

State of emergency

Heather Boerner

Oracle helped the Victorian government assist bushfire victims by deploying a SaaS customer-relationship system in just three days.

Australia, and indeed the whole world, has been through a lot of trauma lately, and it doesn't look like easing up anytime soon. The devastating summer bushfires were awful enough as they were happening, but now comes the long struggle to help those affected get access to the services they need as they work to rebuild their lives. It will be a multi-year effort.

In times of crisis, it is easy for the populace to become overwhelmed and for public services to be stretched to the limit, which is why it is more important than ever that governments are able to respond quickly and flexibly to rapidly changing needs, particularly when it comes to digital interactions with departments and agencies.

“When we're doing true disaster response, we need to find a really good balance between the speed of the response that makes the solution actually useful, and a solution that has enough functionality and is good enough to provide immediate service,” said Peter Still, Senior Principal Product Strategy Manager for Public Sector CX Applications at Oracle.

“It is possible to be really agile, to identify the most important requirements in an emergency.”

According to Still, there are three phases to crisis management that government IT needs to get right:

1. Digital response. This is immediate help for people need when a crisis hits, whether it's a bushfire or any other disaster. Solutions should be capable of being implemented within days (or a small number of weeks).
2. Government service continuity. This is about keeping government running and finding new ways to interact with citizens, even when inquiry volumes are very high and traditional office services are disrupted.
3. Agile recovery. This is about implementing systems to support the environmental, economic, health and social rebuilding.



“In only three days, the system was built and launched, tracking and assisting the 400 new case managers and the help they offered clients.”

“The most immediate request is for immediate updates about what is happening with the crisis, eg. where is the fire? Do I need to shelter in place? Am I allowed to go to work?” said Still.

“That’s followed closely by the need for immediate information about assistance, and for personalised advice — working out automatically what people are eligible for, and helping them register for assistance.”

Such information is vital for getting through a crisis and rebuilding on the other side of a crisis.

Putting all of these steps into action by enlisting the aid of Oracle’s cloud services was essential for the success one Australian government had when coping with the aftermath of a terrifying calamity.

Facing the fire

At 3:00am on the morning of February 7, 2009, the barometer showed 4% humidity, and a whipping wind buffeted Rita Harris’ sheep farm in the Victorian town of Taggerty. By 11:00am, it was so hot that the hairs on the back of her legs singed in the stifling heat. It was obvious that this was going to be an extreme day.

That would prove to be an understatement.

By midnight, the power and phone were out and Harris was choking on the thick orange smoke and swirling ash coming from fires raging in the bush. She’d taken to watering down her house every few minutes to hedge against catastrophe. Flames nearly 70 metres high were towering over the 15-metre-high trees in her yard. Nearby petrol tanks were exploding at regular intervals. She describes the sound of the fire as deafening, like a thunderclap that goes on for hours.

“We thought there was a nuclear bomb,” she says. “It was literally like that. We stood there basically waiting to die.”

The fires started on what is now known as Black Saturday, scorching hundreds of thousands of acres and killing 173 people. At the time it was the most devastating natural disaster in Australia’s history.

Harris, however, was one of the lucky ones. Her house still stood. But she was shaky and disorientated when she arrived at a relief centre in Yea, some 80 kilometres from her property. Then the horrifying reality began to set in: Had her friends and family survived? Could she continue to earn a living? What would happen next?

Crisis intervention

As the fires raged in Taggerty, another crisis was heading toward the then Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS, now the Department of Health and Human Services, DHHS). Thousands of people were displaced from their homes or injured, or their businesses were destroyed. That meant a wave of displaced and traumatised people looking to the government for assistance.

In short order, government officials realised they would have to hire hundreds of new case managers to assist government agencies in targeting services to priority areas. This required a case management computer system that could track the survivors and connect them to the services they needed — and be nimble and scalable enough to evolve as the crisis changed.

“The enormity of the event and how quickly it occurred really put a lot of pressure on us to make decisions and get things in place very quickly,” says Grahame Coles, the then chief information officer at the DHS, whose team was tasked with creating the system that would support the relief effort. “We knew on Wednesday that we had to get a system in place by the following Monday.”

Although DHS had had a PeopleSoft case management system from Oracle in place, it was configured for existing processes and could not be quickly modified to meet the demands of the still-developing emergency. So Coles and his team searched for a new solution. Just 24 hours after the Victorian premier’s announcement that each survivor would have an assigned caseworker, Coles had selected an Oracle cloud solution platform for DHS case management.

