

RESULTS WASHINGTON CASE STUDY: Financial Records Disclosure

Bringing transparency to complex banking records. The Department of Financial Institutions has cut the time to fulfill a public disclosure request by 75 percent.

As the state agency that regulates some 192,000 financial institutions and professionals, Washington’s Department of Financial Institutions gets hundreds of complex public records requests each year. Some requestors are investors wanting to know more about who’s handling their money.

Others are investigators. Some are attorneys gathering background information on a business transaction, or businesses checking up on competitors.

“Some of these requests are for more than 150,000 records.” Phil Brady



While these are public records, they contain personal or financial information exempt from disclosure. Account numbers, for example, are exempt. So staff redact those sections.

“A lot of the requests we get are stupendously complicated,” said Phil Brady, the agency’s regulatory projects coordinator. “We apply something like 128 exemptions, both state and federal, and federal law has really been in flux these past couple of years. It takes a lot of time to do redaction and do it right.”

DFI is a small agency, and responsibility for answering these requests and redacting them was spread across staff throughout the organization.

“It used to spider web,” said Brady. “A particular request could shut down a unit for a week. When people do public records as maybe 10 percent of their job duties, there’s a really steep learning curve each time.”

Improvements: So the agency called a time-out to come up with ways to work smarter and provide information more quickly. Representatives from each division came together to figure out how to centralize the process, reduce re-work and keep staff focused on their core duties.



They cut a 55-step process in half. They developed a new template for requestors, so requests are written more precisely. They agreed to centralize the process so that people weren't constantly having to re-learn the rules. And they're changing the way documents are indexed, replacing a system that relied on multiple types of scanners with different index terms between different parts of the agency with a standardized system.

"The theme of this has really been 'standardize work,'" said Brady.

"People who do this job believe in transparency. We do it because we think it's important." Phil Brady

Outcome: The results? The wait time for records, which a year ago averaged six months, has been chopped by 75 percent. And the number of staff positions working on records and redaction has dropped from 6.5 to 3.5. Some of the most common requests are now sent out in just 15 minutes.



The other major change has been to ensure that employee skills overlap. Before the changes, one critical staffer was largely unable to take a vacation for three years because she knew that being gone would mean that requests would pile up and be delayed.

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