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Board Communication on the Fast Track

BY JOE RUCK

Hospital boards are beginning to take best practice cues from their corporate counterparts and modernize their communication methods by adopting board portals.

A board portal is a secure "host"—i.e., an online storage system for managing trustee communications. It is accessible anytime, from anywhere in the world. Portals typically have a repository for managing current and historical documents, an online calendar, and an online address book. More advanced portals also offer such capabilities as secure e-mail, Web conferencing and "vaults" for off-line document storage by individuals.

Several factors are driving organizations to adopt board portals. Greater regulatory oversight and competitive pressures have significantly increased the volume and pace of board work, making paper-based communications inadequate. And boards have become more aware of the shortcomings of regular e-mail as a way of communicating; e-mail is not secure and can be used out of context in litigation against an organization. Additionally, board portal technologies now exist that are highly secure, easy to use, and functionally rich, making it possible for boards to transition from paper to Web-based communications.

Benefits of a Board Portal

Additional benefits include:

• *Greater visibility into operations.* Board portals make information more accessible to trustees. Agendas are hyperlinked to supporting documents, so trustees can navigate rapidly through materials.

• *Robust security.* Portals provide both product and process security. Product security can include document encryption and two-factor user authentication—an advanced security feature regarded as a necessity by information technology departments when it comes to board materials. Process security can include hosting a secure facility, blocking access to any board content, and third-party security validation.

• *Historical repository.* Organizations will typically keep archival materials in the portal, enabling trustees to retrieve documents for later review.

• *Secure e-mail.* Board portals can provide secure, closed-loop e-mail systems, so trustees can have candid discussions on sensitive topics without fear that e-mails can be retrieved and used out of context in legal proceedings against the organization.

• *Positive ROI.* Organizations have proven consistently that board portals provide positive returns by greatly reducing the time and costs needed to assemble, update, print and distribute board materials.

• *Environmentally friendly.* Board portals reduce the need for printing and shipping materials, thereby reducing the paper toll on the environment.

• *Easy implementation.* Organizations should be able to implement a board portal solution in one week or less.

One Hospital's Success Story

One of the nation's leading, fully-integrated health care providers recently adopted a portal to manage its board communications. The board had been committed to paperless communication since 2005 and had originally developed an in-house system. The board administrator and her team would assemble board books electronically, and then send them on disks to trustees, who would read them with specialized mobile devices. This process was cumbersome and placed significant demands on the organization's technology resources.

In 2007, the hospital decided to replace its internal system with a commercially-available board portal that provided an easier way to assemble and update board books and gave their 16 trustees and 18 leadership team members immediate, online access to new board documents.

Today, the board administrator assembles and distributes board materials more quickly. She also easily creates agendas and electronic board books and alerts trustees that new materials are available.

The hospital's trustees and executives now simply log on to the system from any location and get immediate access to materials—both current and historical. They are also able to navigate through hyper-linked documents easily and can conduct searches to quickly find items of interest. Trustees also benefit from productivity tools such as secure e-mail, Web conferencing and online surveys. The portal has replaced the hospital's in-house system, eliminating the IT support burden. **T**

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