SUCCESS STORY

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Yad Vashem Employs activePDF Toolkit to Assist Friends and Relatives of Holocaust Victims in Preserving the Testimonies of their Loved Ones

Company: Yad Vashem

Industry: Non-profit organization

Product(s) Used: activePDF Toolkit

Company Overview

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, was established in 1953 by an act of the Israeli Knesset. Since its inception, Yad Vashem has been entrusted with documenting the history of the Jewish people during the Holocaust period. The center focuses on preserving the memory and story of each of the six million victims, and imparting the legacy of the Holocaust for generations to come through its archives, library, school, museums and recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations.

The Hall of Names is a tribute to the victims by remembering them not as anonymous numbers but as individual human beings. The "Pages of Testimony" are symbolic gravestones, which record names and biographical data of millions of martyrs, as submitted by family members and friends. To date, Yad Vashem has computerized 3.2 million names of Holocaust victims, compiled from approximately 2 million Pages of Testimony and various other lists.

Business Challenge

Wholly dedicated to preserving the memories of victims of the Holocaust, the charter of Yad Vashem is monumental and historic. In its infancy, Yad Vashem employed a completely manual process by which Holocaust survivors and family members could submit the names of friends and relatives for inclusion in The Hall of Names. Requestors were sent paper copies of the necessary forms, which were completed by hand and then mailed to Yad Vashem for filing into the official records. Later, in an effort to facilitate the process, genealogy software companies introduced new, computer-based methods to assist in collecting the precious information.

Vendors such as Dorot and Ancestral Quest created electronic versions of Yad Vashem's paper form, and employed proprietary software to complete some of the basic steps of the filing procedure. Although this migration helped modernize the testimony submission process, form completion still required significant manual effort. In addition, this solution was only available to licensed users of supported genealogy software. In an effort to provide a more accessible means of submission, two software developers elected to volunteer their time and expertise to further streamline the process.

activePDF Solution

Upon initiating the project, the volunteer developers, including Moishe Milller of TotalBen (www.totalben.com), first created an electronic template of the Yad Vashem submission form. Generated using Microsoft Word, the new form template introduced some problems, primarily due to formatting and platform idiosyncrasies inherent in Word. Wishing to maximize accessibility and provide a truly unrestricted process, the developers began investigating alternatives to using Word for form distribution. They promptly selected PDF as the format of choice, primarily due to its platform independence and the ubiquity of PDF viewing applications. This solved the form distribution issue, but introduced yet another challenge. Since freely available PDF viewers did not natively enable users to fill in and submit completed forms and off-the-shelf PDF form workflow software was cost prohibitive, the team needed an alternative solution to enable seamless PDF form filling and submission. After researching available server-side PDF tools, they quickly settled on activePDF Toolkit. Flexible, scalable, and inexpensive, Toolkit's programmable COM object satisfied all of their requirements at a fraction of the cost of comparable solutions. "The biggest challenge we had was to find a product we could work easily with on a programming level" stated Moishe. "activePDF allowed us to create a template, [which was] one of the main reasons we liked the program." In addition to meeting the PDF form-filling requirements, Toolkit offered a myriad of PDF manipulation capabilities, including PDF merging and splitting, image management, securing PDF, web optimization, adding digital signatures, and more. An abundance of code examples as well as a comprehensive knowledge base available on the activePDF website enabled the team to quickly integrate Toolkit into their application.

Following their implementation of Toolkit, the developers decided to take the project a step further and reached out to Wholly Genes, a genealogy software provider and maker of GenBridge, a utility which facilitates the transfer of data between different genealogy programs. Free for non-profit organizations, the integration of GenBridge into the solution affords submitters more flexibility in how they interact with the system. Now, users can elect to either submit directly from within a supported genealogy software package, or use the newly developed application to capture testimony information from any source. On the back-end, activePDF Toolkit automates the transfer of data, including photographs, to the PDF template, quickly creating documents that are ready for submission.

Results

The benefits of this improved system are obvious. An ardent genealogist, Moishe was able to create 1100 pages of testimony for family and relatives in 20 minutes, a process that would have previously taken several weeks. The automated system has greatly improved the quality and quantity of submissions, by reducing the time and labor investment that previously discouraged those with extensive family trees from producing complete family testimonies. "Imagine just having to sign your name a hundred times, it's a pain," Moishe says in regards to manual form filling, "You're talking about 20 to 30 hours of time. People wouldn't do it."

Yad Vashem has grown rapidly since the inception of the automated solutions, with exponential increases in terms of testimony submissions, as well as supplemental documents and photographs. By streamlining the process and enabling online submissions, Moishe's team has provided genealogists worldwide an accessible means to preserve the memory of those lost in the Holocaust. "We have been able to produce several thousand pages of testimony," Moishe says of the solution, "It's enabling something that wasn't possible before."