

AUTOMATING REQUEST AND APPROVAL PROCESSES

ABSTRACT

The ability for organizations and individuals to quickly make decisions is often hampered by inefficient practices and manual request / approval processes. We outline a way for automating these processes.

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Automating Request and Approval Management



Overview

For most organizations, decisions are rarely made in a vacuum. Organizations require some level of structure, to ensure corporate policies are adhered to and critical decisions receive the proper checks and balances before action is taken. Sometimes this is due to regulatory or compliance pressure, sometimes it's simply organizational due diligence.

In many cases, decisions are synonymous with "approvals." Someone has made a request and someone, or a series of people need to make a decision, yes or no. Sometimes the decision has direct financial impact, like funding a large real estate project. Sometimes the decision has less direct impact, like approving a new piece of marketing collateral for use at a trade show.

At the same time, the ability for organizations and individuals to quickly make decisions is often hampered by inefficient practices and manual request / approval processes. While organizational hierarchy may determine who decides what, the processes driving the decisions remain ad-hoc and manual. Unfortunately, as [Harvard Business Review points out](#) in their article “The Decision-Driven Organization:”

“A corporation’s structure will produce better performance if and only if it improves the organization’s ability to make and execute key decisions better and faster than competitors.”

This white paper describes a method for automating an organization’s request and approval management to ensure better and faster decisions get made while providing the necessary information to audit and report on the decision-making process.

The Request Problem

Most companies have a problem with request handling. The current solutions for handling requests usually fall into three basic groups.

Solution #1: Paper-based Requests

Manual request and approval processes are inefficient, error-prone and create day-to-day setbacks in productivity and morale. A surprising number of organizations still cling to paper forms for internal processing.

Paperless Workflow or “The Paperless Office” sound like great ideas but surprisingly, many businesses, large and small still rely on paper-based communication to manage requests, complete forms and even communicate (interoffice mail envelopes are still in use). At last estimate, 5 million tons of office paper were still being used each year in the U.S. alone.

Resistance to going digital and automating even basic processes like expense requests or benefit change requests persists despite all the clear disadvantages of paper:

- Paper forms require hand processing that wastes time and staff resources.
- Paper forms can be easily lost and misrouted causing miscommunication and delays and/or extra filing.
- Confidential forms can be accidentally made public (ever leave an insurance form on the printer?).
- Paper requests can be held up and miss deadlines because of the need for handwritten signatures.
- Handwritten forms can be difficult to read, leading to incorrect data entry and, yes, more delays.
- Paper is difficult to track. For instance, where is an approval in the process? How many requests have been submitted? How many budget requests were rejected? Etc.

Digitally automating one simple painful and paper driven process can not only greatly benefit the department who sets it up, but all the employees throughout the organization who can now easily submit and track their own requests.

Solution #2: Email and Email Attachment-based Requests

Ah, the email attachment. As much as businesses have tried to move to content management and file storage systems, the email attachment remains the go-to way of sharing files. Even when someone can simply point to a document sitting in a system like DropBox, Box.com, etc. often they find the path of least resistance is to simply attach the file and let it fly.

However, the issue is less about the under-utilization of document management systems and more about the continued use of a specific old-school technology still being used to collect information. Even in 2016 it's far too common to see people attaching forms created in Excel, Word or Acrobat to emails. It could be for an expense report, a document request, a project change authorization, vacation requests, etc. Just launch Microsoft Word and search for "forms." There are hundreds of pre-built form templates available. No one likes downloading them, opening them, saving them and then sending them back.

When forms like these are used for something simple like gathering lunch preferences for a company picnic, it's inefficient but at least it's a fairly straightforward experience. Someone sends out an email with the form attached to everyone and they all send back their completed forms. Sure, the results have to be manually and painstakingly compiled by someone, but it's a one-time burden. That being said, you're better off signing up with SurveyMonkey to handle these kinds of requests.

But when you start talking about more frequently-used forms that require approvals and involve several different people, using forms like these becomes a huge bottleneck. Everyone involved has to open the attachment, review the contents, fumble through the form to make any changes or edits, save it somewhere with a different name, re-attach it and then send it out to the next person in the process. Meanwhile:

- People forget to attach documents or attach the wrong document.
- Someone is going to have to manually enter all the information into another system.

