

Executive Summary

Program Description - The overall thrust of Ohio's Forms Burden Reduction Act was to reduce the "form burden", essentially the completion time, for public use forms required by state agencies. The Act set this reduction at five percent per fiscal year for five fiscal years, ending in fiscal year 1999.

Relative Significance - The initial intent of the Act was to reduce work for the public sector. However, there were also multi-faceted internal benefits. For example, several state agencies reported that as unnecessary and duplicative information was eliminated from the subject forms, there was an equivalent reduction in processing time and reduced errors.

Most significant benefit was the degree of improvement shown in the overall forms management programs of the participating agencies. This in turn improved the capture, input, transmission, and storage of information within the various state information system.

Savings - The legislation stated, in part, that reduction savings would be reported in hours. It should be noted that the term "forms burden", as used in the Act, defined some aspects of the time and cost of providing information, but did not include all aspects. For example, other aspects of burden include a sizable number of inspection reports, audits, examinations, and investigations, which, although not filled out per se by the public, do require public time, and impose costs.

Forms also present burdens to state agencies in terms of *physical costs* related to printing, design, production, paper, storage (electronic or physical), distribution, and *use or information costs*. Examples of *use or information costs* include processing time, information and records collection time, filing time, etc. These internal costs were not included in measuring the burden state government forms impose on the public.

The beginning forms burden of 73.2 million hours recorded in fiscal year 1995 was reduced by 29.3 million hours for a revised forms burden of 43.9 million hours at the end of fiscal year 1999. The forms burden was reduced by 33.74 percent. This exceeded the 25 percent goal over the five years of the program.

Quantitative Benefits - The primary quantitative benefit was the savings in time afforded to the public. However, it should be noted that such improvements might not be readily noticeable by the public. This is because they deal with time elements that may only save an individual a few minutes or seconds. However, when it is realized that forms are completed and processed thousands of times per year, the significance of the time-savings becomes very real.

The program developed a new and innovative method to classify, measure, and record information elements requested on forms called the Information Elements Classification Method (I.E.C.). Prior to its development there were very few methods for classifying

and measuring forms completion time. The program also brought about the identification, elimination, and, in some cases, destruction of obsolete forms. These obsolete forms had long been cataloged, inventoried and warehoused, even though they had passed their usefulness. As the Program passed the midway point, agency requests for direct systems or design assistance from the State Forms Center staff declined, as did the rate of rejected forms. This is another indication of the degree of improvement shown in the overall forms management programs of the participating state agencies.

Relevancy of Use - This program was designed for simplicity and results. It can be adopted and implemented by any organization and, it requires a minimum of forms, systems, or statistical knowledge. The program was designed and developed so that two people within the central unit could handle the administration of the statewide program, including all consultation, education, troubleshooting, and audit.

However, the number of forms under review by the forms program did not represent the full scope of the larger paperwork problem and the burden of reporting requirements. Forms management offered some relief, but a higher focus and a comprehensive initiative would be needed to address the larger paperwork problems, which surpasses forms management alone and encompasses other information management disciplines.

A large number of public use forms were mandated by statute and would require legislative initiative in order to be eliminated, consolidated or revised. In some cases, forms burden reductions were offset by new legislative mandates that increased the overall forms burden. However, some legislative changes were very beneficial to the public. For example, one state agency changed its reporting requirements from annual to triennial, thereby, reducing the burden to the public.

This program was presented at the 1999 International Symposium on Forms and Information Systems sponsored by the Business Forms Management Association, Inc.

Program Description

The Forms Burden Reduction Act was aimed at reducing unnecessary and duplicative paperwork and information requirements that state government forms impose on the public. The Act was primarily a form review process with the focus on determining the necessity and accuracy of the information requested on these forms. The term "forms burden", as used in the Act, was primarily directed towards the time and effort required by the public to respond to information requested on a form. Response time included time to:

1. Read and understand instructions.
2. Generate, assemble, and organize data as required by the elements on the form.
3. Fill out the form.

Approximately 85% to 95% of the forms burden is time spent collecting and organizing the information needed to fill out a form.

State agencies were required to:

1. Inventory and identify all public use forms and the processes used to collect information including specific data elements.
2. Analyze each form and each information element requested on the form in light of existing agency procedures.
3. Used the standardized Information Elements Classification (I.E.C.) Method and procedures to calculate the initial forms burden hours and subsequent increases or decreases each fiscal year.
4. Eliminate unnecessary and less useful information, eliminate outdated or obsolete forms, improve instructions, revise, Consolidate, and streamline necessary forms.
5. Implement other internal forms system changed to increase office processing and efficiency.

Relative Significance

While the initial intent of the Act was to reduce work for the public sector, it was our contention that public use forms could not be improved without review and improvement to internal forms and information processing systems. Improvements to internal systems would benefit the public in terms of agency customer service efficiencies.

The Forms Burden Reduction Act benefited both the public and state agencies in a number of subtle ways.

