

Canada's BizPaL tells businesspeople what permits they need

Instant info from a federal system

BY CARL STIEREN

In parts of Canada, a single website informs entrepreneurs about every single permit they will need in order to launch a new business – a kind of federal super-store for businesspeople.

Most of the permit application forms can be downloaded and some can be completed and submitted online.

The website is called BizPaL, an Industry Canada project which began in 2003. In provinces and cities that have taken on the program, businesspersons no longer spend a week or more tracking down all the many licenses required by agencies of the three orders of government, federal, provincial and municipal.

"Our first website launch was in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, in December, 2005," said Myriam Montrat of Industry Canada. "That's where BizPaL first went online."

The aim of the program is to cover all of Canada with each province and territory online with its own customized BizPaL website.

BizPaL licensing information is currently available for small and medium-sized firms, which represent the largest mass of potential BizPaL customers. For instance, in the food service sector alone, there are thousands of new restaurants starting up each year in a \$38 billion per year industry.

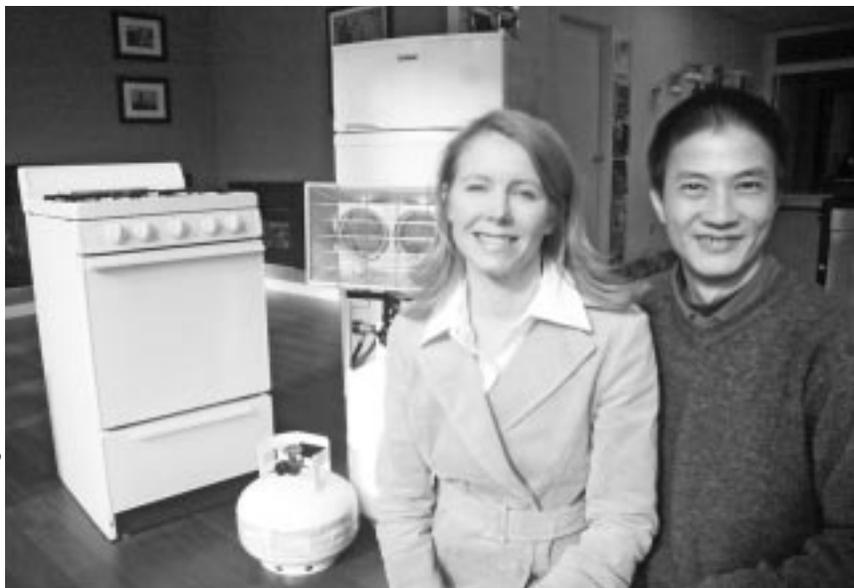
For the user, BizPaL generates a thorough, exhaustive and numbered list of all permits needed by a given entrepreneur, including costs, expected waiting period, inspections, other requirements and downloadable forms.

It is not necessary to be incorporated or a registered partnership to use the service.

Canadian officials got their inspiration for BizPaL from another federation, Australia, whose Business Licence Information System (BLIS), has been operating in every Australian state and territory since October 2006. The BLIS system is an initiative of the Australian government's Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources.

To date, mostly smaller cities have come on-stream, and Montrat is preparing to pitch the virtues of BizPaL to the country's bigger cities. The city of Ottawa is on board though. Its 850,000 population makes it the country's fifth largest city. (Please see sidebar on Carl's Café.)

The businesses that use BizPaL find it a time-saver. William and Susan Chung were starting a new business, Alpine Comforts Hearth and BBQ Products, in Kamloops, British Columbia. There the Chungs identified a market for propane-powered refrigerators, stoves and other appliances for cabins and chalets halfway up a nearby mountain, or to tourist ranches far from a municipal gas line.



– Photo: Dave Eagles

Susan and William Chung used BizPaL when starting Alpine Comforts in Kamloops, British Columbia.

William Chung learned about the BizPaL program from city hall and it provided him with a link to permits he had never heard of.

"That way, we know about the permits and can get them so we don't have to pay fines later down the road," he explained. He has since promoted the program to other friends who are starting businesses.

Another business advocate of the program is Kim Solonick, business support officer for Dāna Nāye Ventures in Whitehorse, Yukon. The organization is an aboriginal-controlled non-profit institution that advises people starting small businesses.

Solonick runs workshops on how to prepare a feasibility study for new start-ups.

"Prior to BizPaL, I used to say, "Here's the very long list of places you need to visit, including the Canadian Environmental Health Department, the territorial licensing agencies, and so on.""

Carl Stieren is the associate editor of Federations Magazine.

"They went to one office and got one answer (about permits) and went to another office and got a totally different answer."

With BizPaL, you get a consistent answer.

"We used to have a whole week assigned to going out to see what licences and permits they needed," she said. "Now they can get it with the click of a button."

Getting the necessary business permits in Canada can be a complicated task, which is dictated in part by Sect. 91 of Canada's Constitution, which gives the federal government the power to regulate trade and commerce. But since a landmark ruling in 1880, that federal power has been interpreted narrowly.

