



White Castle Touches **Employees**

Biometrics-based health-enrollment program saves hamburger chain time, money

Last year, White Castle sold 500 million Slider burgers. While burdened with a paper-based health-insurance enrollment program, the chain felt like it was sifting through just as many enrollment forms.

Eager to automate the process, White Castle added a biometrics-based health-care insurance enrollment program that supports electronic forms, secures each applicant's identity and personal information, and streamlines internal workloads.

White Castle goes to great lengths to provide health benefits to its eligible associates. However, the 400-unit chain was having a difficult time compiling and processing employee information. "Health enrollment forms are called the second most problematic form to fill out," said Don Long, senior director of information services and technology for the \$600 million company. "They were not designed well, and often our associates didn't know how to fill them out."

The chain redesigned the form to be more user-friendly, but that didn't take the burden off of administrators. District managers still visited their designated locations at least once a week, collected all paper forms, stuffed them into canvas bags and personally delivered the paperwork to their regional office.

Here, "Bags were dumped on tables and associates sorted through the paperwork," Long said. "Multiple bags arrived all day long, and in some cases, managers picked up bags six days a week."

Realizing that an automated system was well-overdue, White Castle tried to streamline the operation approximately three years ago by using "a sophisticat-



Biometrics enable White Castle associates to accurately and securely enroll in health-care plans.

ed fax [system] to scan these paper-based documents," he explained. The process, which was tested in one region, did make an impact. "We cut five business days out of the operation, so our efforts definitely smoothed workloads," Long said.

However, this process did not enable White Castle to automatically enter data into the chain's enterprise content-management system. "We also could not inte-

grate this information with other supplemental documents," he added. "We really needed a completely electronic system that could link together processes and eliminate filing."

However, the concept was riddled with challenges. First, all health enrollment documents need to be signed by associates prior to being processed. But, "Just because there is a signature on the form doesn't mean the associate actually signed it," Long explained.

That's when he began exploring how biometrics could play a role.

Powerful prints: Biometric systems use pattern-recognition technology to determine the authenticity of a person based on their physical characteristics, including their fingerprints, hand geometry, eye structure or voice pattern.

Biometrics was attractive for many reasons, Long said.

"First, it could enable us to positively identify team members. Next, it allowed us to embark on electronic signatures," he added. "Finally, it promised to support a completely electronic open health-enrollment program."

When White Castle began exploring its options about two years ago, the chain had good insight into the potential of the technology, thanks to its installation of biometrics in its data center six months earlier. The chain added a biometrics application from DigitalPersona, Redwood City, Calif. This application enables White Castle to accurately monitor and authorize who enters the department.

White Castle wanted to apply similar capabilities to its health-enrollment program. However, Long realized that the program would only be successful with the support of its work force.

"Biometrics is definitely controversial in some circles," Long admitted. "In order to ensure we would not get resistance from the associates, we went to our legal department to get their opinion on the technology."

Based on a study that the legal team conducted with a third-party research firm, the group not only approved the technology, "They encouraged it," he said.

Up and running: This good news pushed the chain to begin building a foundation of systems to support its new project. The chain created an interface between the biometrics application and the company's enterprise management system. This repository would store the electronic documents and sensitive information.

Next, White Castle integrated biometric fingerprint-authentication technology from DigitalPersona. DigitalPersona's Platinum Software Development Kit (SDK), and IDentity Engine enabled the chain to create customized stand-alone kiosks that invited employees to electronically enroll in the company's health-care program.

And registering for the program is just as easy as ordering a sack of Slyders. Employees are prompted to place their thumb on the scanner. Within seconds the print's data points are digitized and stored in a dedi-

cated database.

As registered employees enroll in the company's health plan each year, the scan of their thumb electronically populates the enrollment form with their stored information, such as birth date, address and employment data.

"Since the form is electronically filled out for them, there are fewer processing errors," Long explains. "They can also electronically update supplemental information through the kiosk."

Associates are also using their thumbprint to electronically sign the document. Similar to a physical document, the form has an "X" by the signature line.

"Associates use their mouse to click on the 'X' and a message prompts them to scan their thumb on the dedicated reader," he says. "The application searches the database, and once the software authorizes the associate's identity, their personal signature is printed on the line."

When the form is completed and approved by the associate, it is electronically transferred into the enterprise content-management system, which is also integrated with White Castle's accounting and payroll systems. Here, all employee deductions are automatically transmitted to accounting. More importantly, these electronic files can be pulled from the enterprise system on the fly, be viewed on line, or printed at a moment's notice.

White Castle initiated the biometrics-based system in October 2004 during its health-insurance open enrollment. "Over the two-week enrollment period, we had 6,000 registrants use the system. Very few people resisted," he reported. "It took each employee an average of 2.5 minutes to enroll, and the rejection rate was almost nil," he added.

The electronic system also eliminated the need for district managers to physically deliver paper-based forms to regional offices. "We have already achieved approximately \$1 million in savings and labor," he added. "And that doesn't even include eliminating the liabilities associated with potential car accidents, or issues of identity fraud due to lost personal information."

Today, White Castle supports approximately 450 readers at their food-manufacturing facilities and at "castle level." Another 10 readers reside at the corporate office. Further, approximately 12,000 employees are now enrolled in the biometrics-based program.

Based on the program's success, Long is adding new components. This fall employees will use biometrics to enroll for dental plans and life insurance. Long also plans to use biometrics for the chain's e-hiring program.

"It will come in handy when new associates sign off on hiring forms, especially agreements associated with acceptance of corporate manuals and internal information," he added, noting that this could be live by the fall. **RTQ**

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