

Publication Date: 28 May 2019

YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 164. Improving communication between residents with Stratabox

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Intro: Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to www.yourstrataproperty.com.au.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer, and this is Your Strata Property. Paul Chevrot is the co-founder of Stratabox. Paul completed a Bachelor of Business in Spain and France before resettling to Australia in 2002. After a corporate career in IT purchasing and procurement with various large organisations, he started a successful family wholesale business in 2008, giving him a good understanding of both small and large business dynamics, including customer focus, processes, and user experience. Stratabox was founded in January 2016 in Sydney. The online platform enables committee members and all other stakeholders in a strata scheme or body corporate to securely manage all of their communications and administrative requirements online, enhancing convenience, continuity, and transparency.

Today I am delighted to welcome Paul Chevrot of Stratabox. Welcome, Paul.

Paul Chevrot: Thank you, Amanda. It's a pleasure to be with you on the podcast today.

Amanda Farmer: Absolute pleasure to have you with us on the show, Paul. Thank you for taking the time. Now, I reached out to you, because more and more I was hearing from people, from residents in strata schemes, about Stratabox and that they were looking at it, they were trialing it, they were very excited about it. I've had posts on our Facebook page about Stratabox members inside the YSP online community, telling me about Stratabox. So I thought I would get the man himself on the show to give us some background and fill us in on why you think our building should get involved.

Paul Chevrot: Well thanks, Amanda. It's very rewarding when word of mouth is at work. That's really my reward, to see people using and having confidence in the system, to then recommending it on to other people. So that's great news.

Amanda Farmer: I'm going to start by asking you, Paul, what sparked the idea for Stratabox?

Paul Chevrot: It was a few years ago, and I cannot really take the credit for the initial idea. It was Christophe's, who is also the co-founder and the main web developer of the system. The way he came up with the idea is really when after a few years living in his former building, he put his hand up to become the Secretary of the building. I'm certain a number of listeners will identify with this story. He was literally handed a shoebox with the documents, including printouts of emails. And with his specific background in IT, and especially around online publishing, that's when he realised that there was probably a better way to handle all the aspects of the work of the committee.

Looked around, didn't really see anything that suited his purpose, so he approached me. We had been good friends for over 15 years, so he said, "I think we could come up with something good here." We took our time to really look at, familiarise ourselves with strata and put a wish list, really, of what would make life easier for a committee member, and slowly developed a feature set that is constantly being refined to make sure it suits the needs of strata committees. And obviously, the challenge is, strata is one word, but the reality is it can be very different, and it covers from 2, 3 lots to 300. Ensuring the system is adaptable to all situations is our challenge. But it is a great challenge, and it's very interesting. Keeps us busy.

Amanda Farmer: I'm sure it does, and I am going to ask you to get into in a little bit exactly what it is that Stratabox does and how it works, but first of all, I've picked up from your own description about Stratabox that you're aiming to enhance convenience, continuity, and transparency. Now, can you let me know, Paul, why you and Stratabox think that those are key issues for our strata communities?

Paul Chevrot: Well look, Amanda, I believe that strata has evolved since its inception in the '60s. First, the nature of the buildings has changed. What was probably a 6, 8 lot walk-in with mostly owner-occupiers at the time has now increased in size, in



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complexity. The requirements, especially around compliance, have increased. I think that's really where we need to find a better system to make it work. There's also been a lot of changes. I mean, look at Australia in the '60s and look at it now. There's been a big rise in investors and renters. Increasingly also, there's geographical mobility, which means people invest in other states, or they can even in some cases live overseas. And there's a lot more controlled diversity in buildings as well.

Paul Chevrot: I think as a result of all these profound changes, there's been a move in strata towards outsourcing most of the responsibilities to a professional provider, which is a strata manager. And they have always a strong focus on processes and compliance, but maybe professionalising it has allowed it to lose sight of the main outcome of strata, I think, and the philosophy when it was created, which is people living in buildings in harmony, but also managing a shared asset for the benefit of everyone. And I think all these aspects really converge into one word, which is sustainability, I'm talking the sustainability of the whole strata model, and maintaining the value of a shared asset while remaining affordable.

I think you can always hire a specialist for most areas, but then the costs go up, so for the system to remain affordable and sustainable, I think the committee needs to be active and take its share of the workload and of the responsibilities.

Amanda Farmer: I'm going to ask you, Paul, to share with us a story, if you can, about a building that you've been working with, that's successfully using Stratabox. And in the process, perhaps share with our listeners exactly what it is that Stratabox does, perhaps from the implementation stage and then through to the use of the software, what it is that they should expect from Stratabox.

