SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AND WORKFORCE HANDLES THE PANDEMIC SURGE

Modernized platform built with Capgemini delivers agility and scalability to process thousands of claims

The South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW) acts as a bridge between unemployment and reemployment. The goal is to match job seekers with employers quickly, efficiently, and effectively. From unemployment insurance benefits to personalized reemployment options, the agency provides robust services to support South Carolina's labor force and economic development.

"We do four things," explains Dan Ellzey, Executive Director, South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce. "We run workforce development for the state of South Carolina to train people who are experiencing difficulty finding a job. This includes operating employment services agencies to match job applicants and employers. We pay unemployment benefits. We tax employers, set the tax rate, collect taxes, and process unemployment claims. And we provide labor market information, collection of data, and analysis for the Bureau of Labor Statistics."

> "One thing I appreciate about Capgemini is they were just as eager as we were to look at SCUBI and say: 'How do we make this more user friendly?' Technically, it did exactly what it was supposed to do but we wanted to make it work for someone who may not have a computer or has limited education about computers. As a result of this thinking, we got a better SCUBI and a mobile app. Now you can file claims on your cellphone which is important because we have a number of people in rural areas without broadband."

Dan Ellzey
Executive Director, DEW

Building a more agile platform

DEW began exploring a more modern unemployment benefits systems in 2010. Before issuing an RFP, it invested time to determine the requirements with multiple stakeholders and develop documentation so, once the project began, the process would be easier.

"The feasibility study we did ahead of modernizing our platform really allowed us to jump start the work because we knew what we wanted ahead of time," explains Kevin Cummings, Assistant Executive Director Technical Services, Policies, and Reporting, DEW. "We had all of the requirements, use cases, and test scenarios already laid out for our partner."

DEW decided to work with Capgemini on the project, and the Southeast Consortium for Unemployment Benefits Integration (SCUBI) was launched in 2017. It is a modern unemployment insurance benefit system acting as the system of record for DEW, collecting all the data from the unemployment insurance program.

"SCUBI is designed to empower claimants and employers with self-service so the unemployment filing process can be as seamless as possible," says Cummings. "And it allows our employees to process the filings more efficiently."

Automating to drive efficiency

The system allows DEW to design workflows so, when a claim is filed, it is routed to the individual who needs to work on it. Processing claims is more efficient because the business rules and workflows determine what work can be handled electronically or automated under state and federal laws, and what needs to be sent to an employee.

Under the old system, employees had to review every application submission, and that typically took about 10 minutes, greatly limiting the number of claims that could be processed per day. SCUBI has eliminated this step by automating it.

The new SCUBI system starts the unemployment-benefit process with a series of questions, and most claimants can be routed accurately and processed quickly. For more complicated situations, the work is directed to the appropriate employee. Every case submitted is tracked to ensure deadlines are met and employees are freed to actually add value to more complex cases.

Passing the pandemic stress test

Then the pandemic hit, and unemployment claims surged. DEW went from 8,000 claims per month to 88,000 in April 2020. Working with Capgemini, DEW ensured the system was running properly, and the partners also identified, developed, and implemented enhancements to the claimant and employer experience, while still keeping track of nearly 900,000 claims in 2020.

"We had to move very, very quickly on multiple fronts," says Paul Famolari, Unemployment Insurance Director, DEW. "We had the closure of state offices so we had a workforce we needed to work remotely at home. We had to adapt to that both in terms of technology equipment – acquiring laptops, securing VPN access – and getting access rights for staff. And the SCUBI system really facilitated it because we had this modern system in place so we just needed to provide equipment to our employees.

"It was a tremendous benefit to have the SCUBI system already in place when we adjusted to working at home. It allowed us to adapt quickly and maintain our operations with minimal disruption without transferring paper files."

Implementing new aid programs

Beyond the existing unemployment state benefits, DEW also had to implement the processes for administering the new CARES Act quickly. Because SCUBI was a modern and agile system, DEW was able to build on it to implement pandemic unemployment benefits and place South Carolina in the early wave of states deploying the new federal programs.

"We attacked the surge in claimants by working with Capgemini to make the system more available and quickly implement the CARES Act programs," says Cummings. "It was a lot of long nights, long hours, and a lot of collaboration with the Capgemini team to make it happen."

The team learned early on that something as simple as changing the wording of an intake question could resolve confusion for new applicants, especially those who were part of the gig economy or independent contractors. The federal programs included these workers, so SCUBI was adjusted to ensure their claims could be processed quickly.

"SCUBI meant we were well positioned to handle the challenges from increased volume and the obligation to implement several new programs quickly," says Famolari. "Our system was able to handle the sheer volume of claims coming in without crashing or us resorting to taking paper claims."

