

Cal Employee Connect Through the Years

Did you know? 2023 marks the three-year anniversary of the statewide rollout for the California Employee Connect (CEC) Portal. CEC provides employees with a secure, self-service portal providing state employees with instant access to view and print their earnings statements, Form W-2's, leave balances, timesheets, and more. This homegrown effort was developed to substantially reduce state costs and workloads, such as the manual processing of forms for direct deposit requests, along with providing a tool for state employees to access the information they need. However, the CEC portal you see today was not always what the SCOCConnect team had initially envisioned. This started as a single application for state employees and has drastically grown and is now a dual package, with portals to serve both employees and Human Resources (HR) staff in ways that were not initially imagined. The SCOCConnect team has always been a cross-divisional team, comprised of the State Controller's Office (SCO) Information Services Division (ISD) and the Personnel and Payroll Services Division (PPSD). The team is dedicated to ensuring CEC is and continues to be a platform that meets the personnel and payroll needs for all users.

CEC Development Timeline:

2014: David Akins, (SCO, ISD) was working on his personal New Year's resolution for 2014 which was to go completely paperless at home. Ensuring he had scanned images or online access to receipts, bank statements, and utility bills, David had saved every pay stub ever handed to him from his 22 years of state service. That's 264 pay stubs! He wanted to make all of his pay stubs electronic. The year prior, David worked on a project to automate the transfer of payroll files between the mainframe and SCO's Disbursements Division. He saw first-hand how the payroll files were structured and realized it wouldn't be very difficult to write a program to generate digital PDF versions of pay stubs. Once he received approval from management, he came up with a program to generate PDF versions of pay stubs from the raw mainframe payroll files. Seeing how simple this was to implement, ISD management tasked David with creating a proof-of-concept portal to access these PSD pay stubs. This portal was demoed to various members of management and was universally applauded. However, at the same time, meetings for payroll modernization began and the California State Payroll System (CSPS) Project was established. The application was then shelved for two years.

2016: During a payroll modernization meeting, a member of ISD informed PPSD of the proof-of-concept that the ISD team had created two years prior. Sparks flew, and SCO began the work to develop the application that would be hosted on SCO's network and would directly interface with SCO's mainframe payroll system.

2017: The ISD team was given the green light to begin developing the portal for an internal SCO pilot. One of the main challenges was how to get a modern web application to interface in real-time with the legacy mainframe payroll system. In April 2017, the first live data was exchanged between the new portal and the mainframe system. By October 2017, the ISD team had

perfected this interaction using REST API, which is what ISD's production application uses to interface with the mainframe. In late October, the front-end web application development began. By December, the application entered user acceptance testing, and was readied for use by the first pilot divisions within SCO.

2017-2018: Chris Maio, SCO CSPA Project Director, took the application on the road, demonstrating the preliminary application. He hosted a presentation where he brought in the hefty stack of David's paycheck stubs to tell the story. Taking that bold first step, SCO invited chief executives from the Government Operations Agency (Gov Ops), Department of Finance (DOF), Department of Technology (CDT), FISCAL, Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), and Legislative consultants to establish top-level support for this development effort. Later, Maio presented at the Annual California State University (CSU) Benefits and Payroll Conference where the application presentation was met with "oohs" and "aahs." The application was well-received and was encouraged and resourced to move forward.

Spring 2018: The ISD team announced to SCO that the application—then known as Employee Self Service, or ESS—was ready for testing by ISD and PPSD employees. These SCO employees were encouraged to register and provide customer feedback and input to the SCOCConnect team. The access to the application was limited to SCO employees. Access was not yet available on personal computers or mobile devices. ESS was on its way to becoming available for all state employees. A pie chart broke down the components of the Earnings Statements. Employees could view their Form W-2s for 2016 and 2017. Employees could also view their leave balances.

CEC was developed entirely in-house by SCO staff, using 100 percent free open-source languages, frameworks, and databases, requiring no additional purchases. The technologies chosen to build CEC are the same ones used to power the likes of Netflix, LinkedIn, and more. The application is completely SCO-owned and is free to use by all state employees. The goals established while developing CEC were that it be compatible on any mobile device and be user-friendly. In fact, nearly 60 percent of the usage of CEC is from a mobile phone, and the most popular device used to access CEC is an iPhone.

2019: After successfully using CEC within SCO over the course of 2018, and then receiving approval for the Project Approval Lifecycle (PAL) by CDT in January, SCO opened the application up to six pilot agencies to use from their agency networks. Those agencies included the California Department of Human Resources (CalHR), Department of Water Resources, and the California Military Department. By June, there were a total of 12 agencies piloting the CEC application.