Paul Chevrot: Sure. Amanda, with over 100 buildings signed up so far to the system, we have many success stories. We have committee members living overseas and keeping a closer eye on what is happening in their schemes. We have committee members who are implementing a process where they can have electronic-only meetings, where they can vote, and especially in the context of renovations or upgrades to the building. There is always spend that exceeds the authority of the committee that can be quickly dealt with, with an electronic EGM.

What Stratabox aims to be is a toolbox for committees to help them communicate with all the various stakeholder groups in a building, and the way to do so is to create a profile and then populate it with the characteristics of the building, of course. All the documentation for the building that's available, for example, the by-laws, the resident handbooks, and various, for example, the historical meetings documents. And then it opens lines of communication within the groups.

And the advantage of Stratabox is that it doesn't have to change the way people interact with each other. Because the system is integrated with email, all the people that are in the different groups will receive information in their email, and they can also participate straight from the email without needing to log into the interface. Because there's generally a lack of engagement in strata, we wanted to make it really, really easy for people to, one, receive the information and, two, be able to participate.

And also, the system allows for to customise the way and the frequency you receive the information at. You can receive the information immediately or daily digest or weekly digest even, and you can do that for each specific group. So if you're really interested in the residential aspects, you get information straightaway, but everything that's owner related, for example, once a week is enough for you.

Amanda Farmer: I want to just dig deeper there, Paul, before we go on, about those different groups. You've mentioned there a couple of times different groups, and my understanding is that you're talking about tenants, so residents simply, and then owners, who have a different or a higher level, perhaps, interest in the property than tenants do, because they're interested in the money side of things, the meetings, the levies, the repair and maintenance, perhaps to a deeper level than tenants are. So what you're saying is that Stratabox can filter the communications, depending on your particular preference and your preference depending on whether you're a tenant or an owner, or I suppose a strata manager.

Paul Chevrot: Yes. The communication is segregated between the various groups, and we don't really like the idea of tenants. That's where we would use "resident", because residents, whether they own or not, they live in the building, which makes them

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interested in certain things. And the ownership is really in parallel. We have the owners group, the residents group, and then the committee group, and they can all communicate in a segregated way.

Amanda Farmer: Is there a facility there for someone to moderate or monitor those communications?

Paul Chevrot: We haven't put that in the system deliberately. There is a warning when you join that all our communications are archived, and they cannot be deleted, and I think that's enough to deter any issues with ...

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Paul Chevrot: But the problem with moderation is that it then becomes very labor-intensive, and there's always the question of who moderates who?

Amanda Farmer: Yes, indeed. It sounds to me like Stratabox is more than just a file management system, and there's a number of providers out there who do provide for Strata Managers and for strata schemes file management systems, a place to put all your documents, a place for owners to log in and see all of the documents. You've got this communication to it, which I wasn't aware of, which is interesting.

Paul Chevrot: Yes. After discussing with a number of people in the industry, we realised that the solutions that were out there, especially in terms of, it's usually a portal where you can consult your ready history and the minutes, weren't being used a great deal by people. And I believe that's because they are only one way, so they present you some information, but there's no interaction. That's why we decided to develop a tool that is interactive and also that covers more aspects with more functionalities, because the example I always give is myGov, which I log into probably once or twice a year. If you don't use a system reasonably regularly, you completely forget how to use it.

The idea of putting more functionalities in the same place, which you don't have to use all of them, but you use what you need, but you use it more frequently and with more purpose, which enables people to stick around and stay engaged with the tool.

Amanda Farmer: And you also have the functionality for electronic meetings and electronic voting.

Paul Chevrot: Yes, we offer pre-meeting online voting, which can probably end up substituting proxies for meetings. And it was very challenging to implement, because it hasn't really been tested. When the legislation changed, there was a lot of excitement around it, but I've certainly seen a very, very slow adoption of this, and it's mostly around doubt of how it should really work and what it should really achieve. But again, with the rise of the overseas or interstate investor, I think it will definitely become a lot more prevalent in the coming years, because I've heard stories of 300-lot buildings with three people at the AGM. So how long can that last for? I'm not sure.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I think it does get very frustrating.

Paul Chevrot: We have several clients that are having success in using the system. Every building has its challenges, I guess, and they're all looking to something a little bit different, a little bit different problems to solve. What I see as a successful building is a building where I can see communication really starting to increase and people engaging with each other around things that could have happened yesterday but could have been latent for a long time. So to me, when I see several communications daily in buildings, I know that they are on the right track to talk about things and make progress. Implementing the system is not a magic wand, unfortunately. Improvements and the changes are very gradual, and it takes a while to build trust in the system and to get to a full adoption, I guess.

Amanda Farmer: What is that you think stops buildings from even implementing, from even considering this kind of technology, and how do you get past that with them? How do you convince them that this is good for them?

