



## Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation

# Episode 64: Citizen Empowerment through Technology Modernization

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**Line Dempsey:** Welcome back to our podcast, Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation. Once again, I'm your host, Line Dempsey. I'm currently the chief compliance officer with Riccobene Associates Family Dentistry and Commonwealth Dentistry here in North Carolina and Virginia. I'm also CLEAR's president for the 2022-2023 year.

As many of you are aware, the Council on Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation, or CLEAR, is an association of individuals, agencies, and organizations that comprise the international community of professional and occupational regulation. This podcast is an opportunity for you here about important topics in our regulatory community.

Joining us for today's episode is Dan Hereth, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services. We're glad to have you with us here today.

**Dan Hereth:** Glad to be here today. Really appreciate the invitation. And you know I said it just a minute ago, but just really excited to be participating with CLEAR. We feel like our participation with your organization brings a lot of value to the work that we do day in and day out.

**Line:** That's fantastic! And we're glad to have our listeners with us today. Now I understand that the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services is the state agency responsible for the majority of occupational licensing as well as construction regulation.

So today we'd like to talk with you about some of the technology initiatives that the Department is undertaking. So for your agency, what is the biggest technology priorities for you at the moment?

**Dan:** Yeah. We're in the midst of really a multi-year, multi-phase technology overhaul of our agency. Our agency is a relatively young agency. Professional licensure has existed in Wisconsin for many decades, and but we only recently became the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services. Various pieces of our organization were embedded in other agencies, and in 2011 our those pieces were bought together to form our agency. And so, we're really in the midst of that organization-building process alongside the technology-building process. And I think I almost don't like

to focus on technology when I answer that question. And what I like to focus on is empowerment. Really, it's that foundational idea about what our organization can do for the citizens of the state of Wisconsin, and through that we define what the technology should do for the citizens of Wisconsin.

So, for us it was really about identifying all of our processes and determining, how can we enable our citizens to drive those processes forward? Because at the end of the day, while we're the regulator, these processes are really owned by the people of Wisconsin, and so they should be most empowered to move through those processes at whatever speed and whatever level of comfort they may have with that effort.

So for us, we did move to enhancing our licensing process. We really moved from what was traditionally a manual process augmented by technology to now a technology-based process, a full update of that embedded in the technology. And so what the new technology enables us to do, enables the citizens of Wisconsin to do, is really sit in the driver's seat of their application process and tell us when they're ready to move it forward.

**Line:** Now, I think what you're talking about there is this, you know, a self-guided cloud based online license application and renewal process that you talk about. What do you call it?

**Dan:** We call it LicenseE.

**Line:** Okay, that's awesome. So I guess, what's the difference between that and you know this platform, and how would that make this different for the applicants of the department?

**Dan:** Yeah, absolutely. So, the system we used to use was really - I think of it back in my restaurant days growing up. FIFO - first in, first out. It was really that the application came in the door, and the oldest application got touched first. And the third and fourth and fifth time it got touched, it was the same thing, just cycling through that list. And for us internally, that really created an inefficient use of resources, right?

It meant we were touching applications that were at various stages of the process that maybe weren't ready for our review or for our input. And this new system allows us internally to better identify those applications that are ready for our review and input and to move those forward most quickly. For the applicant side, it does just that. It enables the applicant to really determine when they're ready to submit the documentation and drive that process forward, and that allows them to move as quick or as slow as they like through the process. As opposed to the back-end driving the process, now the applicant's driving the process.

**Line:** So obviously it sounds like (and you kind of touched on it there) this improves the service opportunities, at least for that. Can you speak more specifically on how this modernizing of your technology has done that?

**Dan:** Yeah, absolutely. So for us, internally, when an applicant submits a piece of documentation, that automatically updates the applicant's file with the documentation, and then tells the reviewer (the person who is assigned that application) that new material has come in the door. And so, instead of the guesswork of maybe the application has new documentation that needs to be reviewed, maybe it doesn't, now our folks internally know the minute a piece of documentation has been submitted, or the minute a change has been made, and that allows them to put their focus on that application that's most active in the process.

