

A photograph of the Thorold City Hall building, a two-story brick structure with a gabled roof and a sign that reads 'THOROLD CITY HALL'. The building is surrounded by trees and a clear sky.

City of Thorold Eliminates Paper and Improves Internal Communications with eSCRIBE

Customer
City of Thorold

Location
Thorold, ON

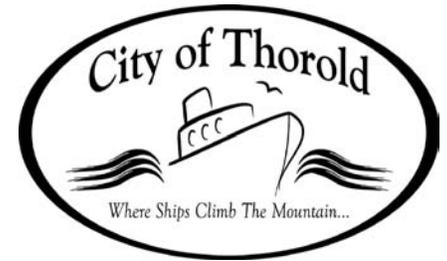
Industry
Municipality

About the Client

Situated on the Niagara Escarpment, the heritage-rich City of Thorold in Ontario is home to almost 19,000 residents. Located 10 minutes from Niagara Falls, 30 minutes from the United States border and an hour from Toronto's Pearson International Airport, the City combines the benefits of an urban centre with the joys of country living.

The Challenge

In the fall of 2012, City Council asked the Clerk's Department to explore going paperless for the first time. At that point, the City was printing more than two dozen agenda packages – with between 250 and 300 pages apiece – for each of the roughly 30 regular and special meetings held annually, in addition to a number of committee meetings every month. Like most municipalities, the City's primary goals in eliminating paper were to improve efficiency while reducing significant printing-related and distribution costs.



No Internal IT Support

When the City of Thorold researched electronic solutions, product features were of course significant, but customer service was the most important consideration. "We didn't have an IT department at that time," said Donna Delvecchio, City Clerk, who held the position of Deputy City Clerk when the project started. "Some of our staff were concerned that we might not have sufficient internal resources to support it. We knew we would need to lean heavily on the vendor we chose, so technical support and training were among our top criteria."

The ease with which the solution allows users to make revisions was also important to Delvecchio. "Our additions would sometimes be bigger than the agendas themselves," she said. "We'd love to get away from that being the case, but everyone has different timelines."

The Solution

Delvecchio discovered eSCRIBE at the annual AMCTO conference and selected it after in-depth evaluations against two alternatives. "eSCRIBE stood out for their training and implementation program," she recalled. "We also liked their extended technical support hours, which means they're accessible if we need them when we start our live meetings at 6:30pm."



Despite not having an IT background, Delvecchio led the City's eSCRIBE implementation effort herself with the expert assistance of eSCRIBE's team. "The deployment went very smoothly," she explained. "eSCRIBE was there to hold our hand the whole way. They were fantastic. In fact, we still rave about the training we received," Delvecchio continued.

"Even though it was done remotely, they could tap in electronically to our screens and see exactly what we were doing. The training was tailored perfectly for us, and the trainers were very patient."

Exceeding Expectations

Installation started in October 2013, with the City of Thorold's first eSCRIBE-enabled live meeting taking place in April 2014. Since then, they have continued to expand their use of eSCRIBE to gain efficiencies that go far beyond their initial plans.

"One of my favorite tools in eSCRIBE is Report Manager," stated Delvecchio. "It wasn't part of our original criteria, but now I don't know how we functioned without it. We can assign deadlines and automate approval workflows, and track the progress of agenda reports throughout their lifecycle. If a report is stuck along the way, we know which staff member we need to talk to, and we're better able to forecast our meetings even without the reports being complete yet."

eSCRIBE Report Manager's version control, audit reports and approval history have also proven valuable. "Being able to get the back history lets us identify where items originated from, who made changes and when," Delvecchio noted. "That information was difficult if not impossible for us to find before."

The Clerk's Department similarly uses eSCRIBE to manage tasks they are given by City Council. "The manager to whom the task is assigned gets notifications automatically, and we no longer need to track tasks with an Excel spreadsheet," Delvecchio explained. "That alone saves us several hours each month."

Reducing Research Time

Task and agenda report management have not been the only time savings realized by the City of Thorold. "All of our reports and bylaws are in eSCRIBE, and being able to easily search them has cut our research time for locating information significantly," Delvecchio explained. "Having all of our bylaws saved in the eSCRIBE library also allows us to offer 'self-serve' searching to other City departments. We used to have to stop everything to do research when asked to provide copies of bylaws, but starting in 2016 we simply point the requestor to the eSCRIBE library to find what they need themselves. That has saved our staff a lot of time."

Having the bylaws in eSCRIBE has also delivered additional benefits. Rather than retyping each time, staff can insert the required bylaw from an eSCRIBE template, maximizing consistency and efficiency.

The Results

First and foremost, implementing eSCRIBE enabled the City of Thorold to successfully achieve their goal of paperless meetings. Using the eSCRIBE iPad app, councillors download agendas and reports and can review them on their tablets in advance of meetings. Council members and senior staff then use the same iPads and app during the meeting.

"The councillors love it, as they have no paper on their desks," said Delvecchio. "They find it very easy to

type notes and highlight sections of the documents right within the eSCRIBE iPad app.”

In addition to the efficiencies and cost savings that eSCRIBE has brought to the Clerk’s Department and Council, the meeting management solution has also enabled broader-reaching benefits.

“eSCRIBE has enhanced the Clerk Department’s customer service to our municipality and improved our communications across the corporation,” said Delvecchio. “Report Manager in particular lets everyone see what each other is doing while maintaining appropriate access and security, so we know what’s coming for our current meeting and are better able to forecast our future agendas.”

eSCRIBE’s customer service has lived up to the lofty expectations that led the City to choose the platform. “Their technical support has been great,” said Delvecchio. “They always respond quickly to emails or phone calls and follow through on any open items, and the extended hours provide a bit of a security blanket for live meetings. eSCRIBE’s support team always makes us feel like we are a priority for them.”

Making Change Easy

eSCRIBE has also fulfilled Delvecchio’s criteria of being able to easily make changes, even beyond her original objectives. “It’s much easier to publish revisions to agendas and reports, but also to make much larger changes,” she said. “This January we implemented a consent agenda, which led to a total change in what our agendas look like. I thought we would have to rebuild completely, but eSCRIBE made it amazingly easy.”

The City’s future plans include adding eSCRIBE’s Webcasting Plus and Internet Publishing Plus Modules, enabling them to improve their video streaming. “eSCRIBE’s streaming tools offer more functionality and can increase the number of meetings we live stream,” Delvecchio commented.



Donna Delvecchio,
City Clerk

eSCRIBE’s intuitive operation and tangible benefits have won over even the City of Thorold’s longest-tenured employees. “When you have done something the same way for a long time, it can be hard to accept change,” said Delvecchio. “Our Legislative Assistant has been here for 30 years, but has totally embraced eSCRIBE. To have someone go through that big a change and be totally on board is a testament to the solution. We don’t know what we would do without eSCRIBE.”