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Paul Chevrot: Amanda, I think the initial issue is always awareness. They need to know about the product, which we're working very hard to try to improve. But I believe technology permeates our lives every day more and more. I've been using online banking for 15 years now, and comes a time for everybody to think, maybe we need a tool, we need a system to help us with the management of our strata. The real difficulty is that the adoption of the system is a collective decision, and we all know that in every building there's always someone who swims against the flow.

And there can also be issues around the fear of increased transparency. What will it do? Will people use the system wisely or not? My recommendation for buildings is always to go slow, progress very gradually, implement certain features first, and then pause a little bit. Make sure you familiarise yourself with the system, and then move on to the next slot. And you can roll it out very progressively to the different groups and add all the information as you need it.

And again, I think every building is different, and you need to focus on what you need the most first, and then see if there are other things that suit your purpose. But the system is built to be extremely flexible, so you can really adjust the settings to what you need or the dynamics in your specific building.

Amanda Farmer: Sounds like a sensible approach. Do you find, Paul, that you are working mostly with strata managers when you are implementing Stratabox, or more so with the committee members?

Paul Chevrot: We really try to focus on committee members, because they are the ones who up until now had no tool to work with. Strata Managers have had tools for a long time. And that doesn't mean that our system is ... I think there's a mutual benefit in improving the communication. If the committee can solve certain issues, that is probably going to stop 10 or 15 different owners ringing independently the strata manager. So in the way communication is set up, there are lots of efficiencies to be gained for everyone.

And there's mixed response from Strata Managers. Some of them are enthusiastic about the tool. Some of them are a bit apprehensive. The system can be implemented in parallel to the relationship with the strata manager, and the strata manager doesn't really need to change his ways of working, apart from probably just changing a couple of email addresses he uses to contact the building. So it's an evolution, it's not a transformation.

Amanda Farmer: Aha. I like that. Put that one on the website. If someone's listening to this podcast and wants to find out more, wants to get started with embracing this kind of technology, what do you suggest they do, Paul?

Paul Chevrot: Look, I think the first thing is always to start a conversation between the different committee members, and probably put it on the agenda of the committee meeting or for the AGM. And I find where implementation is quick and things go well, there's usually a champion, someone who puts their hands up and says, "I think we need this, and let's make it happen." And also, I believe for committees, it's always a good thing to start with a mini-audit of who has what information about the scheme? Is it backed up? Is it secure? Who knows about it? If you have to go back to the previous Secretary or the previous Chairman for him to dig in his old emails about certain things, it's not really convenient.

There is definitely a cost of not having data available and safeguarded, and the example again about multiple requests for the same thing is usually a cost incurred, so if that results can be made available on Stratabox for everybody, that's a positive, I think.

Amanda Farmer: For sure. Now I'm going to ask you the book question, Paul. Most guests on the podcast get the book question. What books have had the greatest impact on you, and why?

Paul Chevrot: Look, I'm currently reading Sapiens, which is a bit of a bestseller, I think, A Brief History of Mankind by Harari. I find it quite fascinating how he's been able to condense the whole of mankind into one book. But also, it's interesting to see how the evolution of technology has led to the evolution of mankind. I think one of the fairly recent transformations of mankind is the increase in urban density. It really transforms the way we live.



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Paul Chevrot: Just to take the example of the car. The car was invented over 100 years ago, and when the car was invented, road rules didn't exist. We slowly managed to catch up to the car with the road rules. I think it's quite similar with strata. We can build over 100-storey buildings, but I think it's time to catch up and really invent a way to manage them more efficiently and more effectively, and that will probably have to be through technology.

Amanda Farmer: Love it. Before we wrap up, Paul, how do our listeners find out more about you and about Stratabox? And let me know if there's anything you want to add.

Paul Chevrot: Look Amanda, the best way to find out more is probably just to hop on our website, stratabox.com.au. The system is self-service, so you can create a profile for your scheme and access all the features and see if it's suited for your purpose. You can also, of course, email us at contact@stratabox.com.au. I always get in touch with the new schemes, to get a sense of their priorities and sometimes to help them define a strategy, first for the initial implementation and, of course, then to help them achieve their desired outcomes.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. Well, thank you so much, Paul. I'm very excited to hear about that good work that you're doing, particularly on the side of improving communication amongst the different people in a building, because it's something that I talk about a lot on the podcast, how important good communication is, and engagement and getting people like residents who may not necessarily be owners to understand more about what's going on in the building and how they can pitch in, get involved. It just improves culture, I find, astronomically. It makes a really big difference, so I'm excited that there's technology out there that is helping our communities to do that. So thanks for taking the time to chat with us today.

Paul Chevrot: Not a problem, Amanda. It was a pleasure to be with you, and I hope we can work together to make strata easier and more engaging in the future.

Amanda Farmer: Sounds good to me. Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Paul.

Paul Chevrot: No worries.

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