Everything Clerks Need to Know to Drive Efficiency in Local Government

From the earliest days of civilization, early settlers realized that they needed a way of recording legal matters like births, deaths, marriages and land purchases. They also realized that they needed to assign a person to perform those tasks and hold them accountable. That's how the position of municipal clerk became one of the first and oldest local government positions.

Since then, the clerk's position has been known by many names — city clerk, recorder or recorder of deeds, municipal clerk, city secretary, deputy city clerk or deputy clerk. It's the first and most direct link between citizens and their local government. The clerk's office also serves as an information and resource center for the community.

The clerk's office is the central hub of local government. It serves all administrative and operational departments, as well as the mayor, city council, city manager or administrator, senior management and the public. Each of these people and departments calls on the city clerk daily to mitigate risk and supply them with professional advice or information or provide a service to them.

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In today's world, the individual who fills the clerk's position must be dedicated, versatile, detail-oriented and well-organized. The clerk's position requires project management skills, leadership skills, sound decision-making skills, professionalism and a huge dose of patience. A municipal clerk is essentially the glue that holds the rest of the city administration together.

Efficiency in the clerk's office is of the utmost importance because of the fast pace and multifaceted aspects of the job. The public looks for assurance that their tax dollars are being put to good use and that their money isn't being wasted.

Technology has the potential to bridge the gaps in governance deficits that have been at the apex of inefficiencies in the clerk's office. Modern governance is the practice of empowering municipal clerks and other local government leaders to use technology, insights and processes to promote good governance practices, which will allow local governments to excel with efficiency in today's digital age. Specifically, technology is available to help clerks create efficiency in the areas of agenda preparation, records management, managing boards and commissions, and sharing council meetings through live video streaming.

What Does a Local Government Clerk Really Do?

In better understanding a clerk's duties, we can identify areas in which to use technology to create efficiency in the clerk's office. Local government clerks have specific duties, such as preparing for council meetings, managing records, fulfilling Freedom of Information Act requests, managing boards and commissions, and issuing licenses and permits. In addition, clerks typically perform any task that isn't already assigned to someone else.

In their duty of preparing for council meetings, clerks prepare an agenda, set up meetings, take the roll call, prepare the minutes and take care of any other meeting-related duties. Clerks also answer official correspondence, manage fiscal records and accounts, and maintain budgets and purchasing records.

Serving as a historian, the clerk also retains historical records and maps, as well as custody of the official seal.

Virtually all these duties require tracking and follow-up systems. Technology provides us with modern solutions that create or improve efficiency for all these activities so that clerks' offices can do more than stay afloat — they can thrive and serve their communities well.

Digital Tools Create Efficiency and Free Up Working Hours

Time is a precious commodity in the municipal clerk's office. From their first day on the job, clerks are taught that every second counts and that their job is to help council members and others maximize every second they can.

It's necessary for council meetings to be set up with much detail to attention so that no one is holding things up because they can't find something they need. It's vital to respect the council members' time so that they can spend as much time in discussion and decision-making as possible. Clerks can demonstrate their appreciation for the valued citizens who take time out of their schedules to attend council meetings and provide feedback by streamlining council meetings as much as possible.

Municipal clerks must know and understand the laws, local policies and local guidelines. Department heads and numerous others rely on the expertise of their municipal clerks.

Digital tools for creating agendas and minutes, managing records and sharing meeting details via video help to get the information to the people who want it and need it without delay. Having faster, more accurate processes means that municipal clerks will have extra hours in the day to work on special projects and serve their communities even better.

How to Structure a Council Meeting Agenda to Drive Efficiency

As the secretary to the governing body, it's important for municipal clerks to structure the council meeting agendas so that they can proceed as efficiently as possible. Meeting Manager Pro by iCompass is the top choice in local government software because of the many valuable features that it provides for municipal clerks. Large or small, any size government can present its citizens with an up-to-date web portal that they can use to review council meeting agendas, meeting minutes and search for information on key issues affecting their community with Meeting Manager Pro.

As part of Meeting Manager Pro, the Agenda Manager is a digital tool that automatically prefills much of the standard information needed for council meetings. The program prefills the date, time, location and names of council members. In addition, the program automatically creates a cover sheet, a template for the agenda and attachments. The clerk can easily create a custom design for the cover sheet with custom fonts, layout and logo. Clerks merely need to use the drag-and-drop technology to make changes on the agenda template, rearrange information or add new information. There's even space to add a consent agenda.

If someone needs to make a last-minute change or addition to the agenda, they can make it and notify the other participants that there's been a change. Clerks can also upload and attach documents from either their own computer or the document center. The program allows clerks to set various user permissions so that only authorized users can view the documents.

When the agenda is complete, clerks can send it out for the appropriate rounds of approval. The final approval signals the system to add the agenda to the agenda packet and notify all participants that the materials are ready for their final review. The Agenda Manager takes up to 80% less time to create an agenda packet than printing and collating an agenda packet manually.

Before or during the meeting, elected officials and staff can review their materials and make notes on them using any electronic device. iCompass even offers a free iPad app called AgendaNotes.

During the meeting, council members can vote for or against any issue using an electronic device and have the results displayed in real time right inside the council chambers.

At the close of the meeting, clerks can quickly pull the information from the agenda into the platform for the meeting minutes. After adding meeting highlights and proofreading them, the clerk can then send the approved version of the meeting minutes out to the necessary parties with just one click. In fact, clerks can automate the system to add approved agendas and meeting minutes to the CivicWeb Portal so that they're quickly available to the general public.

Meeting minutes can be ready for approval after the clerk proofreads them. The program also lets clerks send the approved version of the minutes to elected officials, the public or others using a single click.

