

FEDERAL COURT GOES DIGITAL

Courts have traditionally been known as institutions bulging with paper documents. But as INCITE reports, the Federal Court of Australia started 18 months ago to digitise all its documents, not only saving trees and space, but also streamlining the workload for the staff at this busy hub of legal activity.

The Federal Court of Australia has become this country's first court to fully digitise all court documents. State by state, between July and November 2014, the Federal Court began converting all documents filed with and created by the court to an electronic court file (ECF) format.

Used by judges, registrars and staff, these court files are now accessible to authorised parties via a secure website. The new digital system is reducing costs incurred from printing, storage and handling as well as significantly relieving the load on administrative workers. Paper files were only accessible to one person at a time, and the person working on the file was required to manually record every additional change to the document's text and to its location. ECFs are available on demand and over 90 percent of documents submitted via eLodgment are automatically converted to ECF. The advent of ECFs has allowed for a seamless flow of court documents within the court and the appropriate parties outside the court.

The project was sponsored by Warwick Soden, the court's CEO and registrar, and was implemented using only off-the-shelf technology. Using Microsoft SharePoint, the Federal Court, in conjunction with the Chief Justice and judges of the court, customised the ECF system to fulfil the court's requirements. These included making SharePoint interoperable with the court's legacy systems, such as the case management database. The Court's Records Authority was developed in conjunction with the ECF database, resulting in greater consistency and accountability across court operations.

Before its introduction, over 360 judges and staff were trained in records management and metadata creation on the ECF system. Externally, more than 1,000 people in the legal sector attended 'Working with the Court Electronically' seminars.

ECFs are equipped with a powerful search tool that allows users to quickly and easily locate the information that they require. Judges and registrars can also make copies of the documents in order to add their own private case notes, simplifying the drafting of judgements and orders. Each



file is also available to be 'offlined', allowing access in remote locations that may not have internet access; this is particularly useful for Native Title hearings. The digitisation also allows for cases to be heard by skilled judges regardless of the location.

The documents are encoded in a secure PDF A1-A format – for long-term retrieval and access – and any alterations are recorded, ensuring that the information in the file is protected and trustworthy. The court is also able to view summaries of any active files in real time.

ECFs also increase the efficiency of file retention, disposal and storage. All ECFs are issued with retention and disposal codes, eliminating the need for rekeying and assisting in sentencing when a matter is complete. Finalised cases are handled by the National Records Managers List's site. Native Title files and other historical or socially significant files are sent to the National Archives, where they are preserved as part of Australia's history. Other files are either retained permanently as part of the Court Record or disposed of after the appropriate period of time.

More than 4,000 files have been converted to ECF format, containing over 30,000 documents. Successful digitisation of case files allows not only for the court to run more smoothly, making cases more time efficient, but also for long-term preservation of more records of Australia's legal history for future generations.