San Mateo County Manages Board Agenda Items with Automation and Full Video Access

Kathy Chen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study looks at the San Mateo County automated agenda management system, "SIRE." SIRE is a product of Hyland software Inc., a document management company, and SIRE was implemented in 2012 as San Mateo County was looking for a way to shorten the length of time its Board of Supervisors took to process agenda items; to utilize an online system for making document changes between agenda review and pending board meeting dates; and to reduce its carbon footprint by using less paper.

The Board of Supervisors in San Mateo County has a great deal of responsibility—their decisions affect approximately 740,000 county residents. It needed an efficient, streamlined procedure for reviewing, approving, and working through agendas for each board meeting, to assist in delivery of services to the community. The key to these changes was to implement an automated agenda-building solution to improve workflow, manage supporting documents, and make it possible for board members and citizens to access information associated with each agenda item.

In the past, each board member was required to shuffle through stacks of paper for each board meeting; today, the entire process is conducted in an electronic format and broadcast live with streaming video of the meetings. Automation has also saved the board clerk and their staff an immense amount of time. The board clerk used to be inundated with public information requests and had to pull staff from other projects to find, copy, and send the requested documents. Because documents were stored among many volumes of records in boxes, binders, or drawers, turnaround time was sometimes measured in days. In addition, all county departments also submit agenda items, and managing this process manually has been labor intensive.

Now, both board members and the public have access to archived proceedings online, complete with documents and other supporting information that correspond to each agenda item.

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Introduction

County department proposals for vital services to communities are subject to approval and authorization by the Board of Supervisors. Departments submit letters to request authorization, commonly called "board letters." Since the board manages their flow of business by agenda, the county department must be aware of the timing and agendas of board meetings. Board items must be submitted to allow sufficient time for the approval process to be completed in advance of the proposed activity.

Historically, San Mateo County's manual process of tracking and routing of board letters was prone to human error, difficult to manage, and extremely time consuming. Board letters were composed in Microsoft Word, then emailed back and forth until all edits were incorporated. There were opportunities for emails to be sent to the wrong person by mistake, or for the email to be buried in an inbox. Often, phone calls were required to remind staff to check their email for these important documents to complete the manual routing process. These issues resulted in an evolution from a paper-based methodology to a sleek, dynamic online system that vastly impacted the way the county's board agenda is managed.

For contracts over $100,000, San Mateo County contract staff can draft the board letter and administer the agenda process via SIRE. Contract staff can create, edit, and submit agenda items by completing the online board letter template, uploading contract documents, and electronically routing agenda items from draft to completion through program managers and program directors, online approval to the agency director, county counsel, and the county manager's office.

There are generally four internal stages needed for each board letter before it can be advanced for board consideration. The originator will need to complete the board letter via SIRE, which is programmed to prevent late submission of the board item. The originator will not be able to submit an item if it is less than 22 days before the board meeting; otherwise, the originator will need to select a future date. This feature serves as the deadline for the item. Once the originator selects an available meeting date, the board letter can be developed by completing the template form. If the draft board letter is in Microsoft Word, the content can be copied and pasted from the original document into the SIRE content screen.

The originator then forwards the board letter packet (including the contract, MOU, and supporting documents) through each approval stage. These stages include approval from the program director, county counsel, accounting, contract administrator, and agency director. With the automated agenda process, SIRE is able to tailor approval workflows, keeping the process moving through each routing stage. Once one person approves, the next person in the process will be notified by email that the document is ready for their review and approval.

The reviewer can make additional edits, add notes, and send email notification to the originator for additional follow-ups. In-addition, the system keeps track of users who have reviewed the document. When a staff member is out sick or on leave, an authorized user can submit on behalf of the

staff member to ensure that the agenda moves from each stage to the next, quickly and seamlessly. The automated system allows for the timely posting of agendas with attachments, minutes, and streaming videos to the web. The automation reduces processing time, tracks each item's progress through the process, and saves money associated with paper and printing costs.

As a result of the automated process, all departments in San Mateo County have been positively impacted, not only saving organizational time and money, but also achieving an approximate 62.5% total reduction of paper usage.[1] This process has also allowed the county to collectively reduce its carbon footprint and paper consumption while realizing cost savings in paper purchases, toner cartridge usage, and expended time in agenda preparation.