- Email servers and hard drives are filling up with countless versions of the same document.
- The only person who knows where things stand in the process is the last person to send or receive an email.
- Everyone is losing time they could be spending on more valuable work.

Solution #3: Homegrown Systems

IT departments can build applications internally to address organizational needs. Depending on the nature of the business problem, “homegrown” applications can be adequate either as temporary or permanent solutions but there are some things to consider before building a solution internally for request and approval management:

- **Speed:** Consider how quickly the solution needs to be rolled out. Even in the most sophisticated and well-managed internal IT organizations, developing a new custom software solution can take several months or longer. IT needs to balance a department’s needs with the needs of the entire organization. Integrify offers a great deal of configuration and can be up and running quickly while meeting very specific business needs.
- **Internal Skills:** The major factor that significantly reduces the ROI of a custom solution (and in many cases, ultimately causes the endeavor to fail) is the lack of available personnel with proper skill sets. It takes many skills to design and deploy a business solution that is both scalable and extensible. Unless one of your business areas is product development, there is an extremely high probability that your operations and maintenance technology resources do not include all of the skill sets necessary for a successful solution.
- **Total Cost of Ownership:** The cost of the development team, the time spent on all phases of development (including changes, bug fixing, training, documentation and updates) and the additional tools that may be needed for the build need to be considered before building.
- **One-Off or Platform:** A one-off workflow solution can be built for a specific need but IT and the organization needs to consider workflow holistically throughout the organization. Will IT keep building niche solutions or take advantage of a platform like Integrify that allows departments and business analysts to rapidly build their own solutions?
- **Updates and Upgrades:** Once an internal software solution is developed, the improvement cycle can become extremely slow. A solution may have been purpose-built for your needs today but your needs can change quickly once people are using it every day. What’s the

development cycle internally? How soon can you expect changes and new features to be implemented? Integrify releases updates monthly to improve the product and add additional functionality.

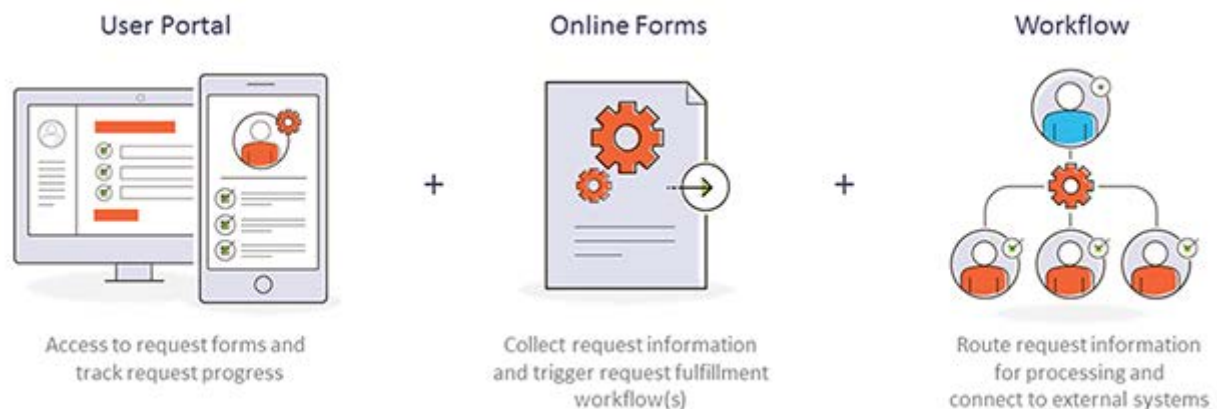
- **Support:** IT teams must support the applications they build. Every new system they build increases pressure on their support staff and they may not be allowed to scale resources to relieve the pressure. Integrify has an experienced service and support team that is dedicated to our product alone. Our knowledge base and documentation are updated regularly based on the questions and feedback we receive from customers every day.
- **Complexity vs. Impact:** Workflow Management systems involve a great deal of complexity to build. Is the strategic impact on the business worth the internal effort required to build one from scratch? In some cases, a workflow management system can provide a distinct competitive advantage, but in most cases the benefits are largely in the form of internal efficiency improvements.
- **Turnover:** IT turnover is a fact of life. Often internal solutions are built leveraging the discreet knowledge of an IT resource, leaving a skill/knowledge gap when the resource moves on. Investing in a stable, proven solution like Integrify means a lifetime of professional support.