Oracle staff set to work, configuring the solution to meet the needs of Victorian bushfire managers as they were deployed in the wake of the fires — a system that was both nimble and secure. It had to be simple enough for new case managers with no computer experience to navigate intuitively. It needed to display all the necessary case data on a single page, to simplify data input and allow for a case file to be printed with a single click.

Case managers also needed to track survivors as they moved from one temporary home to another. The system also had to be accessible through a secure internet connection for case managers on the road. And it had to be flexible and scalable enough to handle an influx of hundreds of new users and thousands of new cases.



“The case managers were being inducted and basically had 30 minutes’ training on how to use the system,” says Coles. “So when we had a look at the options, that was one of the main criteria: Can the system be basically self-taught? Can we get it out there with 30 minutes’ training?”

In only three days, the system was built and launched, tracking and assisting the 400 new case managers and the help they offered clients. It also managed the disbursement of more than \$350 million in private donations to families in need, and the distribution of 26,000 pallets of material goods offered by fellow citizens. This donation management system received an award for innovation in public sector policy.

Silver lining

The Oracle cloud solution was a software-as-a-service (SaaS) solution using remote web hosting and secure web connections to link caseworkers with officials in Melbourne. This was especially important because in the far-flung rural areas of Victoria, where the fires devastated whole towns, there was little electricity, there were few government offices, and there was almost no time to compile notes gathered from weary fire survivors.

By deploying a SaaS solution, DHS ensured that the system would be accessible by wireless devices as case managers moved from one devastated community to another. The SaaS solution also allowed officials at the headquarters in Melbourne to monitor what was happening in the field so they could provide the help survivors needed.

All the case managers had to do was enter their username and password, and they gained access to the files for all their clients: permanent addresses, temporary addresses, and any information already gathered about loss of property, loss of family members, business losses, and the services available and appropriate for them.

However, the technical expertise of the case managers was quite varied: indeed, some had never owned a mobile phone, let alone worked with a cloud-based case management system. But Cindy Tarczon, a contract case manager who worked with Harris in the aftermath of the fire, says that the straightforward, single-page design of the system made it easy for case managers to learn and navigate. “It was very user friendly, and we were able to get up and running without any need for formalised training,” Tarczon says.

In the first four weeks, 4,000 cases were added to the system. By the end of the year, 5,500 people were in the system. And because officials in Melbourne were able to capture and collate the information coming in from case managers, they were able to quickly create social programs or mobilise services specific to the problems in a given region.

Tarczon believes the government's response was quicker and more precise with Oracle's cloud solution because the case files gave government workers a real-time snapshot of what was going on in the fire zone. "We were able to quickly gather accurate information from our clients about what was needed, what the thoughts were on the ground for those people in the community, and what welfare agencies and other support agencies really needed to be doing to be effective in this disaster," she says.

Picking up the pieces

Another aspect of addressing the needs of those displaced by fires was delivering government aid once they were out of harm's way. As the recovery effort kicked into high gear, the information that case managers in the field needed was changing too.

Because the Oracle cloud system was simple to use and easy to control, officials were able to upload new versions of forms, policies, and other pertinent data, preventing case managers from operating on inaccurate information that might delay help to their clients.

"We put up the guidelines, the policies, the consent forms. All of the documents they would need on a day-to-day basis, we were able to post on there. They could all easily access it, and it allowed us to manage version control," said Colleen Clark, the then assistant director of the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service.

After the fires, Harris formed a close bond with her case manager Tarczon, who arranged financial assistance and access to services. At a time when Harris was still struggling with the losses she and her community had endured — and when she was still waking every morning to a landscape that looked more like the burnt crust of another planet than the Taggerty she knew — support from the DHS was something she couldn't have done without.

"I'm glad somebody's thinking of the big picture," Harris remembers thinking. "It meant that we went home thinking that the next couple of months were organised. You just have no idea



of the impact of having five and a half weeks of not knowing if you're going to lose your home or not and gradually discovering that friends of yours have died.”

Taking it online

Technology has changed a fair bit since 2009, and citizens' level of comfort with dealing with governments through technological channels has greatly increased. Indeed for many, especially the younger generations, digital engagement is the expected norm.

