




# Full-Lifecycle Meeting Management Meets Advanced AV: An Integrated Approach to Council Room Infrastructure

## WHITE PAPER

When designing new council room infrastructure or planning an overhaul, it's important to consider not only the experience of those in the room, but also how the system integrates with agendas, minutes and other meeting-related processes beyond the chamber walls. The project must treat audio visual (AV) tools and meeting management workflows holistically as a single, integrated use case in which information and processes flow frictionlessly across all stages of the meeting lifecycle.

This paper explores how AV and meeting management systems can best combine to deliver superior user experiences for both in-person and online participants.



Building a new council room – or overhauling the technical infrastructure of an existing facility – is a major investment of both money and time for any size of public sector organization. For most public entities, these spaces form the physical environments in which all crucial governance decisions will be made, so it is imperative that the infrastructure and tools empower everyone involved to focus on the tasks at hand without being hindered by technical inefficiencies.

Being prudent with public funding means most entities go many years – even decades – between complete redesigns, making it essential that such projects streamline processes and meet the needs of all internal and external stakeholders both in the near term and for a long time to come.

### **The Risk of Disconnect**

All too often, however, those responsible for selecting the technical solutions for council chambers think of the in-room audio-visual (AV) system as completely separate from the critical information management and procedural processes that take place before, during and after the meetings. Treating AV and meeting lifecycle management as two distinct islands leads to significant workflow “disconnects” that create inefficiencies and prevent the new council room infrastructure from living up to expectations.

### **A Holistic Approach – AV and Meeting Management**

To realize its full potential benefits, the new council room design must encompass the AV tools and meeting management workflows as a single, integrated use case in which information and processes flow frictionlessly across all stages of the meetings – from advance preparations to post-session publication.

The scope of this holistic approach must start well before the actual meeting, with the AV and meeting management systems then coming together during the physical session to deliver a seamless experience for both in-room participants and an increasing number of virtual attendees via the web.

### **The Meaning of “Meeting Management”**

Before continuing, it is important to define what we mean when we use the term “meeting management.” Those designing council room infrastructures may think of what they’re planning as “meeting management,” but depending on their background, their definition may be much narrower than how we use the term.

### **From a Technological Perspective**

To infrastructure designers coming from an IT or AV technology background, “meeting management” typically focuses on the AV user experience of what goes on within the council room. They think about the tools that councilors, board members and the public see, listen to, touch and talk into during the meeting process.

### **From Meeting Facilitators and Managers Perspective**

However, for those involved in facilitating and managing the meetings – such as clerks, administrators and accountability officers – what takes place in chambers is only one element of the meeting lifecycle (albeit clearly the most publicly-visible and, certainly, a consequential one). For them, “meeting management” starts prior to the meeting with the preparation of agendas and reports, and doesn’t end until the minutes of the meeting are published for constituents to access – or even later, if there are follow-up actions to be taken.

These differing definitions and disparate perspectives often lead to dissatisfaction after a council room build or overhaul. You can design a great AV system for the environment, but if it doesn’t integrate seamlessly with the end-to-end flow of meeting-related information, the new infrastructure can be a step backward in efficiency, usability and transparency.

### **An Example of the Disconnect**

One local government, for example, issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a “meeting management solution” with no mention whatsoever of minutes; all of the listed requirements were about the AV tools in the room.

As such, once implemented, meeting participants were able to vote electronically and the results were displayed in council chambers – but the results of the vote were not automatically recorded in the minutes. Furthermore, if the particular motion required a voting modality other than simple majority – such as a super-majority or weighted vote – the system could not automatically determine that. The results of the electronic voting needed to be evaluated, recorded and published manually – no better from that perspective than what the municipality had previously.

To better understand the ideal end-to-end flow of meeting-related information, let’s now look at each stage of the process.

