A community's search for a condominium management system

Walk by my condominium's property management office and you'll see a wall-mounted form holder for maintenance requests. I wouldn't touch these forms. I'd rather call or email the manager or assistant manager. I can attach photos to email to more fully explain my message.

BY LUIGI BENETTON

That might just be my comfort level speaking. I've served on my condo board for nine years, the past several years as treasurer. I'm also a technophile, and I know what systems are available in other industries. For instance, I regularly submit support requests online for things like phone service, software, even coffee makers.

Why do we still use paper to communicate with property managers? Maybe it's a combination of age (our complex is almost three decades old) and institutional inertia.

Over the years, I and other community members suggested we modernize our systems on several occasions. This year, members of the boards represented on our Shared Facilities Committee (on which I also serve) welcomed four condominium management system vendors to demo their offerings in our board room.

This exercise got me thinking about the business benefits of the systems we're considering, with a view to sharing this knowledge with other communities.

Keeping technology up to date

The Shared Facilities Committee was told its current "suite" of condominium management systems is antiquated. These systems also reside on a computer in the office that the sister corporations pay to maintain.

The systems the committee is considering are based in the cloud. Cloud-based system providers typically use high-end equipment and keep their offerings up to date as part of the subscription fees they charge their clients.

WHO DOES WHAT

All of the objectives we're pursuing in our search for a condominium management system depend on the roles people play.

Residents will do things such as book amenities, communicate with the office and keep up with happenings in the community.

Directors may approve minutes, "sign" cheques, review monthly financial reports and reach decisions on various issues that management can act upon between board meetings. With any luck, the directors will forego the need to debate and minute such decisions at board meetings, thus shortening those meetings. (Hopefully the board can also use this feature to survey residents.)

Managers will have a record of all interactions between a resident and the office in one place, along with contact information for both owners and tenants, locker location, bikes registered and so forth. Not having to spend as much time fielding resident or director needs in person or on the phone ought to give managers more time to pursue value-added work that they can't automate. And if necessary, they can work from any Internet connection.

Why not let residents ask for things from a web browser or smartphone app while at work?

The performance and security of their machinery and data storage tend to be light years ahead of what their customers could achieve on their own. All that would be needed to access the community's data is a modern web browser or (in some cases) a mobile app.

Managing resident accounts

Residents can change passwords, recover forgotten passwords, delete accounts, maybe even use a bring-your-own-identity (BYOI) feature so they don't need to create yet another password they might forget. They can enter other information like their pets' names, emergency contacts and vacation absences.

Managers might want to be notified each time information changes in a profile so they can double-check it for correctness. When residents move out, managers will likely have to remove access, while keeping data as long as legally required.

Improving communications between…
… individual residents and management

The forms mentioned at the beginning of this article, plus office visits and phone calls, represent the communication channels residents use to reach the office.

Why not let residents ask for things from a web browser or smartphone app while at work? For instance, maintenance request forms completed online can be routed into a "maintenance dashboard" that managers can use to triage requests.

In some cases, managers need not get involved. Residents can book amenities such as the party room or guest suites using an online calendar and payment system without assistance.

… the community and management

The condo lobbies and elevators of the sister corporations, as in many others, contain glassed-off bulletin boards where managers post meeting minutes and notices for residents. But how often do those walls of text capture people's attention?

Instead, managers could explain pressing matters and publish meeting minutes using a blog-like site, a resident email list and a community calendar. Those bulletin boards could be replaced with video screens that rotate through several news items, updated whenever managers see fit, from wherever they happen to be.

… residents and the rest of the community

Bulletin boards may still have a place, but there's no harm in adding email alerts or notices on the website when residents have things to sell, parking spots to rent or events they want to host.

… directors and management

The board spends plenty of time during its meetings hashing out various issues. Directors also spend time on email between meetings, proving that they're amenable to electronic ways of speeding up their decision-making.

Meanwhile, cheap online polling systems let groups reach and record decisions within hours of a matter being put forward. Decisions made online could quickly be minuted and adapted as electronic notices to residents.

… concierge and residents

Concierges accept packages on residents' behalf when they aren't home and send messages to the tiny screens on the security alarm panels inside suites. These messages could be moved to email, text and phone messages.

… the community and the public at large

Having a public website to sing the praises of the community ought to buoy resale values. Prospective buyers would likely fall in love with unit layouts, photos of the grounds and athletic facilities…

… other systems and the property management system

The sister corporations may want to import data from other places to create "dashboards," accumulations of data that, taken together, create a complete picture. For instance, it would presumably be handy for managers to see accounting records by resident. The system may even be able to flag overdue common element fees or other amounts owing.

Ultimately, whichever system we choose, the data in the system belongs to the condo corporation. Each vendor told us we could export our data should we choose to switch to a different system. That's as it should be. ☐

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