Issue Brief

Purging the Paper

How ECM Improves Transparency and Enhances Agenda Management in Government

More Paper Doesn't Equal More Transparency

A cornerstone of the success of public entities and their broader societal role lies in the transparency of their work, and how open processes foster civic involvement. When city councils or school boards operate, for example, it is through regular meetings held open to the public, where citizens or interested parties can witness and interact with the items on the agenda. Typically, the agendas themselves must be posted publicly prior to the meeting to give notice of upcoming actions. This educates the public about the issues to be discussed or decisions to be made, and allows them to be present and responsive as citizens. It promotes an open, democratic system, where citizens can have an active role in their governance, and ensures public entities are carrying out their business in a proper manner.

While crucial to transparency, agenda management for these purposes is a time-intensive task, requiring creation, review and finalization of the agenda (with enough advance time to allow for proper posting). Also required is the reproduction of the agenda and supporting documents, such as explanatory material, planning maps and contracts. Certain agenda items warrant an internal review process (e.g., those with fiscal or legal impact) before agenda and document production occurs, adding another layer of delay to the process. The governmental employee charged with agenda management must then ensure that the agenda meets all necessary criteria, goes through the appropriate review processes and is ready with its supporting materials to bring to the event or meeting.

Attempting to complete this process with paper documents complicates things further. Numerous updates to hard copies require repeated reproduction and distribution; paper copies can often be misplaced or prioritized incorrectly among stacks of documents; and the time and cost to reproduce numerous copies is extensive. The desired goal of transparency in governmental processes is not necessarily fostered by paper documents; all of these complications make it much more difficult for the public and government employees to access correct, up-to-date information.

Why Paper is No Longer a Viable Solution

Agenda management as it stands in most public entities is a paper-driven process often run by already overworked staff. In recent years, many governmental agencies have received increasing numbers of public records or Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests from citizens. These are front-facing priority tasks for serving citizens that must be completed on top of base work

responsibilities, like agenda management. At the same time, staff are bound by legal requirements that require meeting agendas be posted publicly. When staff must deal with these competing responsibilities — with significant time and energy going toward paper-driven processes — it takes away from promoting or deploying solutions for transparency in other areas.

Paper Out, Enterprise Content Management In

Implementing enterprise content management (ECM), where documents in the agenda management process can be scanned, edited, transmitted and disseminated electronically, presents many solutions and improved efficiencies to the problems previously mentioned. An ECM solution enables transparency — with digital documents and document management, it is easier to see what is happening in any government process. This benefits the entity itself, as well as the public.

With ECM, it is possible to implement workflow software to track documents as they move between reviewers and towards finalization. Any internal user can easily determine the status of a document based on where it is in the workflow process.

An ECM solution also makes it easier to access information. An employee can post an agenda online, for example, instead of distributing hard copies. Supporting documents can also be made available in digital format, and may be posted to a website. Suddenly, information that was previously onerous to reproduce and clumsy to disseminate can be easily accessed by the public, even through smartphones or tablets, and can be shared through emails. Using ECM, and having documents in electronic form,

equips governmental agencies with an important tool for promoting transparency, both internally and externally.

What are the Benefits?

The benefits of incorporating ECM into the agenda management process are numerous. The time it takes to assemble and produce an agenda and supplementary materials is reduced significantly with ECM. The ability to capture certain documents is enhanced, the review process can be completed in a more efficient and effective way — ensuring compliance and correctness — and the distribution process is much quicker.

Improves Access to Information

ECM supports the trend of mobility. When materials are available in electronic format, government employees and citizens can use mobile devices to access and share information. Electronic documents can easily be posted online and the publishing process can be automated. This improves transparency and reduces the staff time needed to accomplish the same task with paper. ECM solutions also offer capture options so that supporting documents can be scanned and used digitally.

Enables Document Tracking

ECM improves internal transparency. Materials are traceable and less likely to get lost, and it is easier to tell where an agenda item is in a workflow process. With paper, there is no equivalent tracking method, and staff time may be wasted creating less reliable manual systems for tracking which could be avoided using an ECM solution. Using ECM, clerks can utilize dashboard functionality to see the overall progress of items for an upcoming meeting; organize and create agendas and agenda packets; and even track votes, motions and follow-up items during board and commission meetings.

Reduces Errors

Using ECM adds a level of validity to document processes. When documents are digitally managed, it is more difficult for the process to become tainted. Automation of processes helps prevent errors. When a process is broken down by responsibility and fed into a workflow system, such that any one person only facilitates a small part of the overall document management process, it is more difficult for the process to be corrupted, either intentionally or unintentionally. This transparency helps demonstrate a valid process has occurred, something much more difficult to verify with a paper document.

Speeds Up Document Requests

Even the demand on staff time with public records requests can be improved with an ECM system. A records request, such as one that may originate at a meeting, can be satisfied faster with an ECM system, and fulfilled more quickly using ECM tools like Web-based electronic request forms, workflow systems to route requests, electronic reminders of deadlines and notifications to staff when they have tasks to complete.

ECM in Action

While agenda management solutions exist apart from a comprehensive ECM solution, the use of independent programs or systems requires multiple support efforts and greater maintenance costs. An ECM solution can bridge departments, devices, programs and efforts, and provides tools for agenda management, transparency initiatives, and a range of other benefits across the government enterprise. For one city council, the implementation of a comprehensive system proved pivotal in simplifying a complicated, time-consuming and challenging agenda management process.

In this city of several hundred thousand, the city council convenes four times per month to conduct business, with most meetings involving between 40-60 agenda items, and amounting to thousands of pages in supporting material. Prior to making it to the agenda, each item — with its supporting documents — had to undergo an extensive review process. This began with central support staff who would have to circulate each item to 22 different departments for review, along with the budget and finance offices and the city attorney. If any issues arose, the entire process would restart from the beginning. Understandably, there was great frustration, time lost and errors that occurred in this process, not to mention excessive paper waste. Each department was provided a full packet of materials even when they did not need the full profile of information. At the same time, departments were receiving documents late, or not receiving them at all.

Recognizing the numerous shortcomings in the process, the city council opted to implement a comprehensive ECM suite of software solutions into its work processes. Documents are now edited, transmitted and tracked electronically, a process that can happen largely simultaneously — which was impossible before. System users are prompted electronically for their input, ensuring the workflow continues as needed. The system has also gone beyond simply improving prior processes and now allows greater access to information such as a searchable database of records on city council meetings. Overall, the city council has made extensive gains in efficiency, staff time, cost, accuracy and transparency in its operations due to integrating ECM with its agenda management process.