

2015 Technology Innovation Showcase

City of Decatur: Online Business License Project Decatur Embraces the Cloud

The City of Decatur licenses 1,700 businesses annually, and Revenue Division officials needed a way to make the process quick and easy for business owners and city employees alike. The division looked to technology, and its **Online Business License Project** culminated in the fall of 2013 with the launch of www.decaturtax.com/BusinessLicense, which allows businesses to renew their license online without having to mail a paper check. The website also enables businesses to print their own license if they choose, after the payment has been applied to their account. Payments can be made by credit card or e-check with no additional fees charged to the business. The website was optimized for mobile devices in 2014.

Prior to the new website, a business could renew its business license in Decatur only by mailing a check along with notarized immigration affidavits or by physically taking printed materials to City Hall from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. Businesses usually had to wait 7-10 business days to receive new licenses in the mail.

In addition, data about business licenses was available only internally. Businesses wanting information about their own records had to visit, call, fax or email the city's Revenue Division. Customers had no easy way to access information about businesses they patronize, and anyone who wanted to know if a business was operating with a current, valid business license had to contact the city or submit an open-records request. Depending on what they wanted to know – such as the business owner's name and contact information – additional research may have been required by staff. Other city departments had to contact the Revenue Division if they needed information about a business.

Meanwhile, the City of Decatur migrated from an old, premise-based system to an external, private cloud in 2013 through VC3's Citrix-based Virtual Office Advantage (VOA) solution. Decatur's policy department migrated to the cloud in 2014, completing the citywide shift. By **embracing cloud computing**, city employees and public safety personnel are no longer constrained by physical locations – they can serve customers from anywhere, anytime and from any device.

Before migrating to the cloud, city employees faced myriad limitations that inhibited their productivity. They were anchored to their desks and personal computer workstations from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Cumbersome VPN procedures limited remote use. Employees could not access their applications and files on mobile devices. They found it difficult to share data because some files and programs were saved to local client computers rather than servers. And what was the impact on residents, customers and businesses? They had to go physically to City Hall for service.

The local-client environment presented several other complications. It limited employees' ability to make presentations at conferences and business meetings, which undermined efforts to promote Decatur nationwide. For internal user management, premise-based computing led to inconsistent configurations and setups, which snowballed into delays while troubleshooting problems. The city wasted days or even weeks to onboard new hires, modify user privileges and disable access for terminated employees. And financially the city faced mounting capital and service costs to purchase and install new systems.

- The cloud improves Decatur's organizational culture by allowing the IT provider and the governance committee to focus on strategic technology services rather than fussing over infrastructure.

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- Department heads and personnel staff can now promote telework, flex schedules, more offsite training and cross-training initiatives.
- Two out of three city employees said the cloud had improved IT services, and half said IT services have improved by 10 to 30 percent.
- Decatur's cloud saves money by eliminating onsite server requirements, personal computers and desktop printing.
- Cloud computing increases productivity by enabling employees to work from home; for example, they were able to continue working throughout the severe winter storms of January 2014.
- Cloud computing strengthened the city's disaster-recovery program. If Decatur had not moved its servers to the cloud, the city would be facing about \$40,000 annually in disaster-recovery expenses.
- Decatur experienced a 16 percent increase in occupational taxes collected from local professionals, partly because city employees were able to use iPads when conducting site visits with delinquent professionals.

Decatur's approach to automating services for businesses and the shift to cloud computing help strengthen its case when competing with other cities to attract or keep businesses. Along with its public Wi-Fi network, Decatur has gained a reputation as an early adopter of innovative technology and successfully recruited several technology-savvy businesses. Decatur has also been selected as a Google Fiber community.