

Features to Consider When Building WIC Online Applications

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Look for features that allow for accessibility, flexibility in editing, translation, data access, security, and analytics

One critical step in setting up an online WIC application is deciding what software to use. State agencies may choose to custom build an application or to use commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) form building software. In either case, state agencies need to select what features the software should include. The features recommended in this article are based on market research; a review of all existing WIC online applications; and interviews with state agency staff, local agency staff, and people eligible for WIC about their online application needs.

All of the following features are ideal for online application software. This is true whether a state agency builds its own online application or buys COTS software. No matter the approach, tradeoffs may need to be made. Every state agency has a different budget, staff, and WIC population, which will affect which set of features is best for them. The solution that is right for a state agency is the one that best fits their plans for service delivery and is aligned with their needs, strengths, and constraints. In general, state agencies should look for software that includes the following features.

I. Accessibility

Having an accessible application means it is easier for everyone to access and use, including people with disabilities. State agencies should look for the following features in online application software:

Key features

- 1. Responsive design:** A responsive online application means it is designed to be easy to use on all screen sizes and devices. This will ensure that a WIC online application is usable at smartphone screen widths. This is important because many applicants apply for WIC using their smartphones.
- 2. 508 and WCAG compliance:** Look for software that fulfills the requirements of [Section 508](#) and [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 \(WCAG 2.0 AA\)](#). WCAG are guidelines for developers to use to create accessible websites.

II. Editing

Having the flexibility to edit questions makes it easier to adapt to technology or policy changes and to help guide users through the application. Look for the following features to ensure that text can be edited in the online application.

The features are ordered from most to least important:

Key features

- 1. Ability to edit question text:** This is a fundamental feature. Text should be editable without needing an engineer to do development work.
- 2. Ability to add helper text underneath questions:** Helper text can give more context to help an applicant answer a question accurately. In this example, the helper text gives more context about why this question is being asked.

Required (select all that apply):

Contact preference

To schedule an appointment, we need to be able to reach you. Please select any preferred contact methods.

- ☐ Telephone call
- ☐ Text message / SMS
- ☐ Email
- ☒ No preference

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- 3. Ability to edit question flow:** Flow in online forms refers to the path that a user takes through different screens or questions. The question

order should be able to be customized and edited.

4. **Ability to use conditional logic:** This is a more complex version of question flow. Conditional logic routes an applicant to a specific question based on their previous answers. This reduces confusion for the applicant by showing them only questions relevant to their situation.
5. **Ability to add and edit a confirmation page and email:** An online application should have a confirmation page, and ideally a confirmation email. This helps applicants confirm their submission was successful. In the text, state agencies should include information to help prepare applicants for what to expect next, and how to schedule and prepare for their certification appointment.
6. **Ability to format in-question or helper text:** Using bold or italics within question or helper text can emphasize words or sentences to help the applicant answer the question accurately.
7. **Ability to add links to question text:** Links within the form can offer the applicant more detailed information that's not required to complete the form.
8. **Ability for an applicant to edit responses before submission:** An applicant may want to check their responses and correct any mistakes before submitting their application.
9. **Ability to edit the visual design:** Consider how much the visual design can be customized. Design customization may include:
 1. Adding WIC branding or images
 2. Changing the text color or background color
 3. Changing the font styles

Note: state agencies must comply with [accessibility rules](#) for fonts and colors.

III. Translation

An online application should be available in the languages that a significant proportion of the eligible population needs. This will ensure that people with limited English proficiency can apply online.

There are two main steps involved in creating translations. One is to decide how to translate the text into another language. The other is to decide how to add those translations to the form. Some methods are preferred based on [human-centered design](#) principles and federal legislation. State agencies should choose the approach that is best for its users.

Options for translating text

State agencies should start by translating their applications into the most common languages spoken by their WIC populations. To translate the online application into Spanish, they should use the WIC Model Online Application in Spanish as a resource. This resource includes a tested translation of the [WIC Model Application](#) in English. The application doesn't need to be available in every needed language before launch. A state agency could launch the application in English and Spanish and add more languages later. But, the software needs the ability to easily add needed languages in the future to ensure equitable access to WIC.

The following options are ordered from most to least recommended:

1. **Have a human translator translate application text:** Prioritize translation done by a human, rather than a machine. White House memo M-23-22 about building easy-to-use, digital-first online government experiences recommends this. Translations should be tested with native speakers to ensure that they are easily understood.
2. **Use machine translation:** Relying on only machine translation without review or testing can miss important cultural nuances. While not ideal, machine translation is acceptable when it can be reviewed by a human translator.