**Line:** That's fantastic. That certainly does seem to make it easier on staff too when they're dealing with a lot of different applications like that, especially as large as this is. What would have been your biggest challenges for launching and rolling out a project of this nature?

**Dan:** Well, I think internally the biggest challenge is, there was that culture shift away from a queue. So in Wisconsin, we have a strong German heritage, and we like our lines, and we don't like people jumping in line. And so, you know, we had lots of conversations with staff internally about really shifting the mindset of folks away from needing to service the person who's been in the line the longest to needing to service the person who's most active in the process and whose application is ready for review.

And externally it's really just been about reorienting people towards the process. And I think for us, you know we're blessed to have a lot of folks in a lot of different industries throughout the state that are really engaged in our processes. And with that engagement comes both opportunity and responsibility. There's the opportunity of sort of leveraging these folks to help applicants move through the process and to help educate applicants and to help educate industries. But then the responsibility on our side is to make sure that we're providing them with the information they need to be that sort of workforce multiplier that is so valuable.

**Line:** I know, in North Carolina when we used to work with the North Carolina Dental Board, and when they rolled out their ability to renew online, and they no longer sent out reminders in the snail mail, they don't even send out the renewal in the snail mail. They were met with some resistance. Probably some of the - you know I don't want to say 'older' population; that's not a good nomenclature - but maybe more technology challenged individuals. Have you run into that kind of difficulties in this process?

**Dan:** You know certainly that has been something that we've seen. I will say that we have been shifting towards an email-based notification system for several years, so that effort really predated our effort to shift to the electronic platform, and so that smoothed the way on that front.

I'll say in terms of meeting that challenge, I think that's where that shadow workforce, if you will, that workforce multiplier, comes in with all of the different stakeholders and folks that are invested in our processes. They've really done a nice job of working with us, hand in hand, to get that information out there and to help some of those folks who they know of who may be less technologically savvy

navigate the process.

And you know, we've already renewed over 40,000 licenses in this system. I expect that number to grow exponentially over the next year, as we add the remainder of our professions into the system. And so, just really excited about what it's been able to do for both us as a department, but also for the citizens.

**Line:** That's fantastic. So I guess you know, having worked on this project for a while, what's kind of your biggest insight that you've had from it so far?

**Dan:** You know, it's an interesting question. I think one of the questions I get often - which is sort of a chicken and egg question, right? - is, should you do process improvement first and then update and invest in the platform, or should you update and invest in the platform second? And you know, out of necessity, we did the platform first and sort of have been doing the process improvement along the way.

But I'll say that the insights that a modern system can give you into your processes, into the data that you have, that older systems may not provide has been invaluable, and I don't even think, if we had done some of the process improvement upfront that those conclusions that we would have come to would be valid today, based on what we know the system can do for us and the insights it's given us into our data.

I would certainly recommend for anyone who's interested in updating their licensing system to definitely set aside a piece of your budget to do iterative process changes after the initial project's over. Because I think where we're at right now is, every day we find sort of new high value tasks that we can take and change with technology that will yield a better experience for the applicant and yield more efficiency for us internally.

**Line:** That's great information to have. I guess, for other regulators that were maybe considering updating an antiquated system or upgrading their technology, that have a desire for this kind of better service, what other advice other than that would you, having gone through this, be able to provide for our audience?

**Dan:** Yeah, I think I can speak a little bit to why we chose a cloud-based vendor. Traditionally in government, we build these systems, and then we hold onto the system for 20 or 30 years. And you know the system is good for the first 5 to 10 years, and then it's okay for 10 more years, and then it's terrible for 10 years. And I think that the cloud-based system really. . . you know, I'm not a buy-a-leased-vehicle kind of guy. I'm more of a purchase-the-vehicle kind of guy. But in the context of government, and especially in the context of licensing regulation, where it seems like every legislative session there's updates and there's changes and there's shifting priorities, to have that flexibility and that capability to shift with those priorities from a technology standpoint is really critical. And the cloud-based platforms really provide that to us.

