

# Paperless Agendas...

## Another “Paperless” Myth??

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So, you’re probably saying to yourself... “Here we go again... bombarded by yet another catch phrase with grand promises of creating a paperless office.” For years, office technology has promised to eliminate the space-consuming paper which fills cabinets that are scattered throughout every office, file room and nick and cranny. Banker boxes stuffed to the brink of exploding are stacked in formations that would surely have pleased the ancient Egyptian pharos. So why should we view paperless agendas in any different light than all the other paperless wonders that have preceded it? Well, it may be a matter of perspective. Before we look forward... let’s take a brief look back.

In the early 90’s, the term “paperless office” was the hottest buzz word in the document management industry. Software that provided word processing, spread sheets, e-mail and electronic faxes promised to finally rid our offices from the paper so many despised. Fast forward to 2006. The reality of one day becoming paperless has eluded even the most technologically advanced organizations both in government and the private sector. Why? It’s certainly not due to lack of effort. The fact is, while we can control (to an extent) the paper that we create internally, we have limited control over paper that is sent to us, government requirements for original documents and perhaps the biggest reason of all, some people just don’t trust technology enough to replace paper. So why do so many organizations commit so much time and money trying to become paperless? Because the word “paperless” is often misused, misunderstood or misplaced.

The most frequently heard objection to “paperless agendas” is: “The council/commission will never go for that, they want their paper”. The perception here is wrong, because an Automated Agenda System (better term than paperless) does not take their paper away; only city/county policy can do that. In reality automated agendas provide more access, allowing council/commission members to print out the packet from home, access it via the internet, and have access to all supporting material. Whether they choose to have the paper copy or access electronically, is left up to them. The goal of an automated agenda system is to automate the current agenda *process*, which offers the same benefits as automating any other business process.

The real value automated agendas offer is best defined in four technology fundamentals. Simply put, other than reducing paper, what do we want from this technology? Save time, Lower costs, Reduce errors, Increase quality. Look at the technology we take for granted today: copiers, fax machines, e-mail, document scanners, etc..., each of these four fundamentals is present in some form. So, the question is, do automated agendas fit into the four fundamentals? The answer is yes.

Automated agenda systems provide us with the ability to create our agendas quicker, cheaper, and with more consistency than the manual efforts that are most commonly used today. Automated agenda systems also give us the ability to print agendas much easier than the manual methods we use today. Yes, I said print. By creating the final agenda packet in an electronic format, printing, if a paper copy is needed, is as simple as pressing the print button. By creating our agendas with a tool that is specifically designed for this purpose, many of the variables that

inevitably create bottle necks are removed and we gain insight into the process at any given point in time. So, what about the four fundamentals?

Save time: By using the tools that are available in automated agenda systems, a great deal of time can be saved in every step. By gathering all of the information for each item in one collective database, we become more organized and waste no time trying to locate items that are in various stages of the approval process. The ability to attach any type of electronic file as supporting material saves time by reducing the need to convert files to different formats. A “to do list” and built-in workflow with automatic notification speeds each item on its way from person to person or department to department. Publishing the final agenda to the internet becomes a one click operation and no longer requires the assistance of your web master or IT staff. The entire process becomes more efficient and the time savings are evident in small agendas as well as large, complex agendas.

Lower costs: By decreasing the time required to create an agenda, we see a reduction in labor cost. By keeping the agenda as electronic for as long as possible, we see a cost savings by reducing the need to copy and produce paper documents. Items that have been created for one agenda can also be copied to another agenda in their entirety, eliminating the need to reproduce all of the paper that may be associated with the item.

Reduce errors: Errors and oversights can be virtually eliminated with automated agenda systems by using technology that we find in other electronic systems: spell check, required fields, dropdown lists and file attachments are just a few. Pre-defined rules for routing and workflow ensure items requiring multiple levels of approval or reviews receive it, and that items requiring special routing follow the proper path before being included on the final agenda.

Increase quality: Using an automated agenda system forces consistency in agenda format, structure and appearance. The ability to print paper copies of the final packet creates an assembled agenda with cover pages and automatic numbering on each page. The public will appreciate having the ability to view full agenda packets online in either HTML or PDF formats. Vote and motion tracking provides updated legislative actions immediately on the internet following the meeting and prior to the minutes being entered. Integration with audio and video streaming technology adds even more value to an automated agenda system.

Thus the case is made: automated agenda systems pass the four fundamentals tests that predict successful technological adoption and integration. But the question remains “Are the agendas paperless?” As we have seen with other paperless systems, all of the tools that give us the ability to become paperless are available. Whether or not we choose to use them is entirely up to the user. The fact is that most “paperless agenda” systems still involve paper to some degree. The reasons are the same as discussed earlier; external receipt, governmental regulations and trust in technology. One thing that is clear, all automated systems use considerably less paper. We have the technology to be paperless today but not everyone is ready to let go of paper for good. In the meantime, automated agenda systems will increase efficiency and reduce paper, while improving a process that is ripe for an overhaul.