1. All state agency forms representatives acquired a better understanding of elemental forms analysis.
2. State agencies became more aware of problems the public has in completing state government forms and how agency internal forms and processing procedures directly affect the public.
3. Several agencies reported the forms burden review process lead to error reductions and reduced cost of repairing errors (fewer phone calls and mailings to obtain additional public information).
4. Agencies simplified the language and instructions on most public use forms, making them easier to read and complete, thereby, obtaining better information.
5. Agencies eliminated nonessential fill-in information, modified reporting requirements, eliminated nonessential notary requirements, and made other internal processing procedure changes to make their forms more efficient and user friendly.
6. Several state agencies renewed or restructured their internal forms programs in large part due to the Forms Burden Reduction Act.
7. More forms were reviewed and registered with the State Forms Center as a result of the collection process. Additionally, state agency requests for forms assistance and training decreased as agencies obtained higher levels of forms management experience.

Savings

The beginning form's burden of 73.2 million hours recorded in fiscal year 1995 was reduced by 29.3 million hours for a revised forms burden of 43.9 million hours at the end of fiscal year 1999. The form's burden was reduced by 33.74 percent. This exceeded the 25 percent goal over the five years of the program.

A total of seventeen state agencies exceeded the twenty-five percent form's burden reduction goal over the five years of the Act. Seven state agencies achieved a reduction from five to fourteen percent, and six state agencies achieved less than five percent reduction. The forms burden increased for ten state agencies over the course of the five years of the Act and nine state agencies did not report any forms burden increases or decreases.

Three thousand and seventy-eight public use forms were collected at the beginning of the program. Over the course of the program two hundred and forty new forms were created and four hundred and sixty-five forms were eliminated. This is a reduction of two hundred and twenty-five forms for a final total of two thousand eight hundred and fifty-three forms.

Quantitative Benefits

Based on the overall forms burden hour reductions, the primary quantitative benefits were time-savings to the public and processing time-savings for state agencies. However, the public might not notice the savings on an individual form basis. This is because they deal with time elements that may only save an individual a few minutes or seconds in forms completion time; or a few minutes or seconds in processing a form. However, when it is realized that forms are completed and processed thousands of times per year, the significance of the time-savings becomes very real.

Another quantitative benefit was the development of the Information Elements Classification Method (I.E.C.). Methods used, in the forms profession, to measure the forms burden, have historically been difficult, time consuming, often imprecise, and usually involve time and cost studies. Many state agencies did not have the resources to do detailed time studies. Therefore, requiring agencies to do time studies was ruled out as a means of obtaining reliable forms burden data.

Additionally, state agencies could have difficulty in obtaining reliable public time estimates due to the diversity of businesses in Ohio. At best, public time estimates would only be a rough guess with no scientific backing. Therefore, the State Forms Center established the standardized I.E.C. Method to calculate the forms burden.

The I.E.C. Method had several advantages and disadvantages. The primary disadvantage was that one needs to be cautious when using a statistical study given the problems of generalization. But, on a purely statistical basis, the estimates were good considering the meticulous attention given to the sampling and data collection process, and in view of the narrow confidence intervals of the estimates. In this case, the statistical study had a ninety-five percent confidence interval.

The advantages of the I.E.C. Method are: First, it did not require any specialized training. All that was needed was a familiarity with the form. Second, it captured the differing time variations of the elements on a form. Third, all elements on any form would fit into one of the four categories of information types. For example, each element on any form could be classified into one of four classifications. Each information element type was assigned a time value based on a time study of 128 Ohio forms selected a random. Finally, using the I.E.C. Method avoided having to do initial time studies for all forms, and eliminated the need to perform another time study when forms were actually revised. This allowed agencies to focus their efforts on forms improvement.

Other quantitative benefits, although not measured by state agencies, could have been estimated using standard forms savings methodologies. These included time and cost savings due to the elimination of some obsolete forms, and error reduction time and costs.

Relevancy of Use

This program was designed for simplicity and results. It can be adopted and implemented by any organization and, it requires a minimum of forms, systems, or statistical knowledge. The program was designed and developed so that two people within the central unit could handle the administration of the statewide program, including all consultation, education, troubleshooting, and audit.

However, the program was not intended to resolve the larger paperwork problem and the burden of reporting requirements. Forms management offered some relief, but a higher focus and a comprehensive initiative would be needed to address the larger paperwork problems, which surpasses forms management alone and encompasses other information management disciplines.

A large number of public use forms were mandated by statute and would require legislative initiative in order to be eliminated, consolidated or revised. This was evident from the large number of agencies that reported increased form revisions due to new legislation, which caused their forms burden to increase. In some cases, forms burden reductions were offset by legislative mandates that increased the overall forms burden. However, there were also legislative changes that were very beneficial to the public. For example, one state agency changed its reporting requirements from annual to triennial, thereby, reducing the burden to the public.