

Evolution of Agenda Automation

Like any technology, Agenda Automation systems are evolving quite rapidly. Automated Agenda Solutions started out digitizing agendas by automating the agenda item submission process, approval process, and publishing process, while also providing a reliable tracking system for agenda items. Now the meeting and actions that follow are driving the evolution of Agenda Automation, and the industry has recently coined the term “Total Meeting Management”, which includes Agenda Automation, Minutes Annotation, Audio/Video integration, and Electronic Voting.

Minutes Annotation: The minutes of a meeting are either drafted in a summary or verbatim format. The process typically starts out with an outline of the agenda, and then annotations are made, such as summary text, attachments, remarks or comments, motions and votes. This compilation will eventually become the approved/official set of meeting minutes. In many instances the city or county produces a set of “action” minutes (which they post immediately after the meeting to inform the public of items’ approval status), as well as a set of “detailed” minutes (which contain all actions, summaries, motions, etc) that are to be approved, signed, and archived as the official set of minutes.

Historically the process of drafting minutes has been quite labor intensive. Until recently, the most sophisticated tools for creation of meeting minutes was the combination of an antiquated audio recorder, to aid in the transcription process afterwards, used along with a standard word processing program such as Word or Word Perfect.

Many of the Automated Agenda systems today either come with, or have an option for a minutes drafting tool. As an added benefit, these tools provide additional features such as tracking of meeting attendance, motions and votes, internet publishing tools, audio/video indexing, and others that allow the minutes to be produced and published in a timelier manner.

Audio/Video: Audio/Video seems to be the hot topic with meeting management. Traditionally it is common to see a cassette tape recorder in use by the council/commission clerk to record the proceedings during a meeting. Inserting breaks between items discussions with the use of a foot peddle to start and stop the recording, somewhat creates an index of the minutes. After the meeting, the clerk uses the audio to assist in drafting the minutes and typically the audio media is archived as a final step.

New tools have emerged that aide in digitizing and indexing these audio/video files live during the meeting. With the use of a mouse or keyboard instead of a foot peddle to select items as a discussion starts or stops. This results in the indexing of the audio/video file, which is actually completed using the minute’s annotation tool and integrated with the audio/video technology to make indexing a seamless function. Streaming audio/video of the meeting can then be made available across the internet in real-time or archival fashion. The most impressive feature is that the citizens can click on any item from within the agenda document, to be directed to the specific audio/video segment when the item was discussed.

This technology allows the audio/video of the meeting proceedings to fulfill the requirement of providing verbatim minutes. The clerk can then provide minutes documentation as a summary,

which is far less time consuming. In the end, constituents are provided with all details pertaining to the meeting via audio/video and minutes documentation.

Electronic Voting: Council, commission and board members who vote during meetings are typically those most concerned with implementing Automated Agenda solutions for fear of “their paper being taken away”. This could not be further from the truth, because no system can take away your paper, only a policy change can.

The bigger concern of the voting body should be whether or not the new system includes electronic voting technology. Introduction of this new technology means, they will need to be trained and learn new processes for conducting their meetings.

Manual voting practices, typically with the use of wired remote controls and button or light-up boards, are quickly becoming a thing of the past. Today’s automated agenda solutions offer electronic voting technology, and the options can range from wireless handheld voting devices, to web enabled interfaces, and even touch screens at each board member seat. A computerized public interface is also typically part of the solution and is used during the meeting with a projector or other audio/video equipment to electronically display the item being discussed, as well as the motions and votes taken in real-time.

Importance of Integration: Each one of the topics above are connected and should be viewed as a “workflow” that stays connected when you begin to automate a meeting process. Think about the order of these functions. First comes the creation of the agenda, then the meeting takes place, and finally the minutes are taken for that meeting. If these functions are integrated into one system, they can all share information real-time allowing the entire meeting process to be streamlined. For example; if you utilize an electronic voting feature, the system can automatically populate the minutes with the motions and votes for each meeting item; minutes annotation tools simplify your minutes creation by automatically creating an outline based upon the agenda outline for that meeting, all while allowing you to index the audio/video files during the meeting; etc.

Each governmental body has its own set of goals and needs. The technology is out there, whether you decide to take advantage of all of today’s Agenda Automation technology at once or if you prefer a gradual approach the choice is yours. Whatever your strategy might be, it is important to feel comfortable with the vendor’s offering, and their ability to fulfill your current and future needs.

Written by Donny Barstow – President, MCCi

Additional Agenda Automation articles written and published by Donny Barstow:

“Paperless Agendas” International City Managers Association (ICMA) magazine & International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC) digest.

“Paperless Agendas – Another Paperless Myth?” – Florida Clerk Notes

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