Table 1 contains a cost analysis during the period of February 2012 to October 2012 for the San Mateo County Health System, Department of Public Works, and Parks Department:

Challenges

For San Mateo County, training was the main challenge during the upgrade and remains true for all new

staff using the system. Departments had to upgrade their Microsoft Office software to version 2010 and higher, and use the current Internet Explorer web browser. Current challenges include ongoing training and keeping reviewers within their review window of two days. Overall, staff believe the system works well and prefer it over the old way of making paper packets and corrections to packets every time there was a correction or change.

Recommendations

Alameda County has a similar automated system called Agenda Management System (AMS); however, it is not a seamless, automated system. The system does not allow the originator to initiate and create the board letter via the web. The board letter must be composed in Microsoft Word, and then emailed back and forth until all edits are incorporated. There are opportunities for the email to be buried in an inbox, and phone calls are required to remind the staff to check their emails. Therefore, it is often the county department will miss the agenda submission deadline.
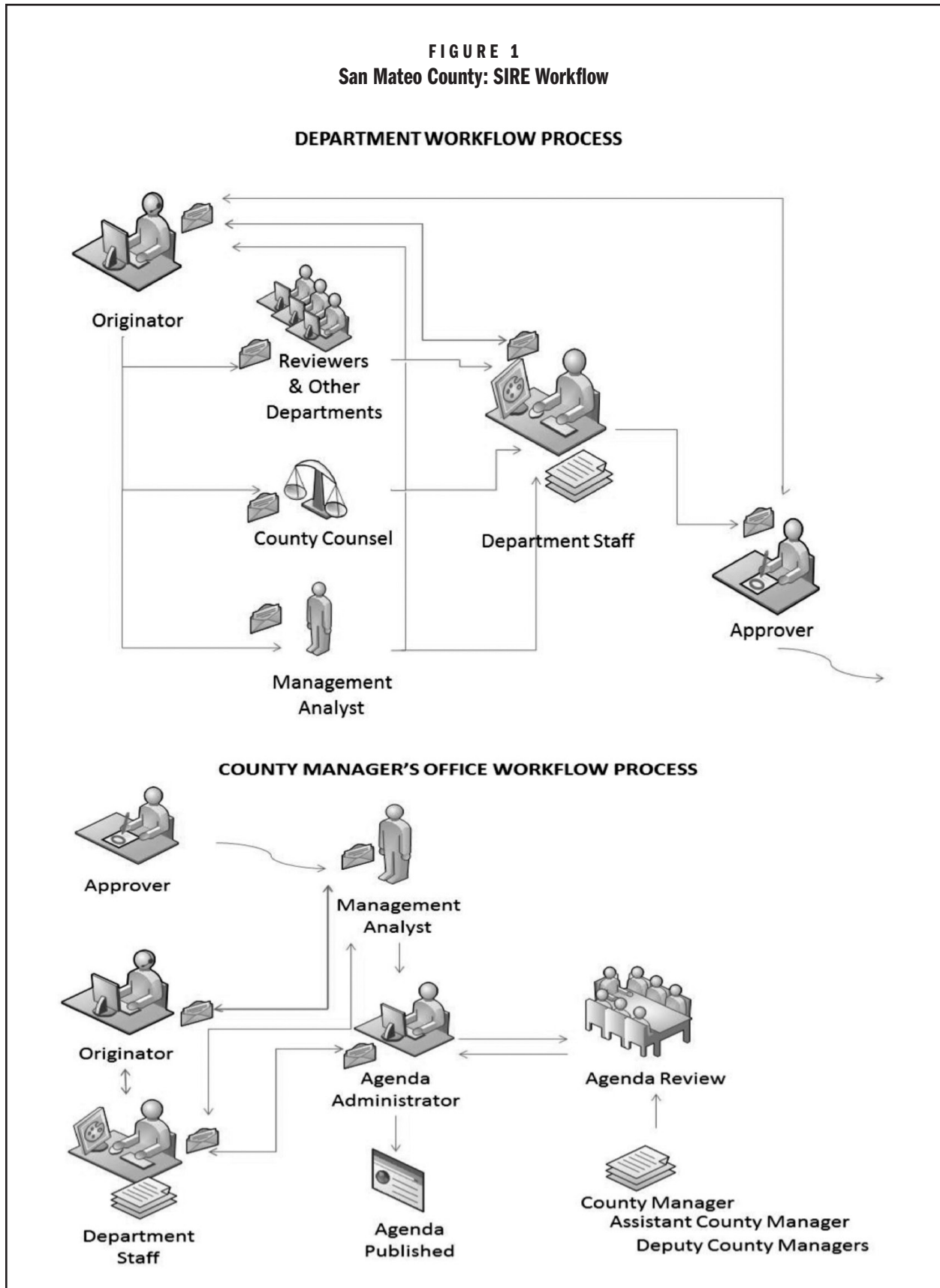
Each county department has its own internal manual tracking and routing of the board letter for approval by the agency director. Once the agency director approves the board letter, the department will upload the board letter to AMS, which will alert the County Administrator Office (CAO) analyst to review the document.