Options for adding translations to an online application

Software can handle an application in different languages using several methods. The following methods are ordered from most to least convenient for the applicant:

1. **Ability to detect applicant's language setting:** This option involves adding code to the online application to detect the applicant's language settings within their browser or device. The software then automatically shows the online application in the selected language. This is the most convenient option for applicants.
2. **Ability to add a language selector bar:** The applicant manually selects the online application's language from a language selector bar. A selector bar is helpful when an application has two or more languages available and is unable to detect an applicant's language setting.
3. **Ability to create multiple forms:** Multiple forms, one in each language, can be created. The state agency would then need to link each online application from its informational webpage. When this option is chosen, the state agency will need to edit multiple forms any time a change is needed.
4. **Ability to edit text fields in the same application:** The translated text can be added next to the English in the same form. An example is "Name/Nombre" describing the name text field on the application. This is the least ideal for applicants. It requires them to read text in another language that isn't relevant to them. And, it does not work well for more than two languages.

IV. Data access

Application responses (data) should be easy to access to save staff time and effort. This gives the most flexibility to add or edit a workflow. Having access to the data also helps make it possible to connect the application to an MIS. However, some state agencies have found it preferable to manually review submissions before adding them to the MIS to ensure data quality and prevent duplicate entries.

Options for accessing application data

The following options are ordered from most to least ideal. These options apply whether a state agency is figuring out how to route applications or wants data to be easier to use.

1. **Create an application programming interface (API):** The gold standard for accessing data is creating an [API](#). An API is a mechanism that allows two different pieces of software to communicate with each other. The Representational State Transfer Architectural Style (REST) is an industry-standard API format. In this case, using an API allows for things like the automatic transfer of data from online form submissions to an MIS. When using an API in this way, state agencies may want a manual review process of new entries to prevent duplicates being created in the MIS.
2. **Use application software workflows to process applications:** If creating an API isn't possible right now, certain software products have workflows that make it easier to process application responses. For example, some software may be able to use the ZIP Code on an application to determine which clinic should be sent the application for processing.
3. **Export application data as a Comma Separated Values (CSV) file:** Another alternative is exporting response data into a CSV file, which can then be imported to populate corresponding fields in the MIS. This is a more manual process. It may be better for some state agencies, though, since it doesn't lock a state agency into using one specific software to review and work with application responses. However, custom code will likely be required to import the responses into the MIS.

There are still options if application data can't be accessed in the ways listed above. Some state agencies have had success processing submissions and putting the information into their MIS manually. Manual processing can be used as a temporary solution while work is completed to automate

the process.

Robust security and privacy

Applicants will be entering sensitive personal information into the online application. Work with the appropriate staff to make sure the software and its terms and conditions fulfill the state agency's security and privacy requirements.

Check if the state agency has a list of approved software that already meets the state agency's security and privacy requirements. If so, a state agency can consider options on the list based on the features listed in this article. This may allow a state agency to get started creating an online application faster, rather than waiting to buy or submit a change order for new software.

V. Analytics

Analytics help a state agency learn how people are getting to and using an online application and how it is working for people as they complete it. Analyzing data allows the state agency to make decisions to improve the software based on data about how it is being used. Ask the IT department if they already have analytics licenses.

Key features

The following are important analytics to have on an online application:

1. **How people got to the application:** Helps understand the [customer experience](#) (CX) of finding the application and which channels are working best.
2. **Elapsed time on the entire application:** Helps track how long the application takes to complete and whether there may be issues causing delays.
3. **Elapsed time on individual pages:** Helps decide which pages to improve based on which ones take applicants the longest to complete.
4. **At which page anyone dropped out of the question flow:** Helps decide which pages or processes to improve based on where applicants stop applying.
5. **Browser used:** Helps decide which browsers to optimize for when improving the application.
6. **Device used:** Helps decide which devices to optimize for when improving the application.
7. **Any errors in form submission:** Helps prioritize changes to make to the application based on errors in the form design.

These analytics can help uncover opportunities to improve the WIC online application CX using human centered design techniques.

VI. Advanced features

The following are features that state agencies may want to implement later. These are features that allow the online application to be more responsive before and after submission and connect to other tools.

1. **Adding workflows for applicant submissions:** Online application software can contain features that allow staff to sign in and manage submissions within the software. When considering these features, a state agency needs to consider its business processes in advance and how and where staff will manage applicant data.

Managing submissions can involve adding or changing information attached to each submission. Examples include:

- Updating applicant status
- Adding notes about an applicant
- Creating automated workflows triggered by certain events with the application, such as sending an automated email from a template when an applicant's status is changed, or routing a submission to a local agency based on ZIP Code

Some state agencies may build these features into the MIS, rather than in the application software. In this case, the state agency should use the data access options mentioned above to determine the best approach. State agencies should also work with local agency staff to see how these features will fit into their workflows to design the best approach for users.

2. **Ability to interface with other systems:** If the application tool has an API or other options for interfacing with other tools, it enables greater functionality. For example, an application could connect with a scheduling tool to show available appointment times. Integration with clinic location data could enable an applicant to find and select a clinic near them. Integration with a document uploader could enable applicants to provide required documents before their appointment.

Conclusion

When deciding what software to use for an online application, state agencies should look for the above features that allow for accessibility, editing, translation, data access, security, and analytics. The features a state agency ultimately prioritizes should be based on their needs, constraints, and what is best for their staff and the populations they serve.

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