unique University structure. After the Graduate Assistant laid the groundwork for the site, a staff member hired in

June 2010 to replace a retired employee was assigned to this project, and the first online application was received in December of 2010. Although paper applications continue to be accepted, the vast majority now comes through the online application system.

An added benefit to this project was the limited cost incurred to set the project up and implement it. There was no setup fee, only staff salaries. CATS committed approximately 150 staff hours at a cost of approximately $3,900 to develop and implement this project. The other cost was associated with hiring two Extra Help staff, who worked on the project for approximately 450 hours at a cost of $4,950. There was no additional equipment cost or annual fees. System updates and defects are dealt with immediately and are typically resolved while HR staff is online with CATS staff.

Implementation

Implementation was in several stages based on the tweaking of the online application form:

1. Add the link to the online application to our website. This very quickly became the preferred method to apply for Civil Service positions. We began screening online and notifying applicants of their eligibility through the online system. The application also required certain entries, so we eliminated the problem of incomplete applications. We could also request more information, such as transcripts, resumes, or other documents via email, which could be attached to the application. Once an applicant was determined qualified for a classification, they were notified to make an appointment to take the examination.

2. We then began adding examination scores to the system. This required the entry of new exams as well as numerous past exam scores. This was one of the most time consuming

tasks. We enlisted the aid of two Extra Help employees for approximately 450 hours (at a cost of approximately $4,950.00) for a period of about a month to finish this process. In 2009, we had entered many exam scores into a simple .dbf file. This file was loaded directly into this newer system.

3. Use the system to create employment registers for specific vacancies, which can then be provided electronically to hiring departments for their use.

Benefits

The benefits of this initiative have been numerous. An estimate of cost savings based on building an in-house solution instead of purchasing an off-the-shelf program ranges anywhere from $15,000 to 100,000. Also, due to automation, time saved in processing an application and working with the applicant has been reduced by at least 2 hours. The solutions provided by this project were driven by the necessity to incorporate technology in HR. Prior to this initiative, the employment services process for hiring was manually driven and time consuming, prone to error and inefficient.

Current results have exceeded all expectations and continue to yield new and positive results. The new process has increased the diversity of our applicant pools since we are now able to reach beyond the counties that surround Charleston, Illinois. The online system has greatly reduced foot traffic to the department while greatly increasing the number of applications we receive, to the point that our Examinations area has a hard time keeping up with the number of qualified applicants waiting to test (which is a good problem to have!). The system also provides applicants with up-to-the minute status on each register showing their rank and when they are eligible to retake each exam to improve their score.

This initiative was achieved without any increase in permanent staff. Other benefits that are an outcome of this initiative are:

- Able to determine register rank immediately after scoring exam

- Can immediately review and screen applicants

- Can immediately determine what jobs each applicant has applied for and what job tests they are eligible to take

- Can more easily create and void registers

- Provides better customer service to walk-in applicants

- Can discern where applicants heard about job openings to better target our recruitment efforts, so we can easily identify the best sources for candidates

- Streamlines communication with large applicant pool in one centralized location

- Enhances our ability to provide good database management and improved communication with our applicants and hiring departments

- Allows for better reporting and tracking of applicant status

- Provides departments with a list of qualified applicants for interviews more quickly

- Increases our recruitment area, and increases the number, quality, and diversity of applicants

- Increases efficiency by reducing both processing time and effort and improving productivity for everyone involved in hiring process

- Automates compliance reporting

- Allows for job specific screening questions

Retrospect

An important aspect in any major undertaking is the understanding that it involves a dedicated long-term commitment to be successful. In reviewing the system, not much if anything would be changed as it has exceeded all expectations. If there were any changes to be noted, it would involve syncing the system with online testing.

EIU did not achieve these results without critical analysis of the processes that brought us to this point. Results from this project have been immediately realized with the expectation that there are more to come. There will be continued growth and development from this project as we learn more about how to more effectively utilize the system and to address growing hiring demands.