## Pre-Meeting Preparation

For most boards and councils, far more time and effort typically go into preparing for each meeting than are spent in the actual session itself. Agendas and reports are the backbone of meetings, with meeting administrators, staff and contributors creating or handling massive amounts of information on tight deadlines to compile these essential materials.

### Optimizing and Automating Workflows

A comprehensive meeting management solution provides optimized workflows and automation to significantly streamline the preparation process, as well as subsequent approvals and revisions. Agenda creation processes that used to take multiple people many days to manage can now be reduced to just one or two days, with a single person handling all report submissions from contributors.

The ideal meeting management system (MMS) can also provide version tracking, give visibility into the status of each expected report throughout its creation cycle, and automate approval workflows to minimize the need for the Clerk to chase contributors and approvers. The agendas and reports can then be electronically distributed to participants such as councilors and board members for review in advance of the meeting through a secure, browser-based web interface or mobile app.

While standalone agenda management “point products” may offer similar benefits for some of these tasks, a true meeting management system not only ties the resulting agendas and reports seamlessly into subsequent processes, but also enables other meeting-related information to be staged in advance of the session.

Council member details can be easily associated with the meeting for display during the session, and conflicts of interest can be entered for motions that will be voted on, saving valuable time during the meeting. Voting types for each motion – including but not limited to majority, weighted, unanimous and multiple-choice – can be defined for subsequent use automatically by electronic voting tools, and descriptions of the motions can be extracted from the agenda for public display during the vote.

By integrating the meeting management solution with the AV systems that will be used in chambers, all of these advance preparations can eliminate the duplicate effort of manually copying the information between standalone products, while helping speed up the meetings themselves.

## In-Chambers Experience

The council room is where all of the prepared information is actually used, and where the meeting management system converges with the AV system to create user experiences for both participants and observers.

### The Often Neglected AV Element

Before continuing our discussion of the intersection of meeting management and AV, it is important to highlight a key element of AV systems that often does not get enough attention until it is too late to fix.

Basic audio quality is one of the primary issues experienced during meetings in many municipal council chambers, with one of the most common complaints from councilors being that “we can’t hear each other clearly.”

Historically, audio clarity was a concern primarily for participants within the meeting room. But with public sector organizations increasingly recording and streaming their sessions as part of their transparency mandates – and in some jurisdictions, as regulatory requirements – clear, intelligible audio is equally important for stakeholders *outside* the room.

Typical, basic audio system designs use goose-neck microphones for participants, and have speakers mounted in the ceiling. When done correctly, this can provide decent audio for the room, but the volume of the ceiling-mounted speakers generally must be limited to avoid creating feedback through the participants’ microphones. As a result, it may be difficult for participants to hear each other, even from one side of the dais to the other.

### A Modern, Improved Setup – Discussion Audio System

A better option for most council room environments is a discussion audio system. Each participant has their own table-top or in-desk discussion station, which combines a microphone with a dedicated speaker and built-in audio system. Providing each councilor with their own speaker right in front of them ensures crystal-clear audio coverage at every seat, improving communication as well as the quality of recordings.

Discussion systems also go beyond traditional audio solutions by enabling advanced options such as built-in recording, electronic voting, video distribution, automatic camera tracking, and seamless integration with advanced meeting management solutions to tie in agendas, minutes and more.

And while the cost of individual discussion stations may be higher than standalone microphones, when you consider that they include a built-in speaker and other functionality, the total system cost including labor may be the same or lower than a traditional audio system design. This same type of technology used in large-scale environments such as the United Nations is affordable and accessible to all sizes of governing bodies, from state and provincial governments to local municipalities.

## **Bringing it Together**

All of the information that was so meticulously crafted before the meeting is readily available to council members during the session, either through a web-based participant portal or a dedicated tablet app. The MMS also helps the meeting administrator conduct the session, from interactive roll call tools to managing request-to-speak queues, while enabling him or her to easily capture minutes of the meeting while incorporating standardized template language and text from the agenda.