The Solution: Automated Request and Approval Workflow

HR, Finance, Marketing, Operations and many other departments/business units handle a variety of requests from both internal and external customers and need a way to collect, route, track and evaluate the performance of the myriad requests they receive.

Request systems can handle all these needs, especially when the system is easily-configured to behave in a way that meets department and organizational requirements. Here is the basic structure of a request system:

Request System Basics

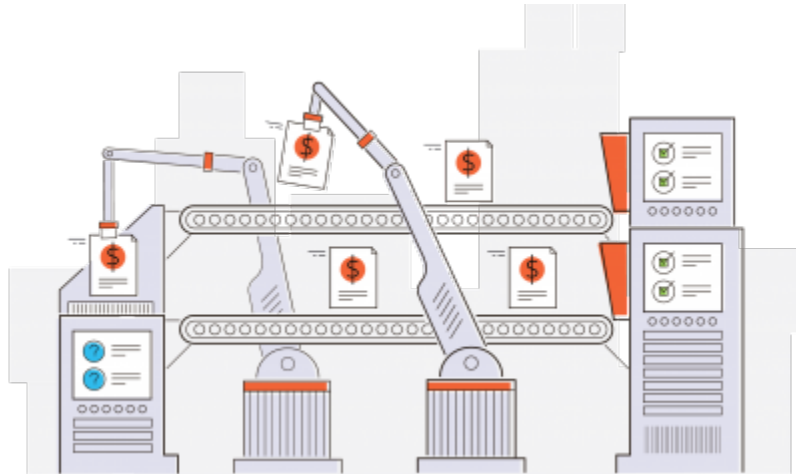


In the simple model above, you can see how a request system collects, tracks and routes individual requests to the proper staff for processing.

Internal and external users are given access to a portal where they can submit requests, track the status of their requests, take any necessary follow-up actions and provide feedback to staff handling their requests.

Administrators create request-specific forms that collect all required information to ensure that the proper request information is provided in the proper format.

Administrators also create workflow rules and processes that take submitted forms and route them as needed. Processes can be simple, single threaded flows that go from A to B to C or complex, multi-threaded flows that branch off based on logic built-in to the workflow.



For instance, in a capital expense request process, a Finance department may route expense requests differently based on the amount of the request. Under \$100k can be approved by a frontline finance manager while anything over \$100k automatically routes to the CFO.

Request systems provide tools for developing workflows that follow preset business rules and ensure that requests are received by the best person(s) to handle them. This could be based on role, management level, department, etc.

Each one of these steps or “tasks” moves a request forward through the process until its completed. Meanwhile, the user is able to see where the request is at any point in the process via the User Portal.

Alerts can be configured to indicate that a new request has been submitted as well as reminders at preset intervals that ensure the request is handled in a timely manner. This prevents the need for emails and phone calls to follow up on request status. In addition, the requester can track the progress of the request and see who is currently working on it.