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1. http://www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/bos.dir/Budget/recommend2013/5-9.pdf

2. There are eight divisions in the Health System: Aging & Adult Services, Behavioral Health & Recovery Services, Correctional Health Services, Emergency Medical Services, Environmental Health, Family Health Services, Health Policy & Planning, Public Health and San Mateo Medical Center.

TABLE 1
Cost Analysis for San Mateo County Health System, Department of Public Works, and Parks Department (February – October 2012)

SOLICITED DEPARTMENTS	PAPER SAVED	EMPLOYEE/COURIER COSTS SAVED	ADDITIONAL STAFF TIME SAVED
Health System[2]	120 reams, or 60,000 sheets	$2,040/week (17 workers @ $120/week) $97,920 total annual savings	1.75 person/days per meeting
Public Works & Parks	12 reams, or 6,297 sheets	2-3 hours of overtime/week.	Using SIRE greatly contributes to staff being able to continue providing expanded admin support

FIGURE 1
San Mateo County: SIRE Workflow

DEPARTMENT WORKFLOW PROCESS

Originator

Reviewers & Other Departments

County Counsel

Management Analyst

Department Staff

Approver

COUNTY MANAGER'S OFFICE WORKFLOW PROCESS

Approver

Management Analyst

Originator

Agenda Administrator

Agenda Review

Department Staff

Agenda Published

County Manager
Assistant County Manager
Deputy County Managers

Source: San Mateo County SIRE workflow chart.

CAO will either approve or deny the agenda item, and the department user is notified via email of the status. Upon CAO approval, the department is required to submit one hard copy of the board letter that requires the board president's signature. AMS does have other similar functions to SIRE with timely posting, and the capability of maintaining agenda items, attachments, and minutes via the web.

It is recommended that Alameda County upgrade AMS to full automation, which will have the following advantages:

Budget Impact

- Save staff time developing the board letter and manually tracking board items.
- Save courier cost to transport agenda materials throughout the county during the approval process.
- Save 2,400 sheets of paper per weekly meeting, which equals to 9,600 sheets of paper per month. The weekly regular board meeting can have over 80 agenda items. County departments are currently still required to deliver hard copies of agenda items, which can often include up to 30 pages per item with supporting documents.

Additional Benefits

- Consistent formatting, ensuring uniformity
- Quick research capability
- Control over agenda item submission deadlines
- Improved communication between users
- Eliminate confusion due to missing documents
- Reduce staff stress related to the complexity of meeting deadlines

Conclusion

Alameda County can benefit from San Mateo County's experience with SIRE, because it is a well organized and easy-to-use paperless agenda management solution. This software minimizes the time spent compiling and emailing documents, and saves paper. It also has the capacity to store and track all documents used in the process.

SIRE saves both time and money by archiving all the details of important meetings so they are available for immediate action by all parties. Fewer errors occur and there is less lag time due to poor information distribution. Through the use of a web-based program, proposed items can be submitted, approved, and added to the agenda with ease. Besides San Mateo County, Sacramento County, and the cities of Modesto and Las Vegas are among other government agencies that use the SIRE system to reduce inefficiencies, increase transparency, and save time. The cost to upgrade Alameda County's current system will be a great investment in the long run.

As part of the solution to improve the county's current agenda management system, the County Administrator's Office and the clerk of the board have already committed to the change, and the Alameda County Information Technology Department is currently tasked to evaluate/upgrade the county system and will further explore the SIRE system.

Acknowledgment