Case Study

Digitisation in Local Government South Africa

June 2018

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Background:

The Client is a medium-sized municipality in South Africa. The town is characterised by a wide mix of income levels as well as a large migrant population that is difficult to engage with due to a lack of information, and the informal nature in which they have settled on the outskirts of the town. The municipality is also a vacation village for both local and international holiday makers, with the population trebling during the holiday periods.

Challenges

In the modern age, citizens expect the world class digital experiences they have become accustomed to from Apple, Google, Facebook, Airbnb and the like. However, government organisations do not have access to the rare skill-sets, resources and funding available to these Silicon Valley giants. Furthermore, South African government organisations are expected to service citizens across all socio-economic groups, on any consumer device they may have access to - including smartphones and older feature phones.

The Municipality's challenge was to effectively engage and service all of their citizens and other key stakeholders through broadly available consumer technologies and make it easy for their citizens to have meaningful engagements with the municipality.
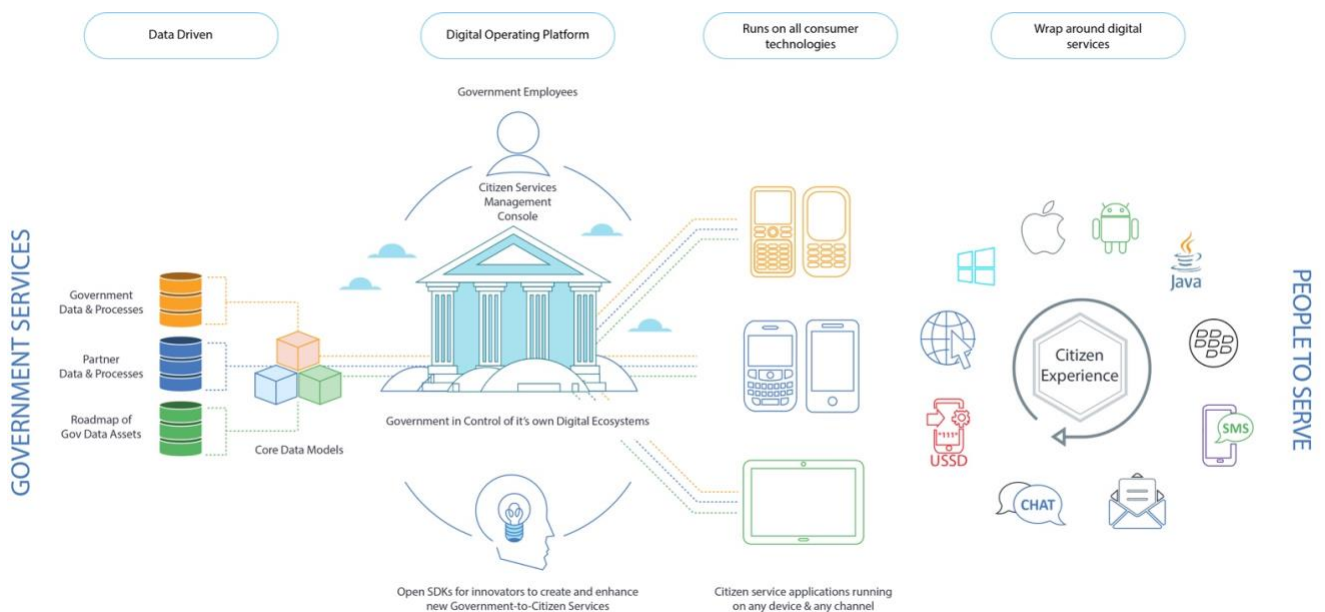
Identifying residents, rather than just ratepayers of their citizen population, was an important objective of the local leaders. As one would imagine, local leaders hear the word 'app' and they figured everybody has to have a Smartphone. However, with only a small portion of the Municipality's population being able to afford Smartphones, the Municipality was looking for a solution where residents can use older mobile phones and other channels of engagement for communications. The idea was to make available, regardless of their socio-economic situation, the same services to all citizens.

Lastly, the Municipality, like most other towns and cities, has different systems that handle taxes, faults, bill payments, communications, town/city management, and other functions. Integrating new communications services with these disparate systems is quite a challenge, even for large cities with large budgets.

Approach

The Municipality's technology team knew they had a challenge on their hands, being that digital transformation programmes can be exceptionally complex, time consuming, and costly initiatives with long and treacherous learning curves for them and their technology partners. In addition, they knew that once they promised instantaneous, two-way communications to citizens, they would have to deliver on their promise. Lastly, when it comes to app usage sustainability, the team knew that if it didn't work the first time, people would simply delete the app and revert back to existing channels of engagement. The experience expectation is simply different from a contact centre, when calls are cut or not answered, the citizen just calls again later. The technology team knew they had to up their game.

