

The European Court of Human Rights Adds Digital Signatures to its SharePoint Platform

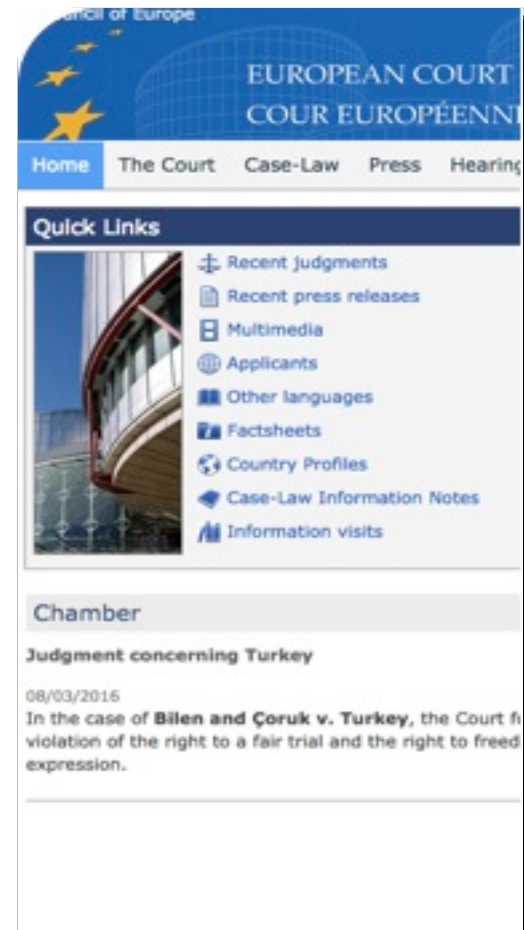
Digital Signatures Keep Cases on Track at the European Court of Human Rights

Overview

The requirement for authentic, verifiable signatures are part of legal processes the world over, but perhaps one of the most demanding examples is the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which processes over 65,000 applications from European citizens each year, resulting in 500,000 letters to be signed.

To manage this huge volume of information traffic, the ECHR created its own advanced, home-grown workflow management system, with the DocuSign Signature Appliance solution as one of its essential elements. The cornerstone of this approach is the court's workflow system, which was developed internally based on the Microsoft SharePoint Workflow Foundation. The system automates what would otherwise be a laborious and time-consuming manual process, helping to prevent any potential delays in case management.

Complementary to the workflow system is an eDocs document management system from OpenText and that sits at the heart of the Court Management Information System. This system captures all types of document, both inbound and outbound, and is the core engine for creating documents that require signing, typically 500,000 per annum. Working in synch, the two systems enable users to check the status of any application or case and then call up related documentation.



Top Benefits Achieved

- ✓ Increased document security
- ✓ Automated and streamlined the business by eliminating manual paper processes
- ✓ Significantly increased document accuracy
- ✓ Delighted customers and partners with quick turn-around of documents.

The adoption of digital signatures is part of the ECHR’s willingness to embrace the best that document management technology has to offer, in order to process its extremely large caseload more quickly and efficiently. The use of digital signatures provides additional security benefits, arguably more so than hand-written or ‘wet ink’ signatures.

Taken together, these systems have helped the ECHR deal with ever-increasing volumes of documents without incurring processing delays, while adding a layer of structure and uniformity, as well as the ability to monitor and manage such a wealth of information. The DocuSign Signature Appliance solution addresses the final piece of the jigsaw by enabling end-to-end paperless processes.

Moving from Manual Processes to Automated ones

Prior to introducing Signature Appliance, every document that needed to be signed (typically by one of the Court’s Registrars or lawyers) had to be printed, manually routed to the signing party and then, once signed, returned to an assistant who would scan the document back into the system. Given that every other part of the case management process had been automated, manual or ‘wet’ signatures were the obvious weak link in an otherwise strong chain.

John Hunter, Head of the ECHR’s IT department, realised that there had to be a better way to manage signatures and started to investigate what was available in the marketplace. He quickly understood that a digital signatures solution would not only provide legally verifiable and secure signing processes, but would also make locations irrelevant so that remote workers could potentially sign documents via remote secure connections and significantly reducing existing process delays. Moreover, a digital signature solution would save time and minimize errors by providing a way to create an electronic archive without the need to scan in paper-based documents.

As the ECHR operates a very secure environment with stringent requirements, the digital signature solution had to meet highly demanding criteria. First, it needed to meet strict security standards and provide infallible proof of signer identity and intent; second, it had to be seamlessly integrated with the existing workflow system; and third, it had to be fully synchronised with Microsoft Active Directory in order to give the Court full control over signer authorisations.