### **Electronic Voting**

Full-featured meeting management software will also include its own electronic voting capabilities, with councilors able to vote through their participant portal or tablet app. The votes are then automatically tabulated and evaluated based on the topic's already-defined voting modality; displayed; and recorded in the minutes.

However, for public sector organizations that prefer to forgo tablets in favor of tactile voting buttons, the aforementioned discussion audio system offers optional voting capabilities that can be tightly integrated with the MMS to enable the latter to automatically capture, tabulate, display, record and archive the votes.

Either choice – tablet-based voting directly through the MMS, or a technical integration between the MMS and physical voting buttons on the discussion stations – is superior to standalone voting systems that simply display the results without evaluating them or incorporating them into the minutes.

### **Public Display Capabilities**

Similarly, the MMS may offer its own public display capabilities for showing relevant information to attendees within the meeting room.

For example, the screen can show the official description of the current motion while voting is open, then switch automatically to showing the results, including details of how each councilor voted. As with electronic voting, though, if the organization prefers to

use the built-in public display capabilities of the AV system, integration between the discussion solution and the MMS can allow additional data to be fed from the MMS for incorporation into the display.

### **Remote Participation of Meetings**

Of course, meeting participants and observers are no longer constrained to being within council room walls. Some jurisdictions might allow council members to participate in meetings remotely; a robust MMS will enable participants to do so securely in real-time from their computer or mobile device, with the same functionality – to the extent permitted by their particular legislation – as their in-person counterparts.

### **Webstreaming**

As mentioned earlier, live and on-demand web streaming have become essential tools in public sector organizations' transparency initiatives and engagement with external stakeholders.

While our preceding explanation of discussion systems focused on their benefits for audio, the more sophisticated offerings also provide capabilities for distributing video between participants, enabling councilors to see each other even without a direct line of sight between their seats.

The vendors of those systems may also offer their own cameras, forming a complete turnkey audio and video solution in which the cameras automatically zoom in or pan to the participant who is talking. This feed is an ideal, minimal-labor source for the streaming and recording capabilities of an advanced MMS, which can also automatically time-stamp the video as it is captured and link those bookmarks to the minutes or post-meeting agenda on your website.

### **Post-Meeting Processes**

Once the meeting is over and everyone has left the council room, the AV system gets a rest until the next session, but the MMS role is not yet done.

Meeting-related information continues to flow, with finalizing the minutes a crucial next step. The clerk or meeting administrator can edit or augment the minutes they captured during the meeting, directly incorporating elements from the agenda for ease and consistency.

## Publishing to Your Website

Integrated functionality within the MMS allows quick publication of the minutes, agenda and reports to the municipality's public website in accessibility-compliant HTML or PDF formats, providing fast-turnaround transparency while minimizing dependency on IT and communications staff resources.

And as previously noted, indexed recorded video can be linked to the agenda and minutes, allowing website visitors to jump directly to the section of the video they're interested in.

Last but not least, follow-up tasks stemming from the meeting can be delegated and tracked by the MMS.

## The Integrated Advantage

This seamless, end-to-end flow of information across the entire meeting lifecycle would not be possible if the council room infrastructure design treated the AV system and MMS as independent, disconnected islands. Only when the two solutions are treated as a single, integrated workflow can their full benefits be realized.

The discussion systems outlined above offer many integration advantages over standard audio systems, including the ability to exchange valuable metadata with the MMS such as motion descriptions, participant names and individual votes. Leveraging such data requires direct integration of the MMS and AV system; simply connecting the basic audio and video output signals of the AV tools to corresponding inputs of the MMS is not enough.

eSCRIBE and Televic Conference have partnered to seamlessly integrate their respective solutions, and are working closely together to turn these potential synergies into reality. Televic's discussion system enables everyone in the room – and on the web – to hear clearly, and interfaces directly with eSCRIBE's comprehensive meeting management platform to deliver efficient, end-to-end workflows spanning the entire meeting lifecycle.