

## @Work - Government

# E-Government Comes to the Provinces

A unique partnership between Unisys and Canada's Atlantic provinces is transforming the way government agencies do business.

### JoAnn Greco

His title may be vice president of finance, but for [Credit Union Atlantic](#) executive Ian Tramble, competitiveness is less about hitting the numbers than about providing top-notch customer service. "Our customers look to us for the convenience and personalized service they might not get at another institution," says Tramble of the Halifax, Nova Scotia-based financial organization.

Providing that high level of customer service recently got a whole lot easier for Tramble and numerous banks, law firms, real estate agencies and other organizations throughout Canada's four Atlantic provinces. That's thanks to a revolutionary e-government initiative called [Atlantic Canada On-Line](#) (ACOL).

A partnership between Unisys and the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, ACOL gives client organizations secure Internet access to government information. This information includes personal property records, vehicle information, business registries, filings for court documents, and more. Banks, for example, use ACOL to gather information before approving a loan; law firms use the service to file financial statements or conduct searches on outstanding liens. These organizations establish an account with ACOL, from which a small fee is automatically deducted for each transaction.

This streamlined information access makes life easier for ACOL's clients, which in turn improves service to *their* customers. At Credit Union Atlantic, accessing information to approve a loan, for example, was arduous and time-consuming. To gather supporting documentation, credit union employees had to travel to one or more provincial Registry offices and dig through dusty filing cabinets filled with tens of thousands of paper records -- a costly process that took days if not longer. Now, loan officers can access the documents they need from their desktops in a matter of minutes with just the



Atlantic Canada On-Line is bringing government services to businesses and individuals in four Canadian provinces, including picturesque Nova Scotia.

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**Learn More:** [The E-Team](#) -- Designing and implementing a cutting-edge e-government solution demands close cooperation -- with client agencies and across functional teams.

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click of a mouse. "ACOL saves us time, money and a ton of headaches," says Tramble.

## **The E-Business Vanguard**

ACOL is at the forefront of a growing trend among government agencies: using e-business initiatives to streamline processes and better serve their constituencies. In the United States, for example, Boston is among several cities that let citizens pay parking tickets online. And states such as Arizona, Maryland and New Mexico offer online motor vehicle registration.

"The cost and time savings that online transactions offer make it a win-win situation for government agencies and citizens," says Cathilea Robinett, executive director of the [Center for Digital Government](#) (Sacramento, Calif.). For example, the state of Georgia estimates that it has saved in excess of \$1 million by putting nearly 30 forms online, including those for corporation filing fees, state college tuition payments, and hunting and fishing licenses.

"Most of the savings governments are enjoying result from reductions in time and staffing needed to process a transaction," says Robinett. "Instead of four or five people handling a paper application and processing a check or cash payment, the online transaction happens directly with the customer, the transaction information goes straight into a database, and it's paid for with a credit card."

E-government also offers revenue opportunities, as Nancy Vanstone, executive director of Land Information Services for Nova Scotia, can attest. "We have seen a revenue increase by using ACOL," says Vanstone. "We expect that increase to grow as we migrate to a completely electronic registry this year and perform more searches."

## **A New Business Model**

The ACOL concept evolved about three years ago as part of a cooperative effort between the four Atlantic provinces to improve services for their citizens and find ways to deliver more of those services electronically. "We were looking for ways to get the technology in place with limited resources," says Marilyn Gaudet, deputy minister of business and consumer services for Nova Scotia, "so we turned to the private sector for help with the large but necessary technology and infrastructure investments. As a result, we've been able to move into the electronic service delivery arena a lot faster. I'm very proud of how this province has been able to dramatically improve and increase services for our citizens in a relatively short time. And there's a lot more to come down the road."

Unisys and the Atlantic provinces are sharing the risks and rewards of the online venture. Unisys has committed to invest \$10 million over five years to develop, implement and manage ACOL's infrastructure. In return, Unisys receives a portion of the transaction fees. "It's a brilliant model," says the Center for Digital Government's Robinett, "because agencies gain access to e-business expertise without having to invest significant funds."

The first application from the ACOL partnership was the Nova Scotia Personal Property Registry System (PPRS), a centralized computer registry that allows organizations and individuals to record their

financial interest in personal property such as cars and boats. This information is available to anyone who wants to purchase the property or grant a loan using the property as collateral.

"The online personal property registry has allowed us to provide citizens with a greater degree of service," says Arlene d'Eon, registrar of personal property for Nova Scotia Department of Housing and Municipal Affairs. "In fact, a survey of PPRS clients that we recently conducted revealed that they are extremely happy with the registry's service."

One of those satisfied customers is Kathy Watts, a corporate legal assistant with the law firm of McInnes, Cooper & Robertson. "We have offices and clients in Halifax, St. John's, Charlottetown, Fredericton and Moncton, so I use ACOL daily to register our corporate clients' financing statements and conduct searches of security interests or outstanding liens on their behalf," she explains. "Instead of traveling around the province to conduct registrations and searches, I'm able to do them from my desktop within minutes. And if I need technical or other assistance with the system, I can contact the helpdesk, which has been very beneficial."

### **Train and Gain**

Indeed, customer support has been key to ACOL's success. The system's Client Support Centre is a single point of contact designed to help all registered and prospective clients and government information providers develop and hone e-business skill sets. Technical-support specialists field inquiries -- ranging from general questions about ACOL services to client account status to technical issues -- from a toll-free phone number. Each inquiry is entered into an automated call-management system and tracked until satisfactorily resolved. The Centre also provides comprehensive training for all users.

"We received extensive training, as well as monthly bulletins and contact lists," reports Tramble of Credit Union Atlantic. "But the system is very user-friendly, so we haven't experienced many difficulties."

Government agencies have had an equally smooth conversion -- and are reaping additional benefits. "Because we needed fewer people to handle less paperwork, we were able to use our staff more efficiently," says Vanstone of Land Information Services for Nova Scotia. "For example, the department is now able to take staff that would have previously worked on personal property registry functions and redeploy them into the real property registration side of the business. So employees can gain work experience in several different job functions. Not only does this help the department provide better service to the public, but also it makes employees' jobs more interesting and meaningful."



Providing citizens with a higher level of service: Arlene d'Eon, registrar of personal property for Nova Scotia Department of Housing and Municipal Affairs.

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D'Eon isn't surprised by the many benefits that government agencies and the private sector have realized from this e-business transformation: "The Atlantic provinces have taken a traditional paper-based way of doing business and completely reworked it. We've created an environment that makes it easier for our clients to work with Atlantic Canada's four provincial governments."

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