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## Where It's @

### Technology is Transforming Community Management

It's decision time at a meeting between a board and a property manager and the discussion takes an unexpected turn to a document that is back at the property manager's office. Missing from the discussion is an obscure line item from last year's budget – which the board needs RIGHT NOW to make a vote.

For Lisa Doran, president/owner of New England Professional Management, LLC, in Soughton, Massachusetts, such a challenge can be easily met with the latest technology. Doran whips out her specially equipped cellphone/Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), uses its miniature keyboard to navigate to her office computer's hard drive and calls up the missing document. With the information displayed on her PDA's screen, the discussion can move on and a board vote made on the spot.

From advanced PDAs with wireless networking ability to specialty software that handles and records everything from monthly billing to maintenance, the technology involved in managing condominiums is changing rapidly, along with the jobs of those responsible for their upkeep.

For Doran the ability to wirelessly monitor her properties and emails at all times has simplified her job. "It actually makes my life easier by constantly having access. When I need to be in meetings throughout the day and do site visits, I don't stress out nearly as much." But not everybody has embraced the new technologies with the same enthusiasm. Stephen DiNocco, CMCA, AMS, of Affinity Realty & Property Management, LLC in Boston, says email is a wonderful tool but it does have its down side.

"It [email] can be a tyrant. In the hands of the wrong person, they can email you to death so you can't get anything else done." To prevent such a scenario, DiNocco generally responds to routine emails only once a day and keeps his responses short. For the more complicated issues, says DiNocco, "you need to be on the phone."

As board members and property managers continue to grapple with learning and balancing the demands of the new technologies, a survey of the newest technologies finds them undergoing major changes. As a whole, the technologies are becoming easier to use, more and more web-based and being applied into ever-new areas.

### Condominium Web Sites

Web sites for community associations have been around since the computer geek on the board volunteered to set up one a decade or so ago. Since that time, condominium web sites have undergone wholesale changes – principally the development of dedicated web hosting firms—and, thankfully, outgrown the need for the nerdy guy on the board, who frequently set up the web site and promptly moved on, leaving the condo in dire straits.

AtHomeNet of Suwanee, Georgia, has been building web sites for community associations for about nine years and has solved the problem of lack of continuity in web site administrators by setting up sites that are user-friendly, even for non-technical people, says AtHomeNet sales manager Cindy Sanders.

"If you can type a Word document or send an email, you can edit in the web site," says Sanders.

Updating of the web site after its setup by AtHomeNet is handled by various officers in the condominium, like board members or those serving on various committees – and each is responsible for updating his own area, says Sanders. For example, he says, the board secretary would post meeting minutes while the landscape committee would post community planting days and watering schedules. Passwords for each official and varying levels of security prevent users from mucking around in areas off-limits to them, says Sanders.

Community websites have been warmly received by owners, board members and, in particular, property managers, says Sanders. "Property managers love them (websites) because it cuts down on phone calls because people can access information whenever they need to – to look at budgets, meeting minutes and their account balances online," says Sanders. In addition, she says, "It [the website] gives the manger the opportunity to use the email blast feature to send out announcements that the pool is closed due to an issue, or there will be emergency snow plowing tomorrow. It all gets put right on the home page of the web site. It's a real easy and fast way to communicate. It saves the managers money, time and effort."

Drew Regitz, co-founder and acting president of web site host AssociationVoice in Denver, Colorado, says board members at the 5,000 community associations his firm serves use the real-time nature of the website to squelch rumors before they even get started. "The board has a chance to get the first official announcement out as to what's happening, which really puts a stop to the informal grapevines." During an earthquake in Hawaii earlier this year, notes Regitz, condominium managers used their websites' messenger services to communicate with owners about how to respond to the disaster and deal with damages.

Property managers, says Regitz, also appreciate the Resource Center feature, which holds governing documents, meetings minutes and agendas, financials, board meeting packets, vendor documents, and insurance certificates – all of which are protected by passwords. "You can upload [to the website] all kinds of board-only documents—things of that nature that the board has to have access to without always having to call the manager to view it," he says.

An additional tool for both managers and board members is that every document stored in the Resource Center is searchable by keyword, says Regitz. "Managers, we found, put away their filing cabinets and search the website first to find answer to their questions," says Regitz, who notes that a quick search could quickly turn up all correspondence with a trouble tenant.

AssociationVoice has just launched Smart Integration, a web-based system that makes online payments possible and allows comprehensive tracking of all homeowner financial transactions, discipline activities, and status of permits and forms.

The Smart Integration system, says Regitz, shifts routine work to low-paid office help and frees the manager up to concentrate on long-range planning and issues.

"We're seeing more and more that the [manager's] assistants are doing 80 percent of the work and the managers are doing the 20 percent remaining," says Regitz. "Managers kind of deal with the higher-level items. And it allows the assistants to handle a lot of the items that once fell squarely on the shoulders of the managers."

### Internet Voting

Voting is joining the growing number of paper activities that are shifting over to the Internet, allowing for greater efficiencies and reduced costs. "The time savings [from Internet voting] can be huge. Setting up the ballot with us can take five to 30 minutes. And our software does all the tabulation at the end," says Michael Tuteur, president and CEO of the online voting company Votenet Solutions, in Washington, D.C.

Tuteur says his software even solves the difficult problem of voting by owners who don't have a computer and Internet access. A module in the software allows paper ballots to be printed out for those without Internet, and then the returned paper and electronic ballots are combined and tabulated at the end of the election for a consolidated set of results.

