Case Study: Ontario Cabinet

New technology enables 'long-distance' signing of official documents.

Photo courtesy LongPen

By Donna Kinoshita

The government of Ontario produces many official documents. These include Orders in Council and regulations that require authorization signatures. For security reasons, these documents cannot be sent by fax, mail or general delivery service for signing. However, video conferencing technology is now enabling 'long-distance' signing.

In June 2008, Ontario became the first Canadian government adopter of the LongPen system, which itself was conceived and developed locally. It allows ink-and-paper documents to remain in the province's cabinet office at Queen's Park in Toronto while they are signed from other locations, such as the lieutenant-governor's residence.

"Every so often, we need to get signatures very quickly outside or at the end of the business day," says Scott Bolton, deputy clerk for the Ontario Cabinet. "This can mean an extra one to two hours in traffic as staff travels to the lieutenant-governor's house or a minister's constituency office and back when they are not available for signing at Queen's Park. With remote signing, the whole process is very efficient, taking about 15 minutes."

A robotic writing arm sits in the cabinet office, where Bolton and his colleagues host a video conference. When the lieutenant-governor of Ontario, the Honourable David C. Onley, joins the meeting, he logs into a private, secure network using a tablet personal computer (PC) running on his home network, with a Cisco router ensuring the stability of the connection.

When Bolton places a document under the robotic arm's camera, the lieutenant-governor sees it on his touch screen at home. Then, when he signs the tablet with a special pen, his signature's biometric information—including speed, cadence and pressure—is measured and securely transmitted to the robotic arm.

The robot is the only device that can interpret this encrypted data. It precisely replicates the signature on the document in the cabinet office.

The system provides a real pen-and-ink signature instead of an image or 'digital signature,' neither of which is acceptable for signing legislative documents.

"Maintaining high levels of security was a key part of the successful implementation," says Bolton. "Our information technology (IT) staff performed a thorough threat and risk assessment beforehand. The security features and our own business processes address the limited risk. We also received a legal opinion stating that case law is primarily concerned with the intent of the signer. So, we have no legal issues with this system."

Remote signing is just one component of the Ontario Cabinet's video conferencing and online collaboration initiatives, which include other 'e-cabinet' plans for the future, such as electronically managed documents and agenda information. In the meantime, Bolton expects remote signing to become more common.

"It is really easy to set these up, so key officials can use our robot here," he says. "It provides an efficient, environmentally friendlier and cost-effective method of doing our core business."

A robotic arm in the cabinet office precisely replicates long-distance signatures.

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