Spring 2020: In March, the COVID-19 pandemic forced California to transition its workforce to a hybrid work model to include telework. The SCOCConnect team saw an opportunity to accelerate the application rollout in a compressed schedule, thereby providing a service to the state employees by relieving the workload and cost of departments mailing out pay stubs. The original plan was to roll this out in six waves over the course of two years, but due to the

pandemic and accelerating the rollout, the CEC Executive Steering Committee approved releasing the application in three phases (as shown below):

1. April 15, 2020—129,000 employees across 73 departments
2. May 6, 2020—93,000 employees across 46 departments
3. June 15, 2020—66,000 employees across five departments

In April 2020, the project hit a milestone of 10,000 total registered users, demonstrating the application received effective word-of-mouth marketing ahead of its formal release. This was a 38.5 percent increase from the 7,400 registered users as of March 18, 2020. State employees were driven to register quickly, as the state printing of direct deposit pay stubs was suspended due to the pandemic. Because of the paper supply shortage, having access to CEC was the only way employees were able to view their payroll information.

With CEC being the sole application during the pandemic for employees to view their payroll information, the SCOConnect team expressed that the accelerated rollout was more challenging than expected. This resulted in long hours, but it was extremely rewarding. The team was able to assist Californians in need who were suddenly working from home and adjusting to new ways of living. The CEC technology created a new way of doing business for the state.

While change can be difficult for some, especially when it comes to implementing a new system, the CEC application created a sense of adaptation to technology and acceptance as the access to pay stubs and Form W-2's became a necessity. Employees quickly figured out how to register and provided feedback about how easy the application was to use and navigate.

Summer 2020: As departments were mostly remote, SCO received countless phone calls and inquiries requesting assistance from departmental HR offices. SCO provided those departments with resources, including enabling the eTimesheet feature. The eTimesheet feature had already been in the works for SCO use but was accelerated and expanded to other departments due to the pandemic.

Because of remote work, many paper processes became obsolete. For example, during the “Our Promise” campaign, there were no paper donation forms to hand out to employees. Therefore, the SCOConnect team met with the “Our Promise” staff to automate the campaign donation form. The SCOConnect team decided to post a direct link on CEC, allowing employees to donate directly through their user profile.

During the pandemic, all development was paused. This allowed the SCOConnect team to change methodology from predictive to iterative and began the process of releasing features with continuous updates after rollout. The team continued to support customers during the various phases of functionality rollout. This allowed customers to witness the changes in real time, and for them to provide timely feedback.

June 2020: Printing was shut down at SCO's Disbursement Center to reduce the number of staff in office. CEC, which was initially used as the back-up form for pay stubs, leave balances, and

Form W-2s, was now the primary method employees were using. ISD set up a disaster recovery system as a backup method to ensure stabilization.

September 2020: CEC won the [Best of California Award](#) at the Government Technology Conference (GTC) for [Best Application Serving an Agency's Business Needs](#). David Akins (Principal Engineer), Albert Chang (Co-Developer), and Todd Boltjes (Chief Information Officer) accepted the award.

Winter 2020: Anecdotally, on New Year's Eve in 2020, CEC Business Analyst Moe Adam's car needed repairs that would cost \$10,000 to fix. Since Moe was at the Auto Mall when he received the unpleasant news, he decided to shop for a new car. Moe was able to confidently purchase his new vehicle as CEC was accessible at his fingertips, and he was able to provide his earnings statements timely to the dealership. The SCOConnect team had received feedback from employees like Moe who were excited about the new application, but they also heard from employees who were not ready for the technological shift. Those who saw the change as a challenge and still wanted to continue receiving paper documents voiced their concerns to the team.

August 2021: Prior to 2021, CEC was an application to be used only by state employees. However, in 2021, the application evolved into a more universal platform that could support HR office. ConnectHR was developed and launched to all departmental HR offices. ConnectHR supports the SCO paperless initiative by allowing HR offices to upload files while either teleworking or working onsite. ConnectHR has created a way to securely exchange confidential information between departmental HR offices and SCO. Like CEC, ConnectHR was developed entirely in-house by SCO staff, leveraging much of its technology from the CEC platform. It has proven to be a viable and secure method to transfer data and/or documents to the correct SCO program area. The SCOConnect team aids HR offices with submitting forms, which also promotes accountability, compliance, and eliminates additional workloads.

January 2022: Additional interactive capabilities, such as address changes and updating/enrolling in Direct Deposit, were approved to launch in CEC. These interactive features enable employees to utilize self-service features. HR offices review all changes before they are processed. This ensures all parties are accountable and informed in the process.