Security concerns over voting, says Tuteur, are dealt with through encryption and an ultra-secure server system. Votenet Solutions handles online voting for the Emmy Awards, Gospel Music Awards and BET Awards, says Tuteur, who notes the system is also certified as hacker safe.

Elections under Votenet are typically set up by property managers or board members, who use the software to create ballots and plug in names of candidates or ballot questions before sending them out, says Tuteur. "It allows you to set up the ballot in minutes and as long as there's a voter list – who's eligible to vote – we can make sure that it's only one vote per voter," he says.

### Outsourced Billing

BestBill of Phoenix, Arizona has become a leader in outsourced billing and payments by offering a cheaper, faster and easier way for management companies to deal with the monthly task.

Management companies that use BestBill are able to run with reduced staff or "retask" those employees who used to handle billing to "pay attention to what is the purpose of that company," says BestBill CEO Dan Haugland. "They're not in business to bill. They've in the business to manage that property," says Haugland, who note that BestBill's fees are minimal and based on a charge per document produced, which includes postage and envelopes.

BestBill works with in-house management software and doesn't require any training or expensive software upgrade on the part of the management company.

"Presumably you have some software that keeps track of who's in the units, what the due dates of the documents are, and how much they how owe. You would produce a file that has the information for me. Pretty much every software package on the planet can do this. You send me [the information] via a secure connection.

"Someone with Quickbooks can still use Quickbooks. That's the magic of what we do. We can work with so many kinds of accounting software," says Haugland. After the database is received by BestBill, the firm will create a customized bill (typically with the logo of the client), set up the approved payment methods, and print the bills at their high-speed printer center.

BestBill can bill and receive payments electronically, send out bills by the U.S., mail or do a mix. As for processing of payments, the company can handle processing through a lockbox or have the payment sent directly to the client. "We don't intervene in the payment process or slow it down, or carve off a little bit of it. Our full thrust is to make sure we can get your bill paid faster," says Haugland, who notes that firm also does invoices, past-due notices, collections, annual budgets and newsletters.

### Remote Deposit Capture

Remote deposit capture is a new technology that speeds up cash flow of receivables and can reduce the need for onsite office staff. Remote deposit centers allow paper checks to be scanned in a business' own office and then electronically deposited into a bank account. While eliminating the need to physically sort deposits, the technology also speeds up the cash flow tremendously and allows companies to trim staff or reassign them to other tasks.

NewAlliance Bank of Manchester, Connecticut, is providing remote deposit for large management companies and condominiums with onsite property managers who may collect as many as 400-500 checks a month, according to bank vice president Dan Rys.

The hardware for remote deposit capture, generally purchased or leased for a nominal amount, consists of a small scanner that sits on a desk and takes up less than a foot of space, says Rys. The process of depositing checks from multiple associations into multiple accounts is greatly simplified by remote deposit, he says. "They [a management company] have an online checkbook program where they would go and open up their series of accounts and, say you've got five deposits to ABC association. So then you would go ahead and run the five checks through and they would get credit to ABC association. Then you have five more checks from another community and you would do the same thing. Pick that community's account and then run those checks through the scanner and put it into that account."

An additional bonus, says Rys, is that staff are spared a trip to a bank, and they funds are generally deposited the same day they are scanned.

### Online Reserves and Asset Management

The handling of reserve reports and scheduling of maintenance for roofs, siding and other capital items is another area moving online. SmartProperty of San Diego, California is providing a web-based system that gets rid of paper reports and makes them accessible from any computer. "When you're tracking and managing paper all the time, is the tail wagging the dog?" asks SmartProperty.com founder Damian Esparza, referring to the inefficiencies and problems generated by paper reserve and maintenance records.

Instead of paper records, which can be lost, SmartProperty offers a service in which reserve report data and other maintenance records are entered into its proprietary software system.

With the data available in easy-to-understand and trackable form, a number of problems are solved which work against proper maintenance, says Esparza.

One of the chief problems occurs when a property manager or board member who is "keeping track" of the maintenance leaves, taking their practical knowledge with them, says Esparza.

"There hasn't been an institutionalized platform to manage information from one board to the next."

SmartProperty provides an institutional bridge by taking existing reserves studies and entering the data into its asset tracking system. The SmartProperty program, once loaded with a property's data, can generate detailed reports, keep track of individual vendor contracts, remind the condominium when maintenance work needs to be done, and generate detailed budget figures for use in upcoming budgets.

The use of computer tracked reserves also gives owners a better picture of why maintenance needs to be done – especially when raising condo fees can prove unpopular, says Esparza. "Essentially what we're doing is allowing owners or boards of directors a better understanding of what the true value of their property is, but also more importantly what the liability factor is," says Esparza. "A lot of times they don't understand that you might have a million dollars of assets for your reserves. But really, what is the true liability that you have for these future obligations?"

"Unless the owners and board can understand the true value of the asset, and what maintenance steps need to be taken to protect it, the risk you run is something really bad happening to your property – insurance premiums going up or special assessments."

### Sold on Technology

Already sold on her advanced PDA, Doran says she is open to new technology advances of all kinds. In fact, she recently upgraded her firm's management software. "I really think the technology available to management companies today is just so vast, we'd be crazy not to stay on the cutting edge to streamline operations, and therefore save our clients money," she says.

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