

Case

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County Clerk's Office helps protect citizens' privacy

Distributed image capture helps the Palm Beach County Clerk & Comptroller achieve compliance and enhance customer service



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It also gives our staff a well deserved sense of empowerment.”

**Palm Beach County Clerk,
Sharon Bock**



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When the state of Florida handed down a mandate requiring county clerks to remove personal data from public records, the Palm Beach County Clerk & Comptroller upgraded to a document imaging system that was truly ahead of its time.

Four years ahead of its time, to be exact.

The Palm Beach County Clerk & Comptroller's Office is an independent, constitutional governmental agency headquartered in West Palm Beach. At its head sits Clerk & Comptroller Sharon R. Bock, whose responsibilities include serving as the county's chief financial officer, auditor and treasurer, clerk of courts, county recorder and clerk of the board of county commissioners. The agency serves a local population of 1.2 million citizens from seven locations, and online at www.mypalmbeachclerk.com. In 2007, the office served nearly 1 million walk-in customers and more than 1 million telephone customers.

With such varied functions, the Clerk & Comptroller receives and processes millions of paper documents annually. These include “official records” such as mortgages, deeds, liens and marriage licenses, and “court records” such as traffic citations, complaints and final judgments. Documents arrive from many sources by mail or messenger, or are presented in person.

“Our paper volume is tremendous,” said Un Cha Kim, chief operating officer of the Clerk & Comptroller's Office. “We receive over 20 million pages per year.”

State Mandate Calls for Data Redaction

To address privacy concerns and reduce identity theft, the Florida legislature recently passed a statute requiring county clerks to redact personally identifiable data from images of all public records by 2011. Redaction is a process whereby confidential information — such as Social Security numbers, bank account details and credit card numbers — is removed from, or concealed within, records. The mandate applies to all public records filed with the Clerk & Comptroller's office.

Considering the Clerk's quantity of archived records, and the high volume of new documents it receives each year, compliance was not going to be easy. Palm Beach County courts file nearly half a million new cases annually, each with its own supporting documents. Unstructured documents abound. Some court records contain hard-to-read handwritten notes. And the Clerk is required to retain some records for decades.

These old documents can be fragile, faded or otherwise damaged

Personal Information, Off the Record

To contend with the mandate, the office called on the services of longtime partner Computing System Innovations (CSI), a systems integrator. CSI had overseen the implementation of the Clerk's original records management system and possessed the expertise to comply with the statute without disrupting the existing records retention system.

For automated redaction, the agency selected IntelliDact, CSI's proprietary redaction software. IntelliDact uses optical and intelligent character recognition (OCR/ICR) to identify personal data in digital images, including bank account information and credit card numbers. The software searches the unstructured information in images and marks any neighboring data it suspects of being confidential for redaction. IntelliDact also automatically docket documents

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images. Auto-docketing extracts identifying information — such as the case number or names of parties of interest — from images and enters it into a database, saving the Clerk's Office the trouble and expense of keying that data manually.

The accuracy of any redaction solution depends in large part on the readability of the document images. With that in mind, the Clerk's Office and CSI gave careful consideration to scanner and software selection. They ultimately chose a combination of Sidekick and Trüper scanners from BÖWE BELL + HOWELL Scanners (BBH) and Kofax Ascent Capture software.

With CSI's guidance, the Clerk's Office settled on a distributed scanning system that would capture and automatically redact documents at their points of entry. The office placed the scanners in strategic locations to maximize efficiencies, with low-volume production Trüper scanners at sites with higher paper volumes and compact, entry-level Sidekick scanners at sites with lower paper volumes. In all, the Clerk's Office has deployed approximately 100 Sidekick scanners and 20 Trüper scanners. Besides the scanners' speed, versatility and ease of use, the agency appreciated that Trüper and Sidekick come bundled with Kofax VirtualReScan® (VRS) image enhancement, which automatically checks and corrects images for alignment, brightness, contrast and image clarity. This step is critical in preparing the images for OCR and redaction.

Imaging + Redaction = Productivity + Compliance

Palm Beach County has completed redaction of its official records — both back files and all new incoming documents — which number more than 40 million pages. For court records, the Clerk's Office is introducing automated redaction in a phased plan, one court at a time. The system has gone live for the county's traffic/misdemeanor, probate and circuit civil courts, where all new records are imaged and redacted, and saved in a database. The Circuit Civil department, for instance, scans and redacts approximately 400,000 pages per month. Fortunately, BBH's durable scanners handle such document volumes with ease.

Distributed scanning allows data to be entered into the Clerk's system faster, rather than waiting for documents to be transported physically to a central scanning location. A traffic ticket scanned in the Clerk's South County branch, for example, is redacted automatically, uploaded to a centralized server, and validated and processed at the West Palm Beach headquarters.

"It used to take several days for a document received at the courthouse to be entered into our system as a case on record," Kim said. "But today any document that enters these courts is imaged quickly and automatically redacted for personal information. This has proved to be an effective way of protecting our citizens' privacy while reducing manual data entry."

The Clerk's Office only scans and redacts court records that are specifically requested and retrieved from archive. These documents can be up to 35 years old, and the paper may be very delicate. Staff rely on the Trüper 3200 model scanners, which have a flatbed scanning option for exception documents, fragile documents and bound pages.

"In addition to an auto-feeder, the scanners have a glass bed, which allows us to scan irregular documents without damaging them," said Karen Heidtman, director of legal records for the Clerk & Comptroller's Office. "This comes in handy in our criminal departments where we might receive spiral-bound documents or pages torn from a composition book."

Office departments that have implemented imaging and automated redaction have seen significant productivity benefits and tangible savings. The traffic department, for instance, previously had about eight full-time staff and 15 temporary staff who entered data off citations. Despite the manpower, there was a three-week scanning backlog. Yet within three weeks of CSI's IntelliDact system implementation, the staff had learned to operate the easy-to-use document scanners, eliminated the backlog and the 15 temporary staff positions.

"The system saves time and resources, and increases our redaction accuracy," Clerk Sharon Bock said. "It also gives our staff a well deserved sense of empowerment. Workers once labeled 'data entry people' are now trained, tech-savvy associates."

The Clerk & Comptroller expects to complete rollouts soon to the four remaining courts. According to COO Kim, the Clerk & Comptroller's Office's innovative imaging system will significantly increase productivity across the organization — not to mention achieve compliance nearly four years before the state's 2011 deadline.



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