Examples

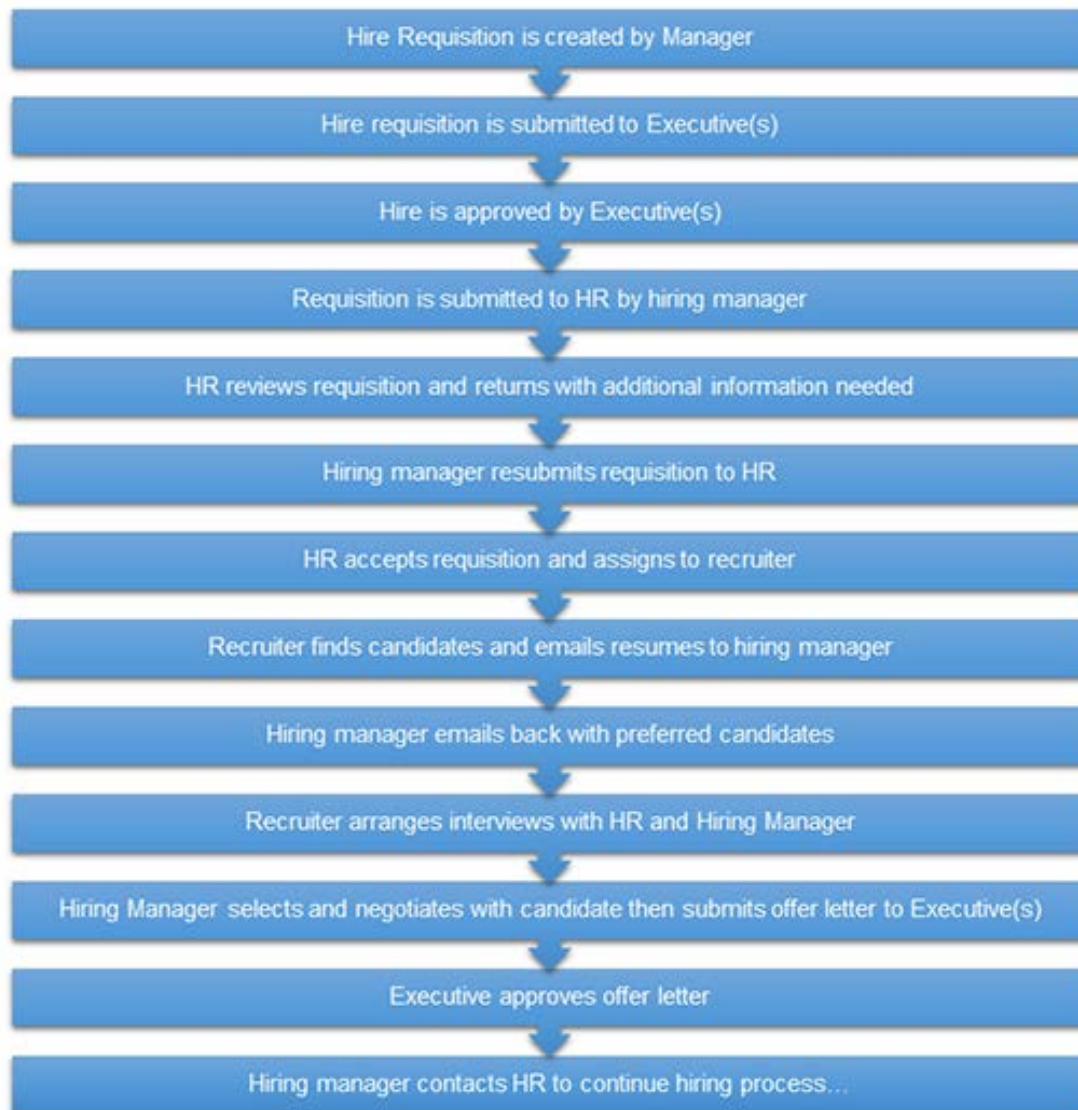
There are hundreds of different types of requests made in every organization on a regular basis. In larger organizations there can be thousands. One of our customers, [GlaxoSmithKline, was processing over 900 different types of requests with about 30,000 transactions per month](#), largely around IT processes. Before we go into some detailed discussions of specific types of requests, here is a short list of some of the request processes we've seen automated. Keep in mind this is only a small percentage of the possibilities.

Examples of Requests

IT/IS IS Service Request Security Access Request New Account Setup Request Software Change Request New Project Request Finance Purchase Request Salary/Wage Change Request Capital Expense Request	Facilities Office Relocation Request Resource Scheduling Request Facility Access Request Move and Expansion Request Sales Quote Approval Request Contract Review Request Product Discount Approvals	HR Benefit Change Request Timesheet Approval Request New Hire Request Employee On/Off Boarding Request Vacation Request Purchasing General Procurement Request New Vendor Request Bid Request	Marketing Marketing Campaign Approval Request Print/Online Ad Request Sponsorship Request Marketing Collateral Request Legal Legal Hold Request Contract Review Request Request for Production
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Example #1: New Hire Request Process

One of the more common request processes our customers automate is the new hire request process. A typical hiring request process can be fraught with inefficiencies. From the moment a manager or supervisor requests a hire to the moment that new hire is productively integrated into the organization can take several months. Depending on the size of the organization and the complexity of the hiring request process (for instance if external recruiters are involved) it can take even longer.