The municipal clerk is also responsible to be the official recordkeeper. This is an important responsibility because of the legal liabilities that accompany the retention of records. The document center is an online file storage tool that stores and organizes documents safely in the cloud.

Fulfilling requests from citizens for documents places high demands on municipal clerks. The document center is available on the CivicWeb Portal, where citizens can easily do a search and pull up any documents that are marked for public viewing. The CivicWeb Portal attaches seamlessly to the government's website with the same tone, look and feel. The portal provides a welcoming online space where citizens can check the latest council meeting agenda, review the minutes of the last meeting and check out any supporting materials. By registering for updates, citizens can subscribe to information that they're interested in and receive it via an automated email.

The Efficient Way to Manage Boards and Commissions

Citizen engagement is important for improving the quality and delivery of local government services. Having an opportunity for local citizens to be involved in decision-making brings about greater accountability and transparency in local government. One of the ways citizens can get involved is to fill a seat on a local government board or commission. While this is a win/win situation for local governments, it's something that increases the workload for municipal clerks.

This task adds countless hours of updating spreadsheets documenting which boards and commissions have vacancies, when terms are expiring and updating lists of attendees for meetings.

Board Manager is a digital tool from iCompass that drastically reduces the time that clerks need to spend on this process. Citizens who are interested in serving on a board or commission can go to the CivicWeb Portal and view vacancies online and check the status of their application without having to call the municipal clerk. Once a citizen has been approved to join a group, the system integrates with other programs to transfer their names and titles to meeting agendas and minutes, which saves the clerk even more time.

Driving Efficiency with Live-Streaming Video Meetings in HD

The morning after council meetings is usually a busy time for clerks. Clerks answer call after call from citizens, the press and staff looking for information about the previous night's meeting. Some have requests for copies of the agenda and the minutes. Others are looking for the outcomes of votes. These are just a few of the questions that clerks must answer. The solution to making council meeting information available to citizens is to provide them with live-streaming audio and video recordings. iCompass' Video Manager HD tool is the first HD video-streaming meeting solution for local governments.

With Video Manager HD, clerks can easily save and post audio and video recordings on the CivicWeb Portal immediately at the close of council meetings. The tool integrates with YouTube, the world's leading video-streaming platform. Citizens can now watch local government meetings anywhere using any electronic device. Clerks can add video links and time-stamps to their agendas and minutes so that citizens can go directly to the portion of the council meeting that they're interested in. For added convenience, time-stamped items appear in the description window on the YouTube video window.

To enhance the viewer's experience and to assist disabled people, the program adds closed captioning. Clerks can clarify, edit and add text as needed prior to publishing it. Clerks can also trim the beginning and end of the meeting so that the video starts and ends at the exact times the meeting is called to order or adjourned. Citizens who opt to watch live-streaming council meetings can start or stop the live webcast using the video encoder when viewing council meetings from a tablet or mobile phone.

Video Manager allows users to set screen options to help viewers with low-bandwidth internet connections for unparalleled reliability. Citizens can also set their YouTube channel to automatically add all new council meetings to the channel, so that they can view them at their leisure.

Local governments that opt for Video Manager get access to an efficient, transparency-focused council meeting solution that brings value to communities and increases citizen engagement.

Governance with a Modern Approach

Local governments have lagged other industries and entities in implementing useful technology. Tight budgets and resistance from longstanding employees are often the reason for lack of meaningful progress. The reality is that manual, paper-laden processes are outdated, time-consuming and costly. Age-old practices lack the necessary security, exposing local governments to risks and liabilities. Fragmented processes that don't integrate across departments create duplicate information that doesn't get shared with others that need it. A small investment in software that was designed with local governments in mind produces big gains in efficiency, accountability and transparency, which are the tenets of good governance.

Good governance sets the stage for managing legislative risk and expectations in today's complex digital world. Modernizing governance requires recognizing where the deficits are in local government.

Many local governments have continued to serve their constituents without fully considering such things as globalization, digitization, interconnectivity and access. While other types of organizations have been quick to enjoy the benefits of these advancements, skepticism among local government workers and some citizens has caused local governments to be slower to get on board with digitization. The main deficits in local governments not implementing valuable government software are:

- **Leaders lack the information they need to ask the most pressing questions**
- **The council becomes somewhat myopic regarding the true needs of the community**
- **Systems and data are too disconnected to be of the most effective value and hinder opportunities for collaboration**

When local governments take steps to alleviate these deficiencies, they gain visibility, security and speed. As an added benefit, local governments increase their decision-making abilities, enhance transparency and increase citizen engagement.

Modern governance means joining council work with civic engagement to empower collaboration, ensure accountability and inspire trust. It also means providing a high level of security to protect against cybercrime without limiting appropriate access to information. Integrated digital systems promote data collection without unnecessary duplication and a central location where every local government department can access it.

Good Governance Is Dynamic and Forward-Thinking

Good governance doesn't look the same from one local government body to the next. No two communities have exactly the same needs.

Municipal clerks, council members and other local government staff owe it to their constituents to re-examine current processes and to continually ask how they can improve efficiency. Good governance also requires following the best practices as set by corporations and nonprofits. One of the hot topics for all organizations now is focusing on providing the skills and perspectives that solve the problems of the community now and in the future.

Governance in today's world is fraught with complex, interconnected and increasing risks. Local government leaders need the types of digital software solutions that, as developed by iCompass, ensure that councils and staff remain aligned with their goals, track progress, remain transparent, and stay in compliance with laws and regulations.

Some of the problems that carry the greatest risks are some of the easiest to solve. Many local governments have yet to realize the dangers of using text messaging apps, email accounts and other electronic apps that lack the strong security that local government work demands.

Everything clerks need to know about how to drive efficiency in local government starts with iCompass.

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