An Ontario Town Fosters Economic Growth with ConsignO Cloud

Andrew Zanier, Town of Huntsville and Notarius

After transitioning to ConsignO Cloud trusted electronic signatures, the town of Huntsville:

Processed 6,000 invoices within 10 months

Speed up the issuance of construction processes

Reduced its weekly payment turnaround times by 92%

Deployed the platform across all of its departments in just three weeks

Since 2016, Canada has experienced the strongest demographic growth out of all of the G7 countries. In Ontario alone, the population has grown by 5.8%.[1] This trend comes on top of an unprecedented affordable housing crisis.[2]

As home prices continue to soar and more Canadians need housing, governments at all levels must create well-paying jobs and ensure that new constructions are being built. In fact, Canada would need more than 1.8 million new housing units to reach the per capita standard of industrialized countries.[3]

Faced with these economic and demographic challenges, cities and municipalities now have a key role to play. Andrew Zanier, Huntsville's assistant town clerk, has a front row seat to these changes. How is he facing these colossal challenges? He agreed to share with us how his small town in the heart of Ontario is adapting in this context.

Doing more with less

"Just like other rural municipalities in Ontario, a lot of people from the city fled up here. These municipalities were traditionally smaller. (...) I don't think that municipalities like us are used to growing like that."

Andrew will be the first to tell you that the pace of work has sped up at the municipality. The town is growing and becoming more diverse. Statistics Canada reported a population of 21,147 for Huntsville in 2021, an increase of 22% since 2001.

Since most Canadian cities have large territories to cover and sometimes have a tough time finding a skilled workforce, this growth has put more pressure on different municipal services.

"We have a library, a community centre, a fire hall and other public buildings that are all in different parts of the town and the town is pretty big. So, you have to rely on staff to travel and literally handle everything. (...) A lot of processes tend to break down because of that."

Administrative disruptions have a major impact on real estate and economic development in towns like Huntsville, because if contractors and companies have to wait on the municipal government to obtain permits, significant financial losses and delays in deliveries can result.

In a context of rapid growth, this can quickly become chaotic for the regional economy.

"We work really hard to get things done as quickly as possible. Our economy kind of depends on it. A big part of our economy is construction and development. If we cause delays that affect people, it could really hamper the community."

With all of the challenges that were before them even before the pandemic, Andrew and his colleagues were seeing their workload increase exponentially. They were required to design forms, coordinate authentication processes, send official documents, manage document archives, ensure that documents were compliant, and respond to continuous requests for information.

"We are a small town; we wear a lot of hats."

Because the Office of the Clerk has an impact on every department in the town, Andrew quickly realized that they needed to simplify their document management process, or the economy would see the repercussions.
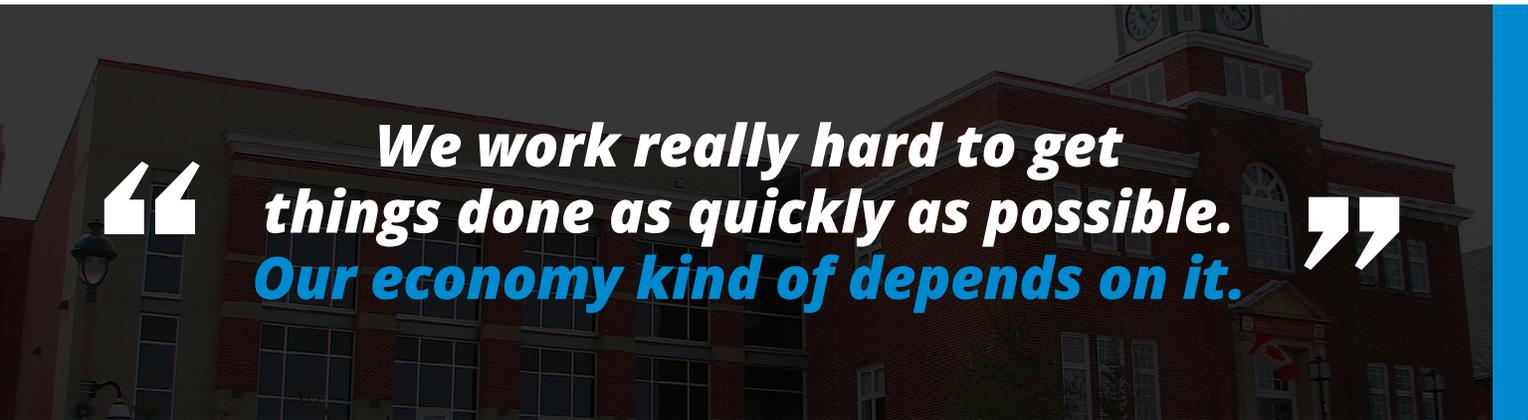
> ## "We work really hard to get things done as quickly as possible. *Our economy kind of depends on it.*"

ConsignO Cloud: A foundational municipal technology

"With paper records, you can get lost in the volume and it's harder to find what's important and what is not."