Like most internal business processes, the culprit is the “email hand-off.” Email, while a great communication tool when used properly, is too often used as a replacement for processes that should be centralized and automated. The hiring process is no exception. How does this illustration compare to your organization’s process?

Whether this is exactly your process or not, it’s probably similar unless you’re at a very small company. We actually cut it off a little early because we figure the point was made: hiring request processes are painful.

In a typical email exchange where someone needs something, there is an average of five emails sent:

“Hi, I need (something).”

“OK, I’ll need (more information) first.”

“Here is (the additional information).”

“OK, thanks. I’ll get back to you.”

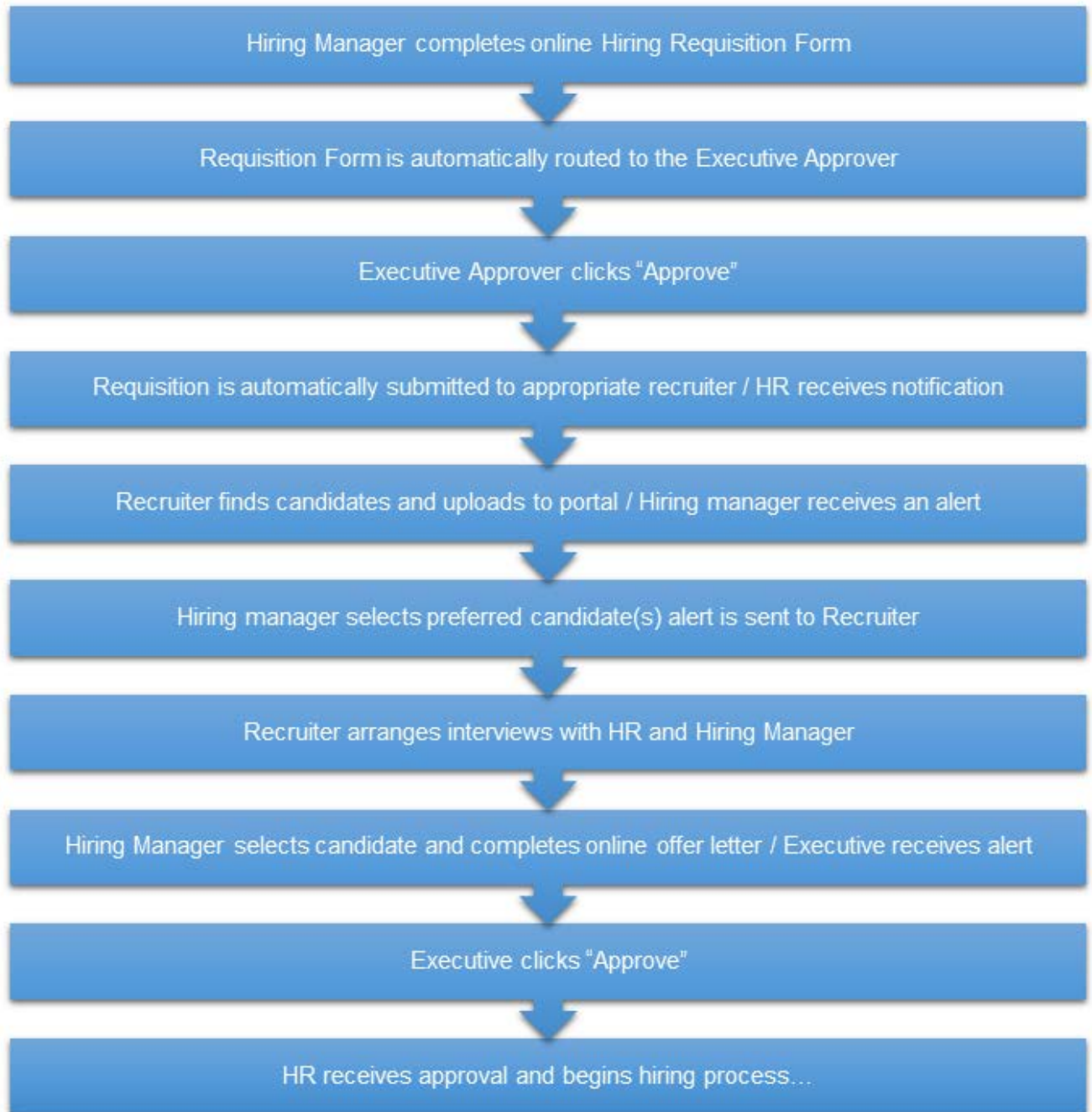
(Later) “I’ve done the thing.”