In terms of advice, I would just say that the stakeholder engagement is really critical for us as an umbrella agency. And I know you spoke to your experience in North Carolina; it sounds like you have more of a board-based model. You know, we have such a breadth of stakeholders, and each board, each profession is going to have different priorities and different needs and different processes. And so, I think investing in that work with your stakeholders, really growing your technology alongside your stakeholder group and bringing them along for the ride is critical to the success of the program. You know, by the time you get to the end and you're done upgrading, there's always going to be critics, right? Nothing's ever going to be perfect for everybody, but by investing in that time upfront and having those conversations, they have a higher level of commitment and buy-in to what's being built. And it helps to minimize some of the grumbling that you might experience otherwise.

**Line:** Well, as you near adding this to all of your licensing organizations, as you start to look towards future projects, either new ones or enhancements, what do you envision for your department and the way you serve your applicants and other residents of the state of Wisconsin?

**Dan:** Yeah, for me it's about automation. And I know that can be a bit of a scary word. And I think even recently we've heard of the national investigation, the Nightingale investigation into transcript fraud. And I do want to be clear - when I say automation, I don't mean we are gonna automate away the safety and the due diligence that our teams need to do to ensure we're only allowing the qualified individuals to enter the workforce. What I mean is taking those tasks, those mid- and low-level tasks that don't add as much value, and to me automation really provides me the opportunity to refocus our team on those tasks and on the review of documentation that *is* critical to ensuring that the safety of the citizens of Wisconsin.

To get to automation in licensing, a lot of that has to do with electronic integrations, with national vendors and national testing organizations. And you know, for our agency, with over 80 different professions and 240 different licenses, that's not gonna happen overnight, and quite frankly, it's not going to make a business sense to automate and to integrate in every case. But building out the platform in a way that you have that flexibility to add those integrations and those automations over time, as the business case can be made and as budgets allow, is really what I think is the critical next step, and it's going to be an ongoing effort.

**Line:** Excellent! Well, it's been great to hear about your agency's experience and the journey that you have taken on modernizing your technology. You know, one of the great benefits of being involved with CLEAR is being able to hear from our other regulators and learn from each other about the challenges and successes. So thank you, Dan, for speaking with us today.

**Dan:** Absolutely. I really enjoyed being here and looking forward to the next conference.

**Line:** Oh, yes, absolutely. That'll be in Salt Lake; looking forward to that. Actually, right before that, we've got the International in Dublin. But it's certainly been a pleasure. And to our listeners, we would

like to continue this conversation. And here are some questions for you to think about:

- What level of service should regulators be providing their applicants and registrants?
- Is there anything that technology shouldn't be used for or that shouldn't be done?

We greatly appreciate and thank our members for your feedback. We've recently launched a new Regulatory Network platform, and questions like these will be posted there for member feedback and discussion. If you haven't already joined the CLEAR Regulatory Network, we invite you and encourage you to do that, and then be a part of these online discussions.

I also want to thank our listeners for tuning in for this episode. We'll be back with another episode of Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation very soon. If you're new to the CLEAR podcast, please subscribe to us. You can find us on Podbean or any of your favorite podcast services. And if you've enjoyed this podcast episode, please leave a rating or comment in the app. Those reviews help us improve our ranking and make it easier for new listeners to find us. Feel free also to visit our website at [www.clearhq.org](http://www.clearhq.org) for additional resources, as well as a calendar of upcoming programs and events.

Finally, I'd like to thank CLEAR staff, specifically, Stephanie Thompson, content coordinator and editor for our program. Once again, I'm Line Dempsey, and I hope to be speaking to you again very soon.

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