Andrew explains that several years ago, Huntsville tried to digitize its administrative processes, but that unreliable internet access caused the project to fail. Today, things have changed with high-speed internet, and nothing is standing in the way of municipalities that are located far from major centres from modernizing their processes.

In 2020, Andrew felt that the time had come to make a sweeping change. At Day 2 of the lockdown, he convinced his superiors to try ConsignO Cloud and its trusted electronic signatures.

"It was a Friday. And Monday we were locked down. (...) I couldn't believe how fortunate I was because with ConsignO Cloud, we were able to continue where we left off!"

Within days of deploying ConsignO Cloud, Andrew helped the different departments get familiar with the platform and addressed their concerns. To his amazement, most people understood the basics in just a few minutes.

"It's so easy to use. (...) The ConsignO Cloud tutorial takes five minutes to complete, and it shows you 95% of everything you need to do. I did not expect that it would be so widely accepted."

Within weeks, Andrew began to receive more and more requests to digitize authentication processes, and soon realized that what was meant to be a trial was looking like it was there to stay.

"We were initially just going to have five licenses. I said: 'We can't do that, we need more!' (…) Within three weeks, people were set up, they were trained, and they were using it. We haven't actually stopped since."

Andrew says that the two-factor authentication processes (email and text message) make everything secure, and the audit logs allow the municipality to comply with its legal requirements. Because the very purpose of the platform is to ensure legal reliability, employees are more willing to embrace it.

"It gives people a sense of security because there's a second authentication factor. There's a clear process on who is sending the document and where it goes."

What's more, Andrew is quick to say that for his profession of clerk and for the municipal archives, ConsignO Cloud is a major turning point.

"It's a keystone piece of technology. All of a sudden, we have everything digital, we have everything digitally signed and digitally coded."

He notes that since the platform was designed to automatically generate documents in PDF-A format, it makes long-term archiving much easier.

For example, if a court has to consult to an electronic document in 10 years, it will be able to read it and verify the identity of the signers in seconds.

For Andrew, the scope of application is now limitless.

"I sign my record destruction forms through it, we issue property compliance reports, building inspectors and planners sign off on it. Those are things that we hadn't considered when we adopted the solutions."

> **Before, that process would have taken three hours per week, and now _it takes a few minutes._**
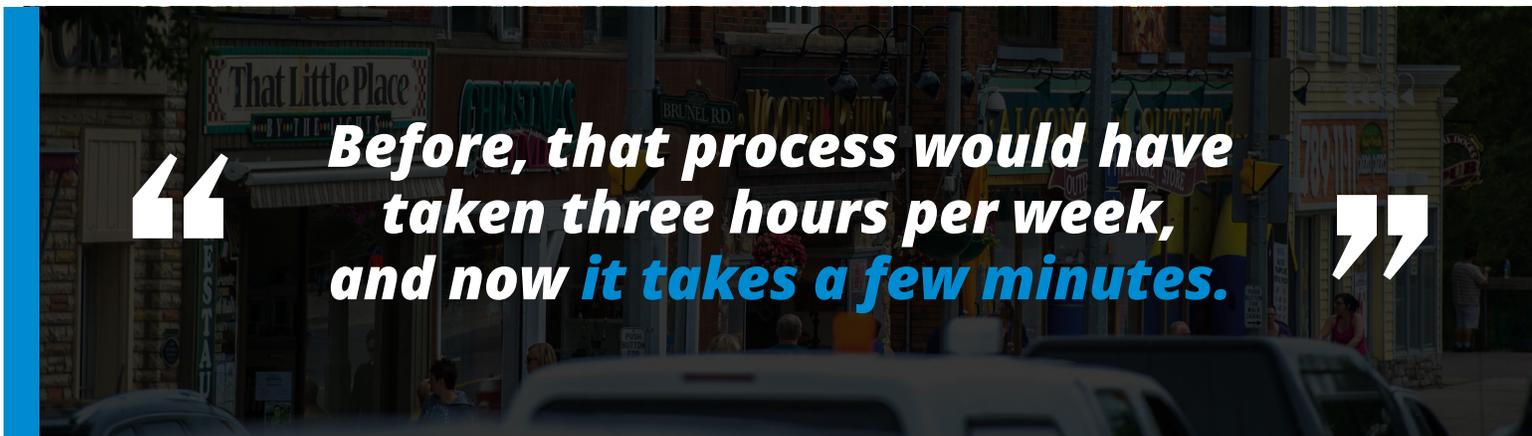
Accelerating real estate development

With the adoption of ConsignO Cloud, Huntsville began its broader transition to electronic document management and, today, the entire construction ecosystem is reaping the benefits.

