PAPERLESS AGENDAS 101

Paperless agendas are a hot topic in local government, and rightly so. The agenda process, in its traditional paper form, is tedious and inefficient. Every action—from compilation to distribution—has room for improvement.

Most agenda solutions concentrate on providing a consistent method for submitting agenda items, routing those items for approval, and, in the end, compiling and publishing the agenda and supporting material (attachments) to electronic media such as a Web site or a CD.

Some applications even provide drafting tools for attachments and minutes, audio and video modules, legislative voting tracking, hand-held electronic voting devices for council and commission members, and dedicated meeting interfaces for the public who attend the actual meetings.

Today's buzzwords—paperless agendas, agenda automation, and agenda management—all refer to solutions that are similar, although some solutions are more robust than others. Today's market offers three distinct types of solutions that can be tailored to every locality's budget and needs.

WHAT SOLUTIONS ARE AVAILABLE?

Fully customized solution. Many communities have developed their own in-house solutions. Some have developed fairly robust tools to manage the agenda process, but most local setups comprise only network drives, e-mail traffic with attachments, and internal manual processes that make use of basic office software tools. These localities can be considered innovators in the paperless-agenda world, but new software packages offer greater customization, tracking, and consistency.

Customizable solutions in today's market allow internal IT staff or a vendor to replicate current agenda layouts, item-submission-form layouts, minutes layouts, and the approval process currently in use by the local government. Localities tend to be particular about

their agendas and perhaps unwilling to change their processes to meet the requirements of a software package. Customizable solutions mold the software around existing processes. These solutions are the most costly, but they can provide what a community wants and needs.

Out-of-the-box solution. The term "out of the box" means the solution comes with configuration tools and can be installed and deployed quickly and easily. The customer is able to configure and modify the agenda program internally, when needed. These packages do not offer the flexibility of a total customized solution, but they usually satisfy the needs of most small and medium-sized localities.

Some of these solutions offer more robust configuration tools than others, but a community should be prepared to modify its agenda process to fit the out-of-the-box product. If a community chooses this route, it needs to analyze available products carefully and pick the one that comes closest to fitting current needs and processes.

Hosted solution. Hosted solutions—commonly called ASPs, which stands for application service providers—are becoming more popular in all aspects of technology. With a hosted solution, a local government leases or rents the software from a vendor for a yearly or a monthly fee. The vendor, in turn, maintains the software on servers and gives the local government secure access to the application. The locality benefits from low entry costs, no hardware requirements and costs, and continued availability of its scarce in-house technical resources.

Hosted agenda solutions offer only limited customization, but they provide standard configuration options that will satisfy a large portion of small and medium-sized localities. The most attractive aspects of a hosted solution are the lower cost and the technology support provided by the vendor.

Regardless of solution, some considerations are universal:

- **Web-based setup.** All three types—not only the hosted solution—can be Web based. This means they can be set up on the intranet and no software is required to be installed on each PC throughout the local government, which allows for easy maintenance of the solution and upgrades. Because the agenda process touches every department in a community, a Web-based solution is the easiest to maintain and support. In addition, licensing tends to be cheaper. Licensing depends on the solution chosen, and it is something that should be a serious consideration. An unlimited license is preferable since everyone in the organization will be required to use the application to submit agenda items. Licensing models that limit the use of the solution based on users, viewers, and so forth will be frustrating, and it will be hard for the locality to determine how many licenses are needed up front, let alone having to purchase more licenses in the future when needed. Just because a solution is "Web-based /Thin Client Software" does not mean it comes with unlimited licensing. This is an important question to ask during the selection process.
- **Work flow and approval process.** The system needs to accommodate both defined work flows and push work flows. In a defined work flow, agenda items follow a predetermined path. A push work flow can handle ad hoc items and allows routing

PAPERLESS AGENDA SOLUTIONS

Solutions	Degree of customization	Cost
Fully customized	Totally customizable	$$$
Out of the box	Limited to configuration tools	$$
Hosted (ASP)	Most limited	$

(pushing) items for approval when no predetermined path exists.

- **User friendly.** To gain acceptance across every department, the solution must be understandable to all users. Bells and whistles are great, but they cannot be too complicated or difficult to learn. Mirror the current process as much as possible, and keep the presentation as simple as possible.

Vendor and product selection. The agenda market is a hot market, and many new players will enter and depart. Some vendors lack financial stability and will fail. Others will not be able to gain market share and will eventually leave the market or provide poor support. It is important that your community chooses a vendor it trusts—one who has a solid reputation in working with local governments.

As the market matures, only trustworthy vendors with good solutions will remain. Agenda management solutions—an exciting area that offers improved efficiency and time savings for local governments—will continue to evolve and improve over the next few years. The market will have reached maturity when three to five primary suppliers offer reasonably priced, stable products.

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