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Electoral Registration speeds up thanks to Halarose and ABBYY

The annual canvas of the electorate in Walsall is a large project that requires the accurate gathering and storage of data received from every household within the local authority. The project runs each year from early August to the end of November, covering 108,000 dwellings, with upwards of 80% of households responding (of which upwards of 25% return a form with handwritten changes, which require manual inputting). New legal requirements should have the effect of increasing these percentages. William Quinton, Managing Director of Halarose Ltd., explains how its software solutions, with the help of ABBYY FormReader software have increased efficiency in this time-consuming task for Walsall Council.

The Background:

Halarose Ltd. is a software development company specialising in Electoral Registration and Election Management software for local government customers, including Birmingham City Council, The Electoral Office of Northern Ireland, and Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council. Its EROS-II Electoral Registration software registers over 6 million electors and it is continually updated and developed with the aim of simplifying processes to save local government organisations time and therefore money. When faced with the enormous task of data collection, Halarose decided to integrate ABBYY FormReader 6.5, a solution for fixed form processing, into the EROS-II suite to vastly reduce the amount of gathered data that requires manual input.

Walsall Council is responsible for gathering information about residents who live in the 108,000 households within its jurisdiction, for the electoral register. The register has to be updated annually to provide accurate information on who is eligible to vote in local and national elections. Although registration can be made over the phone or via the Internet, approximately 65-70% of residents return a form via post to Walsall Council.

The Challenge: Efficiently process electoral data

"One of the highest process costs that our customers have to sustain is the annual canvass," explains William Quinton, Managing Director of Halarose Ltd. *"All households in the UK are required to complete a form detailing any changes to the electorate resident at that property. The task of capturing and recording this data is enormously time consuming."*

The task is made more time-consuming by the number of forms that have to be returned to the respondent due to missed information, spoiled forms, or just a lack of signature. This added layer of administration adds to the urgency for accurate information to be added to the database when forms are completed correctly. During every canvass, Walsall Council processes over 70,000 pages of data and this task requires around 1,500 man hours to complete.

"Our customers need to extract information about electors quickly and efficiently to ensure that not only can accurate registers be printed for election candidates etc. but that ballot cards can be dispatched in advance of any local or national elections that take place. Accuracy is key in this process and the customer has to be sure that data entered is correct" continues Quinton.

Walsall Council needed to seek the most efficient solution for processing the mountain of physical forms that the canvass generates. Details such as name, date of birth and nationality are all included in a completed form. This data needs to be quickly and efficiently processed to allow EROS-II to update the Electoral Register.

About Halarose

HALAROSE LIMITED, an Oxfordshire based company, was established in 1978, and is a pioneer in constantly implementing new technologies for our customers.
Acquired by its present owners in 1988, it entered the Electoral Registration and Election Management market in 1997 with the first available Windows system in the UK. Halarose has been enhancing EROS-II since then with the aim of increasing efficiency for elections offices.

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The Solution: ABBYY FormReader and EROS II Software

By combining the Electoral Registration software, EROS, with FormReader, Halarose created a solution for reducing the workload for local governments.

Forms processing requires fast and efficient capturing of data that has to then be verified and saved to a database. At Walsall Council, forms are fed through a high-speed scanner before ABBYY FormReader 6.5 analyses them and accurately recognises and extracts data from the forms many times faster than a professional operator could achieve. This enables EROS-II to capture data in an efficient and secure way.

In the case of Walsall Council, neither manual sorting nor checking for missing pages is required, since FormReader can identify forms and select the matching template. FormReader is installed on 3 workstations and allows one operator to process from 1,000 to 3,000 forms per day depending on the complexity of their layout. With a flexible architecture that uses multiple workstations to streamline processing, ABBYY FormReader 6.5 can process up to 10,000 forms a day and can be easily expanded as a company's processing needs increase. For Walsall Council, this flexibility allows it to handle the unpredictable daily level of returned forms both quickly and efficiently and also the shorter processing times resulting from the new legal requirement to add door to door canvassing into the canvass period (August – November).

After data is captured, FormReader exports the data to a staging table in EROS-II software using an ODBC connection. An operator then processes the data in the staging tables and it is then passed into the Electoral Registration database.
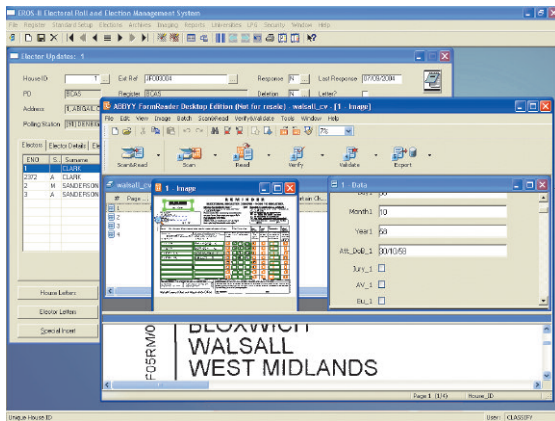
"FormReader 6.5 is fast, easy to use, allows the customer to build their own templates and contains an extensive dictionary" comments Quinton. "Enthusiasm for FormReader 6.5 among the user group is high."

The outcome:

The time saving can be quite considerable according to Halarose's Quinton, *"A batch of forms that takes 32 minutes to process manually takes 12 minutes when using FormReader. This saves the customer money and also makes the job less routine. At the last canvass, one customer saved 16 man-days. At the next canvass, with our improved process and improved form design, this saving should increase to 31 man-days,"* he says.

Peter Allsop, Electoral Services Manager at Walsall Council agrees. *"The prime goal is to use it to save processing time and hence labour costs. The ease of use was also important as it cuts down on the manual input of data. Overall, the system is user-friendly and doesn't require much training"*

Mr Allsop also agrees with William Quinton's forecast that time-saving should increase in this year's canvass: *"We used ABBYY's Intelligent Character Recognition software for the first time last year on a limited sample"*, he comments *"but with certain modifications we hope to put a lot more volume through it this year."*

Images of EROS II and ABBYY Software at work

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