“That 2009 case study is the best example I've seen of something that was deployed incredibly rapidly. It was deployed in a really disciplined way to start helping people almost immediately,” said Still.

“But what has changed a little bit since then is [that] there's more focus on self-service and using modern digital channels to provide assistance.”

“The model in Victoria in 2009 was that we were assisting people to register for the emergency benefit programs that were available. But it was done largely using case workers,” he added.

“We still absolutely support that today, but I think... most people when they can would prefer online self-service, whether it's through a chatbot or through the web.”

Other success stories

As a disaster unfolds, governments need help to automate and manage services that people rely on, but which are disrupted in a disaster. This is partly about moving transactions that people might otherwise conduct in person, to online. And it's partly about providing a CX platform to empower employees, who are used to working in an office but now need a way to route work between them rather than talking across the cubicles in an office.

Over the longer term, social services programs, unemployment assistance and other initiatives need to adapt quickly, and ensure excellent service; there needs to be a low rate of fraud, waste and abuse; and there must be the ability to keep adapting to meet government outcomes.

“Security is always important in government, too, so we cannot compromise on that... and it has come up often in discussions I have with customers,” added Still.

“Usability is important to drive adoption as well, eg. to ensure that employees can work in a new environment, or to encourage

citizens to try self-service even if they transacted with government in other ways before,” he said.

Oracle’s SaaS solutions have helped governments around the globe achieve some remarkable results. Take France, for example. One of its agencies used Oracle’s CX solutions to transform its citizen social benefit experience to 100% digital via omni-channel for 30 million of the country’s people. Deployed within five months, it supported 10 million transactions in the first four weeks with a peak volume of two million transactions per hour.

Then there was the major US government agency that used Oracle CX to launch an interactive tax assistant, enabling 24/7 self-service customer access to tax information and FAQs. The same technology enabled it to rapidly deploy a rebate calculator in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. And it also powered the agency’s 20,000-plus customer service representatives spread across 256 call centres and 54 service centres.

Creative solutions

So what has driven this agility and the ability to respond quickly to fast-moving events?

“I think two things have changed,” said Still. “The first is that governments are changing. I have seen a very creative and pragmatic approach to crisis response from the government organisations I have been privileged to work with.”

Still says that while government IT has a reputation for being slow and deliberate, he has seen governments make creative use of solutions they already own, and also focus on very quick implementations and smart solutions for immediate problems.

“We have seen a number of governments set out to implement new solutions in less than a week, which is very unusual for enterprise citizen experience solutions — but it may be the start of a culture change that will stay with us,” he said.

“The second thing that has changed are the solutions that vendors like Oracle can provide,” he added. “We can deploy software very quickly in the cloud, without customers needing to worry about procuring hardware, figuring out how to install the software etc.

“In addition, even though every government organisation is a little different, and has somewhat different requirements, our SaaS products have a strong foundation of functionality and best practices built in, which helps governments get started very quickly.



“That could be with advice wizards and knowledge searching on a portal; management of service requests; running a contact centre; or even managing complex cases for citizens who have been badly impacted,” he said.

Smoothing the way

One of the main advantages of online, self-service solutions is that they are available 24 hours per day and don’t lead to the problem of huge activity spikes (eg. on the phone) during business hours, as seen recently with people calling Centrelink for assistance during and in the aftermath of the bushfires.

“Part of the global solution we have today is called the Oracle Intelligent Advisor. This was actually invented in Canberra and is still built and maintained in our Canberra office. It lets you take very complex government policies and turn them around so that it generates automated advice,” said Still.

Helping people help themselves by smoothing the way to finding relevant information, linking to the correct online forms to fill out, or guiding them through the maze of red tape, is often far more effective than the traditional methods, Still says.

“If you talk about chatbots, or a website, or a chat session with a human operator, or a phone call... the direction we’re taking is [that] all of these things should be joined up, and it shouldn’t matter how someone makes that contact,” he said.

“At the end of the day an interaction is an interaction, so you should apply the same logic to work out whether someone’s eligible for fire assistance, what their payment would be.

“From the point of view of a government, you can be much more agile and deploy much faster if you can define how an interaction works — what the rules are — one time, and then they’ll always be consistent; you only have to build it once.”

Further information:

<https://www.oracle.com/au/applications/customer-experience/service/intelligent-advisor.html>

<https://www.oracle.com/applications/customer-experience/industries/public-sector/>