Solution

The Municipality's technology team set out to find a technology solution to digitally transform their communications and service delivery model to all citizens. One that could seamlessly integrate with internal systems. One that is easy to use. And one that is cost-efficient with little up-front investment.

Ubiquitous Engagement with all Citizens

The team believed that the biggest value that a technology solution could provide is a multi-platform system that could reach all their citizens, no matter which type of mobile device they own or digital channel they have access to. These are some of the key features of ComUnity's Citizen Engagement Platform: delivering native applications with rich user experiences to all devices and channels. In other words, true digital inclusion:

- Smart Devices - All versions of iOS, Android, Windows, Blackberry
- Mid-range Devices – Asha and Symbian
- Non-Smart Devices –S40, S30 and similar running OS like J2ME and UIQ Tech
- HTML 5 and Hybrid Applications
- Web Browser Applications to every type of Mobile, Tablet and Desktop browser including Chrome, Firefox, Safari, Edge, Internet Explorer, Opera Mini and others
- Social Media Integration
- Live Chat

- Email
- SMS & MMS
- USSD

Some of the key features delivered by the ComUnity Platform enabled citizens of The Municipality to:

- Manage their own **profile**, account & contact information
- Receive contextualised, relevant **information** based on the communities they form part of
- View, Query and Pay for their **utilities** bill
- Log **faults** for all municipal divisions and receive automated feedback on their progress to completion. Push Notifications are sent to the relevant Citizen as the Fault moves to each stage
- Upload images of the logged fault and use **geo-location** to pinpoint the location of the fault
- Have a live, **instant messaging** Chat with an agent from the Municipality's support area
- **Feedback** data provided directly to the Municipality's communications department
- **Share** the App virally with other citizens from within the App
- Immediate **access** to important municipal contact numbers

  Some of the key benefits derived by the Municipality from implementing the Citizen Engagement Platform:
- Optimised Communications, stimulating active citizenry
- Enhanced Service Delivery
- Operational Efficiencies and Revenue Assurance
- Socio-Economic Development

Easy Integration into CRM/Case Management System

ComUnity seamlessly connects into organisational systems of records and systems of management. Being able to connect into these systems is not something unheard of, but contextualising the information to make it relevant to the citizens and then delivering a

Ease of Use - Intuitive

The solution needed to be intuitive and simple to use for both citizens and the administrative staff of the Municipality. Best practice needed to

"wrap-around" experience on any device and operating system is where the true value of the ComUnity Platform is realised.

In the Municipality's case, faults that are logged via the App, are submitted directly into the CRM/Case Management system and then routed directly to the relevant department to deal with them, without any human intervention. This means that logged faults are instantaneously transferred through the process, moving from a "Logged" status to an "Assigned" status, which previously would have been a 2-step process. Additionally, citizens would have had to phone the call centre and explain who they are, where they live, and what the nature of the fault was. This consumes resources and costs people time and money to make the call.

The benefit for the Municipality customer support staff was that they didn't have to be trained on any new systems or applications. They simply continue with 'business as usual', and the ComUnity Platform choreographs the interactions in the background.

The citizen experience was dramatically enhanced, as they instantly receive the reference number for their fault. Automated push notifications are delivered when the fault changes status, and people are kept up to date on progress all the way through to completion.

Rich analytics on all fault logging activity can now be derived from the ComUnity Platform, as all activity is logged and stored with time and date stamps. A multitude of reports can now be generated to assist the Municipality with resource planning decisions, in order to address the areas with the most issues.

be adhered to from an interaction design perspective, paying careful attention to the unique requirements of the various consumer technology platforms.

The ComUnity Platform delivers a simple and logical user experience, while simultaneously ensuring the experience is one they are accustomed to using on their device. In other words, Apple (iOS) users have an Apple experience, while Android users have an Android experience, and an old Nokia would have an old Nokia experience, natively.