This is, unfortunately, a best case scenario. In most exchanges like this there are “check-in” emails, more information requested, other people brought in, etc. But let’s assume best case scenario and review the hiring process as previously laid out. There are several steps that likely involve emails to be written and sent:

1. Hire requisition is submitted to Executive(s)/Hire is approved by Executive(s)
2. Requisition is submitted to HR by hiring manager
3. HR reviews requisition and returns with additional information needed
4. Hiring manager resubmits requisition to HR
5. HR accepts requisition and assigns to recruiter
6. Recruiter finds candidates and emails resumes to hiring manager
7. Hiring manager emails back with preferred candidates
8. Recruiter arranges interviews with HR and Hiring Manager (Note: Let’s double this one to consider scheduling conflicts)
9. Hiring Manager selects and negotiates with candidate then submits offer letter to Executive(s) / Executive approves offer letter
10. Hiring manager contacts HR to continue hiring process.

Assuming the average for each of these conversations in the hiring process, that’s **60 EMAILS** written and sent just to get to where we cut the process off.

Now let's look at an automated version of the same hiring process.



When you first look at it, the processes look equally imposing. But if you consider the number of steps in this automated process **that require emails to be written and sent**, things look much different:

1. Recruiter arranges interviews with HR and Hiring Manager (Note: Let's double this one to consider scheduling conflicts)

So that's 10 emails written and sent, compared to 60. Emails are still part of the process, in the form of automated alerts, but there are far less and most require nothing more than a click. The rest happens automatically.