"Before, developers needed to submit their drawings and sign agreements in person at the town hall. Now, we send these agreements to planning consultants or developers through ConsignO Cloud."

As a result, the solution significantly reduces the amount of time it takes for documents to be signed by promoters, the planning department and the mayor.

The process for issuing building and development approvals is now faster and more flexible. In a context of a housing crisis and population displacement, it is critical that issuing these legal documents be as easy as possible.

In addition, real-estate buyers and law firms are also benefiting from the new digital processes thanks to tax statement accounts that are emailed as attachments.

"Now, professionals from legal offices just fill out a form online. We sign it digitally and we just email them the attached certificate. Legal offices really appreciate these tools because they don't have to drive across town, take a piece of paper and then, drive back."

But where ConsignO Cloud makes a dramatic difference is that it greatly reduces the time it takes to pay invoices. Because the town is a major work provider, a healthy cash flow has an overall impact on the region's different economic dimensions.

"Because a bill can be just emailed to an AP Clerk, signed in ConsignO by public works, and immediately sent back to the concerned clerk, payment approval is a lot quicker. (…) Before, that process would have taken three hours per week, and now it takes a few minutes."

It's clear that ConsignO Cloud quickly transformed how Huntsville issues official documents and processes transactions, but where it stands out even more for Andrew is that it also helped to make everyone accountable.

Improving governance

When the town adopted ConsignO Cloud, Andrew had no doubt that the deployment processes would also shed light on how much work goes into managing documents.

"It provided perspective on how busy certain people are in their day-to-day work. (...) Our account payable clerks process a lot of invoices. We didn't know how many, we just knew there were a lot. (...) With electronic files, it's black and white. If there are 115 documents in this folder, you will see them in a blink of an eye."

Adopting the platform has therefore helped us identify different processes, standardize them, and designate the responsible managers and signers. For example, when a document lands on a desk, it is handled by the right people, and signatures are tracked with the help of automatic reminders. This is a significant contributor to each employee's individual accountability.

"Everyone knows where their part plays in that process. (...) There's a level of consistency that it was impossible to have because we were relying on personal behaviour. It made us think about how we used to do things. In ConsignO, as a manager, you can see the whole project from beginning to end."

In addition, because roles are clearly defined across the platform, when an employee leaves the organization or goes on vacation, it is easier for managers to assign signing responsibility to someone else.

"I can take five minutes to show them what the previous person did. The work and the activities can just continue simultaneously."

Trusted electronic signatures are second nature

Andrew admits, the challenges of the years ahead will be many and complex. As Huntsville has experienced two major floods in the last decade, Huntsville is equipping itself to deal with similar weather conditions.

Andrew says, "Demographically we are going to be in sort of a bind because we are a service-based economy. We have affordability issues. (...) If there's no one to work in a service economy job, then your economy doesn't function as it should."

His hope is that the solutions it brings will help the region's economy adapt in the medium term. He believes that, on a small scale, it is having an impact, but that if most municipalities could do the same thing, the sum of these small actions could make a significant difference.

"Some of the little changes made such a big difference. For example, we've processed about 6,000 invoices in 10 months with ConsignO Cloud, which we couldn't do before. If you're waiting for a lot of invoices to be processed, it may affect a lot of projects."

And because the tool has proven itself and has been adopted by all of the municipal departments, Andrew and his colleagues are working to simplify processes even more. He hopes to be able to automate even more data collection processes and provide an ever-greater number of official electronic documents to the public.

He believes that now that the bulk of the work has been done to convince his peers, all he has to do now is be creative because now everyone wants to sign their documents with ConsignO Cloud.

"Now, it's second nature and people expect to work this way. Today, when a paper arrives on a desk, people say: "Why are you giving me a paper document?" (...) It worked out a lot better than I ever thought!"

[1] Stéphane Bordeleau, Radio-Canada, "Le Canada connaît la plus forte croissance démographique du G7" on the website ici.radio-canada.ca, 2022 [online], https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1860872/recensement-canada-croissance-population-covid-urbanisation (Page consulted on February 14, 2022)

[2] Ryan Flanagan, CTV News, "Millions of people will move to Canada in the next 20 years, but where will they live?" on the website ctvnews.ca, 2021 [online], https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/millions-of-people-will-move-to-canada-in-the-next-20-years-but-where-will-they-live-1.5464205 (Page consulted on February 15, 2022)

[3] Bianca Bharti, Financial Post, "Ontario housing shortage is worst in the country and threatens to exacerbate affordability woes" on the website financialpost.com, 2021 [online], https://financialpost.com/news/economy/ontario-alberta-and-manitoba-lead-the-provinces-in-canadas-chronic-housing-shortage-says-scotiabank (Page consulted on February 14, 2022)

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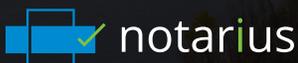
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