Winter 2022- Spring 2023: CEC released the following features to be made available statewide:

- Direct Deposit (new/change). This feature replaces the STD. 699 Direct Deposit Enrollment form.
- Address Change feature. This replaces the STD. 686 Employee Action Request (EAR) form.
- W-2 Opt-In. This allows employees to opt-in to an electronic or paperless W-2.
- The ability to electronically donate to the "Our Promise" campaign.
- ConnectHR A/R 035. This allows HR staff to change the method of collection from Agency Collection to Payroll Deduction for Accounts Receivables (A/R).

- eTimesheet feature. Twenty (20) departments currently use this feature, and additional HR offices are able to request to use for their departments.
- In order to help secure all of these new features, the SCOCConnect team also implemented Multifactor Authentication (MFA). This feature uses any modern smartphone MFA app.

SCOCConnect as It Is Today

Soon, you can expect to see an electronic withholdings change feature. Employees can now use these interactive capabilities to serve themselves, saving paper and the time of HR specialists, as well as the SCO's Personnel and Payroll Operations Bureau (PPOB) and SCO's Disbursements Operations.

As employees are no longer required to use paper forms, the platform has evolved to become extremely convenient for both employees and HR staff. To put this in perspective, four (4) pallets of paper a month were once used to print direct deposit advice statements. At that time, about six (6) percent of state employees did not feel comfortable putting their banking information on the STD. 699 Direct Deposit Enrollment form. However, now that CEC offers a secure platform for employees to enroll in direct deposit, SCOCConnect is now expecting to see an increase in enrollments via the CEC self-service portal. PPOB used to manually key in each STD. 699 and STD. 674 A/R Payroll Adjustment Notice. Since employees are now able to self-serve via CEC, PPOB staff are now able to focus on other deadlines. CEC has evolved from a single application for employees to a portal that serves both employees and HR staff, resulting in a paperless initiative. Through CEC and ConnectHR, SCO has had the opportunity to establish impactful connections with state HR offices while assisting in registering and addressing technical questions that arise.

The SCOCConnect team is extremely responsive to their customers. The team listens to all comments and feedback. They receive feedback from HR user group forums, workshops, and more to make improvements in the state employee and HR communities. On a typical payday, CEC now sees about 100,000 log-ins.

As expected, the more features that are launched, the more inquiries the SCOCConnect team receives. The team is making efforts to automate responses by implementing chat bot features to reduce back-and-forth email communications. Learning, evolving, and responding to customers helps the team better understand customers and boost efficiency.

SCOCConnect: The Future Vision

The changes implemented by SCO demonstrate how public agencies can create efficient and effective modifications to improve customer service. While CEC was initially written for internal customers, the team has seen what it can do for external customers. The CEC team is analyzing any additional forms they may be able to automate in CEC that would eliminate manual work for HR, employees, and the PPOB. The main goal the team keeps in mind is, *"How can we streamline the process from beginning to end?"*

As CEC continues to expand, the SCOConnect team has acknowledged that there has been tremendous growth in the past three and a half years. The team is excited about the possibilities of SCOConnect, both CEC and ConnectHR and what is to come. Both the people and processes are ready to transition to new technology with the CSPA Project implementation.

CEC initially began as a team of three (3) business staff and four (4) Information Technology (IT) staff who served 300,000 state employees and 5,000 HR staff. This team learned to anticipate questions and respond to customer inquiries and built the process along the way. As this initiative has grown and additional features have been added to the original project, the team will continue to grow as a bridge to our future state.

The story of change at SCO represents the best of what can be done in state service. As the CEC platform and development are fluid, SCOConnect is here to fully support the timeline for CSPA. The team continues to support CSPA through providing employees and HR offices with useful self-service tools and solutions. The challenges posed by use of new and improved technologies are addressed in monthly change-control meetings and documented with monthly Executive Project Performance Reports. The compilation of these reports helps ensure the Uniform State Payroll System (USPS) remains in compliance with federal and state laws and bargaining agreements/contracts. Executing essential details will enhance the work experience for all customers. Testing, tracking, and monitoring data will evolve into data analytics with the growth and modernization of the future state.

Similar to her dedication to modernizing California's property tax system while at the Board of Equalization, State Controller Malia M. Cohen will advance the state's payroll system by continuing to sponsor the further development of SCOConnect and the CSPA Project. Under Controller Cohen's leadership, both SCOConnect and the CSPA Project will continue to progress forward to achieve the vision set forth by the previous administration.