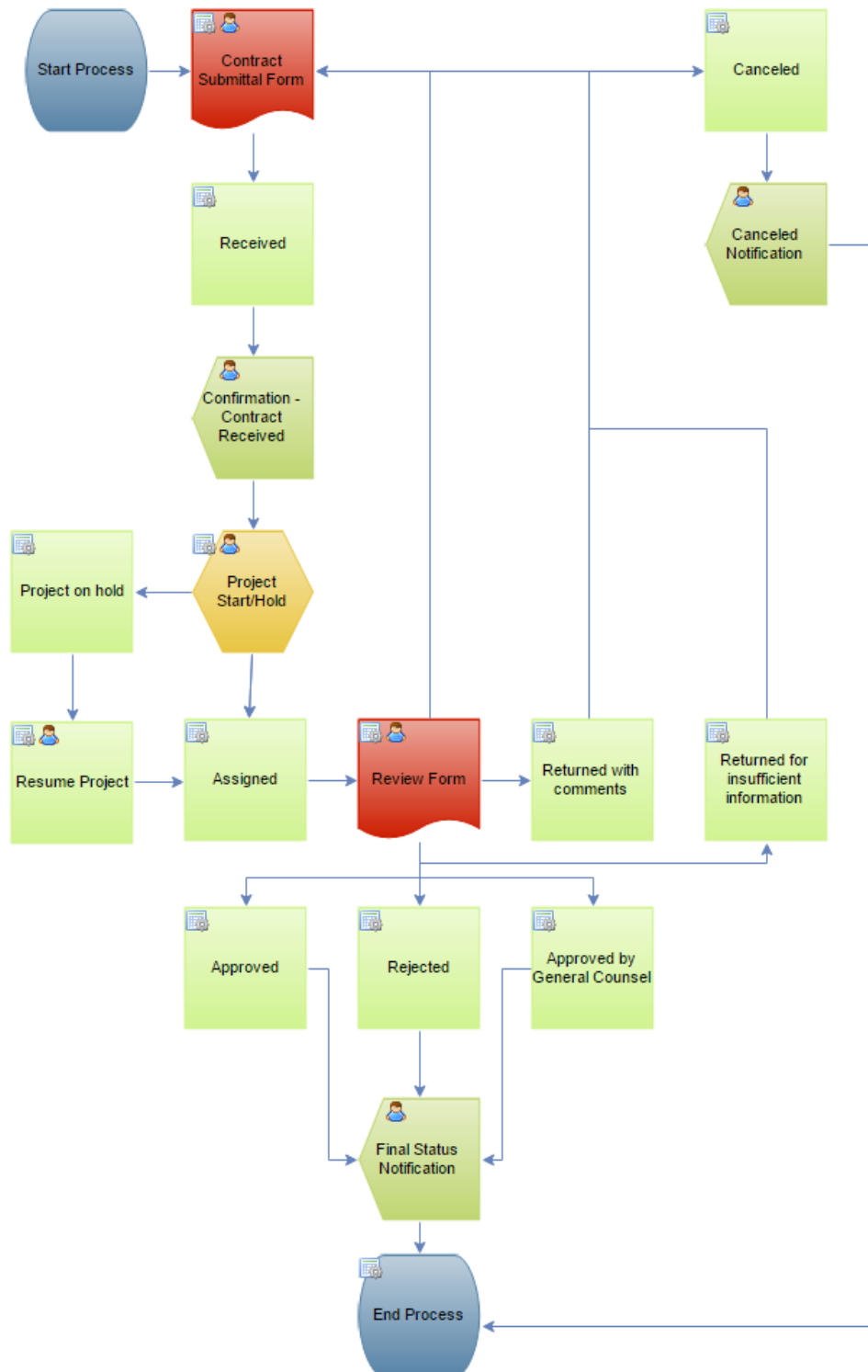
Example#2: Contract Review Requests

Below is an example of a process designed for Contract Review Requests. This is a critical request process in many industries and helps limit risk and liability.

Here's the basic flow of the contract review request process:

- A request is submitted in the use portal to have a contract reviews. The contract itself is attached as part of the form.
- A confirmation of receipt goes back to the submitter while the contract is assigned by the designated approver.
- The approver also has the option to put the project on hold temporarily. Perhaps more research needs to be done before assigning it.
- The assigned individual reviews the contract and then submits a Review Form. The information they provide may trigger several different outcomes: approved, approved by General Counsel, rejected, returned with comments or returned for insufficient information.
- "Approved by General Counsel" indicates that because of the type of contract submitted, it required an additional approval from General Counsel.
- Once the contract is approved, the requestor is notified.

Here's how the process looks in Integrify:



Further Considerations

Environment

Depending on your business, industry and organizational policies, there may be limitations on the types of software you can use. Even though cloud-based applications are secure and widely-used, your IT department may prefer to use locally-installed software. In other cases, you may want to use active directory to sync logins to the software with your existing user directory, which can't be done with cloud applications (more information below).

To meet the needs of these different scenarios, software vendors may offer multiple platforms for an application:

Public Cloud

Choose this option if you do not require integration with other systems or the systems you need to integrate with can be accessed over the internet. Commonly, internal applications are configured to accept connections from the cloud.

The public cloud option requires that user accounts are managed within the cloud system. This option requires no internal IT resources to set up, is fully managed by the vendor and can be available almost immediately after purchasing a license. No hardware is required.

Private Cloud

Choose this option if you require data isolation, an encrypted database, custom login page or an SSO bridge. The private cloud also allows you to schedule your own updates and allows for direct access to your SQL database.

This option may require some involvement for internal IT if SSO is required but is fully managed by the vendor. This option can be available within an hour of purchasing a license. No hardware is required.

On Premise

Choose this if you are required to integrate with systems that cannot be exposed to the Internet or your corporate policy requires that your data reside within your company's firewalls. Integration with Active Directory is also available with the on-premise option.

This option requires internal IT resources to install, configure and maintain the app server(s). Hardware or virtual hardware is required to run the system. Additionally, a database license (MS SQL Server, Oracle, etc.) is required.

About Integrify

Integrify has been providing software to enable automated request and approval processes for over ten years and has worked with a diverse array of companies, including GlaxoSmithKline, AT&T, Baylor University, Sony Entertainment Network and BP.

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