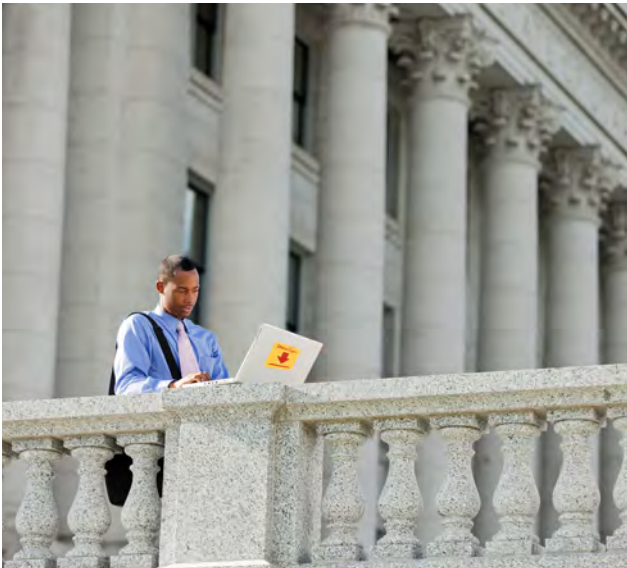
DocuSign Signature Appliance - The Best fit for ECHR

After a lengthy evaluation process, it seemed that Signature Appliance met all of the Court’s requirements and offered the best fit with its needs. Says John Hunter, “CoSign’s centralised solution is very secure, with no desktop token devices or drivers, no key distribution to users or desktops and built-in key management. It has a built-in certificate management tool and enables us to retain control with excellent scalability.”

However, to be sure, John Hunter and his team put the system through its paces: “Before we go with a solution, we play around with a trial version and test it to its limits. Then we create a proof of concept so we know what we’re buying before we purchase it and can be sure that it’s the right solution for the Court. We also asked some external consultants to evaluate Signature Appliance, including looking at all the security aspects, verifying the process of issuing and approving the security of the certificates.”

Signature Appliance passed with flying colours, but the next hurdle was to convince some of the Court’s members that digital signatures was the right way to go. As is often the case, there was some cultural resistance, so John Hunter hit on the bright idea of proving that digital signatures are not just as good as manual signatures, they are actually better.

“I obtained two letters signed on paper by the Registrar of the Court. I presented him with three documents, two of which were authentic and a third on which I had personally faked his signature. He chose the fake one, which demonstrated to him how easy it is to sign a document and put it into the system, whereas with digital signatures, the time of signing is recorded and a certificate is issued so that the entire process is much more reliable.”



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-John Hunter
Head of IT, ECHR



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John Hunter,
Head of IT
ECHR

The roll-out of the Signature Appliance solution started with one section of the Court who provided highly positive feedback. As John Hunter explains, “they really liked it, especially the assistants because it significantly reduced the number of paper documents they had to scan back into the system.” From a return-on-investment perspective, Signature Appliance quickly proved its merit because “now that it has been implemented, it has a near zero overhead.”

An Integral Part of an Automated Paperless Workflow System

About 200 of the 760 employees at the ECHR now regularly sign documents using Signature Appliance, as part of a fully automated paperless workflow system that enables the Court to keep its hundreds of thousands of annual cases on track. Documents – which can be in any one of 1000 templates within the OpenText eDocs system – are typically in Word or PDF, both of which are formats that Signature Appliance supports. With just a couple of clicks, authorisers can insert a time-stamped, verifiably genuine signature that is tamper-proof and remains part of the document for its entire life.

The originator of the request is notified automatically once the document is signed by all the required authorisers, and the signed electronic document is then published directly into the court's online repository. This means that the information, including the signature's certificate of authenticity, can be easily accessed should there be a query about it.

Concludes John Hunter, “The idea of switching from ink to digital signatures can be a cultural challenge, but its benefits are indisputable. Using digital signatures along with our workflow and document management systems means that we can process applications more efficiently and rapidly, helping us to serve European citizens the best way we can. I estimate we've digitally signed around three million letters since we started using Signature Appliance six years ago.”



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About The European Court of Human Rights

Located in Strasbourg, France and established in 1959, the European Court of Human Rights is responsible for protecting the human rights of millions of Europeans, by ruling on applications alleging the violation of rights defined in the European Convention on Human Rights. Judgements made by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) are enforced on a national level and are incorporated into the legislation of the Council of Europe member states that have ratified the Convention.



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