A number of court cases upheld the provinces' rights over property and civil rights, set out in Sect. 92 of the Constitution. Consequently, permits for local businesses within a province fall under provincial jurisdiction.

In general, Canadian municipalities are empowered to enact bylaws affecting any business carried on within the city, with regard to health and safety, nuisance control or consumer protection. So cities, along with the provincial governments and the federal government, all have powers to require different kinds of permits and licenses.

The first task in promoting the use of BizPaL was to enlist provincial and territorial governments to join the program and start preparing lists of permits and devising mechanisms to keep permit information up-to-date online.

The Yukon Territorial government, the BizPaL pioneer, now has the municipalities of Whitehorse, Dawson City and four other towns online. In Ontario, the City of Ottawa went live on Sept. 25, 2006. The province of Saskatchewan joined in June with its provincial government website and so did Saskatoon, the province's largest city. In British Columbia, the town of Kamloops was the first online. The government of the province of Manitoba and several local municipalities are expected to be online soon.

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Online Business Permits and Licences- Step 2 of 3



Ottawa's BizPaL website shows businesses the licenses they need.

How to licence a café with BizPaL

I have always wanted to open my own restaurant – a place called Chicago Carl's Café in **Ottawa** - where friends can gather and folk singers can perform.

I have the money for the tables and chairs, dishes, cutlery and all the kitchen equipment, but before getting too committed to this dream, I need to find out about all the licenses and permits I will need from the city, the province and from the federal government.

So, I decided to give BizPaL a road test.

I tried it out by first going to <http://www.bizpal.ca/>, and then clicking my way to http://www.ottawa.ca/business/starting/bizpal/index_en.html.

After a couple of clicks more, I came to a list of businesses that included appliance repair, art dealers, motorcycle, boat and other vehicle dealerships, oil and gas pipeline and related structures, restaurants and several other categories of businesses.

I chose "restaurants."

I was then presented with a number of questions, and I clicked "yes" to say I would be doing building renovations, serving alcohol, offering live entertainment, having an outdoor patio, and playing live or recorded music. I clicked "no" to having five or more pool tables. Then I was shown a summary of my responses and asked if I wanted to change anything. When I clicked "yes," my original choices had vanished, and instead of changing one answer, I had to answer the same 20 questions again. This is the only bug I found in the BizPaL website. From my answers, BizPaL told me I would need these permits:

1. Vendor Permit – Ontario
2. Entrance Permit – Ontario
3. Encroachment Permit – Ontario
4. Site Plan Control Approval – Ottawa
5. Building and Land Use Permit – Ontario
6. Liquor Sales Licence – Ontario
7. Food Premises License – Ottawa
8. Building Permit – Ottawa
9. Temporary Encroachment Permit – Ottawa
10. Commercial Sign Permit – Ontario
11. Permanent Sign Permit – Ottawa
12. Temporary Sign Permit – Ottawa
13. Performing Rights Licence – Canada

The federal government licence was the one that surprised me. The website of an agency called SOCAN explained it is an organization that administers the world's entire repertoire of copyright-protected music, and for live music I will have to give SOCAN three per cent of what I will pay my musicians.

BizPaL gave me all my answers in a flash, with no hesitation and saved me from long waits in line at government buildings and city hall. The cost of 12 of the 13 licenses and permits will be about \$2,500 with the exception of the site plan – which could cost between \$1,400 and \$10,000 – if I build an outdoor patio. On second thought, maybe I don't need that patio. Or better yet, I will just hold onto my day job – for now.

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The provinces and territories are responsible for their own data, and they receive reminders to update their information from Industry Canada.

The next milestone for BizPaL is to reach critical mass, Montrat explained. "We want to reach 60 per cent of all businesses starting up in the next two years."

Statistics Canada reports that there are approximately 135,000 businesses started in Canada each year, that would mean reaching 80,000 businesses per annum.

By enlisting the support of the Canada Federation of Independent Business, the new service had a key ally. "They supported us because one of their main concerns was responding to red tape and paper burdens of their members," she said.

Signing up new provinces has been a game of dominoes.

"When Saskatchewan joined, they looked at how Ontario did it by region and they leveraged some of that information," Montrat said, "And British Columbia looked at what Saskatchewan did and they liked what they did and looked at how they did it. People in the partnership are helping one another.

Clearly, BizPaL is off to a significant start. Proof of its initial success came in June 2006, when BizPaL won the Government of Canada's Public Service Award of Excellence. The award was for the launch of the business-friendly innovation and for delivering quality service to citizens and businesses.

But the real test will be in getting all the provinces and territories to buy into the system. Right now, the service is free for participating governments. Starting April 2007, provincial governments will be expected to pay a share of the cost of the BizPaL operations. "We want it to be sustainable," said Montrat.

It's a worthy goal. ☺