

PITCHING IN

The agency addressed the crisis first through hard work and overtime. Operational employees worked longer hours on weekdays and took on additional weekend shifts. Administrative staff worked overtime to help in dealing with the crisis.

But by spring 2007, it was clear that extra hours alone would not suffice. So, in a bold move that was probably unique in the history of government in Canada, management asked every Passport Canada employee to put aside their usual tasks for one day each week and pitch in to assist with the processing of applications.

Over a period of months, administrative and support staff helped move a backlog of thousands of mailed-in applications. Payroll clerks opened mail. Policy analysts called applicants to correct minor errors on forms. Financial officers tracked down files to answer questions from applicants on the status of their passports.

The agency implemented other measures as well. In partnership with the Public Service Commission, it expedited a recruitment drive for more passport officers. Regional offices added waiting room and processing space wherever possible. Some passport offices remained open longer hours and tacked on an extra evening processing shift. Areas of the country without passport offices got more service points when an existing partnership with Service Canada, whereby its outlets can receive applications, was expanded. Expedited technology upgrades enhanced the agency's internal server capacity and ensured Canadians prompt access to online application forms.

POLICY INNOVATION

By the summer of 2007, two major process changes made it easier for Canadians to apply for passports, at the same time allowing work to proceed more quickly inside Passport Canada.

The first was the Simplified Passport Renewal. Current passport holders could now renew without resubmitting proof of citizenship and other supporting documents. The second change was to amend the rules concerning who could act as guarantor on a first-time passport application, allowing most Canadian adult passport holders to act as guarantors.

THINKING AHEAD, THINKING FAST

But all of the innovation in the world could not change one part of the challenge: there was not enough room to do the work. Passport Canada's

production functions were housed in a traditional cubicle-office environment that was no longer practical for the post-WHTI volumes. The agency needed a new production facility that would reflect new thinking in passport production—and in record time.

By February 2007, discussions were under way with Public Works and Government Services Canada to create a purpose-designed passport factory—without a factory-like atmosphere. The building's design had to promote effective production flows and ease of movement.

Within a month, the agency had a suitable location, a former integrated-chip production facility in Gatineau. What followed may have been the fastest and most efficient government-building fit-up ever: 26 months of work was compressed into 26 weeks. The new building started operations on January 3, 2008. Its features and design are so innovative that in the months since its opening, requests have poured in from passport agencies around the world for details, photos and tours.

A STORM WEATHERED

The crisis that followed the implementation of the first stage of the WHTI forced Passport Canada to change rules and adapt to a new working reality. The agency did nothing less than reinvent itself—and did so while maintaining the integrity of the Canadian passport.

By December 2007, a little over a year after the WHTI announcement, service standards had returned to just above the pre-crisis numbers. The figure for mailed-in applications, in particular—16 days—meant that the bulk of Passport Canada's business was now back on track.

The scale of the achievement was recognized in June 2008 with the Public Service Award of Excellence for Exemplary Contribution Under Extraordinary Circumstances. In accepting it, Passport Canada Chief Executive Officer Gerald Cossette said, "I am honoured to accept this award on behalf of every person who was part of the unprecedented resourcefulness, commitment and drive we brought to bear in overcoming the demand surge."

Added Cossette: "The most rewarding outcome in all we went through is that we succeeded in working together as a team and as a single organization."

The next phase of WHTI, covering those who cross into the U.S. by land or water, comes into effect on June 1, 2009. Passport Canada has already begun work to meet another surge in demand, with national advertising and outreach visits throughout Canada by our Mobile Passport Unit. Whatever the future brings, with staff, processes and facilities in place, the agency is confident it will continue to succeed.

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