"We worked with Capgemini to address the issues," explains Ellzey. "Immediately, we revised some questions and, on an almost daily basis, increased our volume with Amazon Web Services (AWS) to handle the influx. And in the end, I think the final assessment of South Carolina is we did very well during the pandemic. We paid all of the federal and state programs quickly, though we did take a little longer because we were attempting to avoid fraud; not all states took the same approach."

The SCUBI evolution

After successfully managing the deluge of claims during the pandemic, SCUBI usage is returning to more expected levels. The pandemic surge was the equivalent of about seven years of work in the span of nine months. It was the ultimate stress test and SCUBI passed beautifully.

DEW is now exploring the next opportunity. "We want to use machine learning to try and predict behavior of claimants and employers better and make sure we are asking the right questions with the right language," says Cummings. "The system provides a huge amount of data so we want to start using it to continue to improve."

SCUBI launched in 2017 and at the time it was a huge and important improvement, but no one knew then just how important. The unprecedented wave of claims that would hit three years later could have overwhelmed the older, rigid mainframe system. Instead, DEW's modern system meant South Carolina's labor force was among the best served in the nation.

"The Capgemini team was very dedicated and committed to South Carolina and our system. They worked long nights with us. They provided a lot of technical skill and expertise. They were very smart, dedicated, and responsive when we experienced the surge of applications and helped us succeed. It was a really great experience."

Kevin Cummings
Assistant Executive Director Technical Services, Policies, and Reporting
DEW
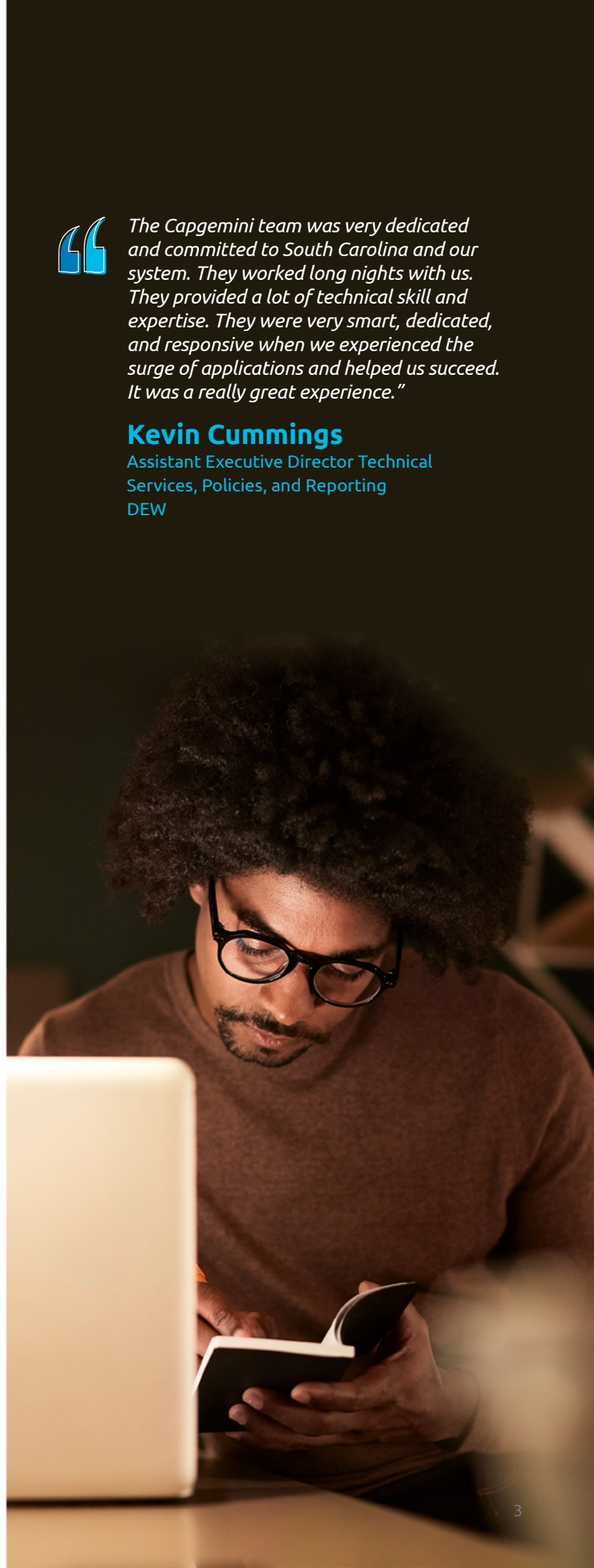
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