Administrative Users, such as support agents and communications personnel, used the web browser application with little to no training and found it simple to broadcast messages, compose news articles, and service citizens with the live chat feature.
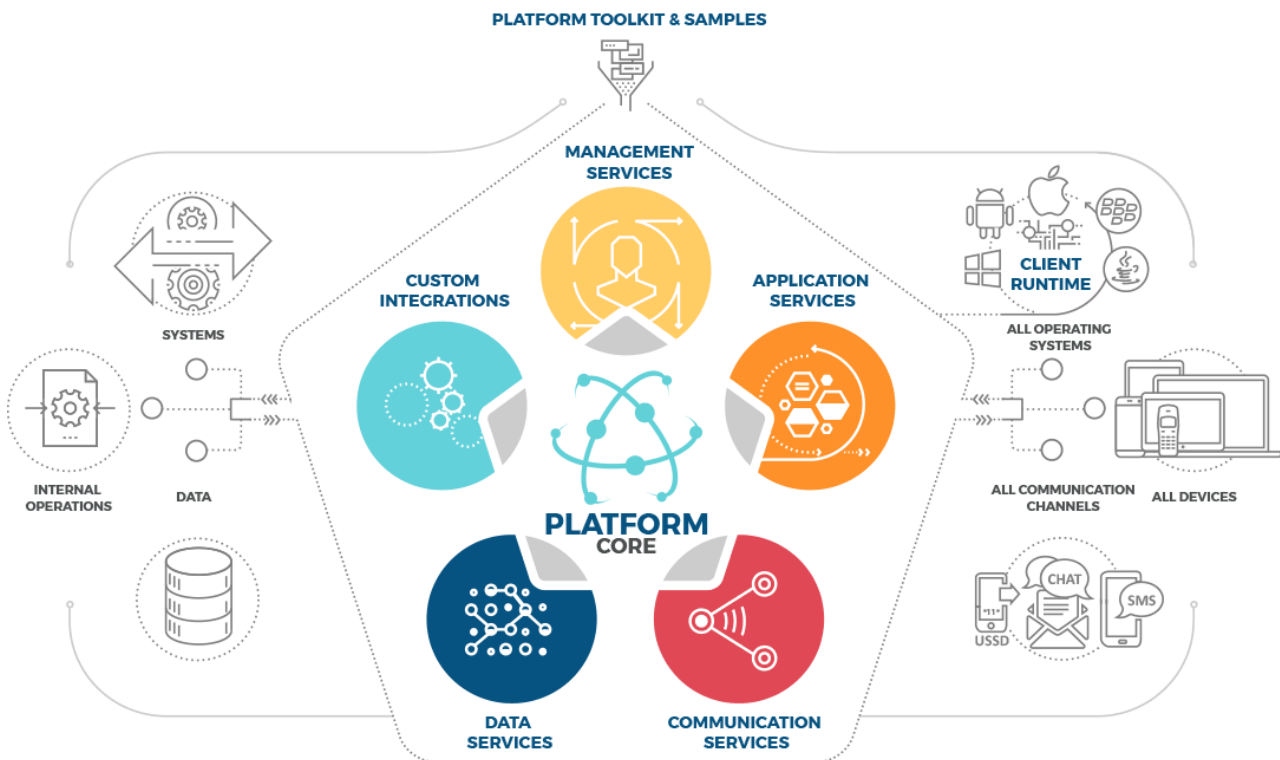
Crisis Management

The Municipality experienced a severe natural disaster during the initial deployment of the ComUnity Platform. It was a tragic event that devastated the Municipality and surrounds and was labelled one of the worst disasters in South African history. In these situations, communication is of paramount importance to limiting the damage caused and even saving lives.

The fires decimated the majority of the communications infrastructure. The Municipality turned to the Citizen Engagement Platform as the tool for communicating to citizens and coordinating efforts during the crisis. Fake news was rife and was exacerbating the panic amongst citizens. The ComUnity Platform quickly became the centre point for the dissemination of reliable news.

The Municipality utilised the Platform to coordinate meetings in suburbs that were attended by thousands, where disaster management officials could brief the citizens directly. Communications about evacuations of danger areas were managed via the Platform, and citizens relied on the App for official communication on when it was safe to return to their homes.

During the aftermath, the ComUnity Platform was used to manage the efficient distribution of much needed relief and aid to victims. Aid agencies were defined as a new user group on the Platform with specific rights, so that they could accurately record who received the aid they provided and make sure the system wasn't being abused. This ensured the relief was being received by the people who needed it most, and disbursements could be accounted for.

Conclusion

The Municipality knew what they needed to achieve and they had two options in doing so:

1. **Build internally from scratch:** The Municipality could have employed dedicated teams of people with highly specialised skills and knowledge to build and manage digital services. This approach is exceptionally costly, cumbersome and inefficient. It is also unrealistic for any municipality to be able to compete for the broad array of specialised skills required to achieve this approach at market scale.

2. **Build digital services on a platform:** Municipalities can choose to adopt low-code platforms that already harness and package solutions to connect your data, processes and partnerships with people and markets across socio-economic strata through applications that run everywhere. By building on platforms using their own resources or those of partners, Municipalities can focus on their core objectives, namely connecting their valued services with citizens. The ComUnity Platform takes care of the myriad of technology complexities involved in making this happen.