

Publication Date: 22 September 2020
YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 232. The software behind your virtual strata meetings - StrataVote

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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, your Podcast Host. I'm here each week helping you demystify the legal complexities of apartment living. This week we're talking about electronic voting, and very soon I'm going to introduce you to our guest, Matt Larwood, of StrataVote.

But firstly, I want to acknowledge the amazing week that was last week. The 2020 Shared Space Summit. At the time I'm recording this intro, we are wrapping up the summit. So, so many of you attended and enjoyed the summit sessions. This was the largest online gathering of strata property owners the world has ever seen. We had more than 1,000 of you registered in attending the summit. I've heard from so many of you about how much you enjoyed hearing from our summit guest experts and how you're inspired and ready to take the lessons that you've learned from the summit sessions back to your communities.

I've also heard from some of you that you missed the summit and are feeling a little disappointed about that. Well, I know you won't make that mistake in 2021. We will be back with the Shared Space Summit next year. Can I be so bold as to say bigger and better than 2020? Already looking forward to that one.

But between now and then, I will continue to bring you the weekly podcast. We've welcomed lots and lots of new people into our world as part of the summit. So if you are tuning in perhaps to the podcast for the first time, we've been doing this for over 4 years now. More than 230 episodes. Feel free to go back and check out some of the earlier episodes way back in episode number one, when I was explaining exactly what strata is, we've covered so much ground, interviewed so many guests and helped many people come to grips with this crazy world that is apartment living.

Today I'm bringing you Matt Larwood, the General Manager of StrataVote. Matt has many years of experience working with companies to implement custom software solutions. And his focus is on ensuring the future direction of StrataVote is very customer centric. In his spare time he is the President of the Eagles Lacrosse Club and also the Deputy Mayor of Prospect Council. I didn't know that Matt. We'll have a chat about that next time we get together. Matt's sharing the efficiencies that this kind of software is bringing to our strata meetings, to the management of our strata schemes, and by the sounds of it, it is just the tip of the iceberg for this kind of technology.

I'll take you over now to my chat with Matt Larwood. Matt Larwood, welcome to the show.

Matt Larwood: Hi Amanda. How are you going?

Amanda Farmer: Doing very well. And you, sir, must be a very busy man. I was just saying to you off air, you are the right man at the right time, I think. Electronic voting platform for our strata owners, StrataVote. I imagine you are in a particularly high demand at the moment. How different is business now to this time last year?

Matt Larwood: That's a good question. Yes, it's significantly different. We've now got a team of around 10 people working on sales, but mostly implementation, training support. And also most importantly, ongoing development of the platform. So 10 people full time gets us a fair way through the types of things that our customers are demanding. So it's a very, very busy place.

But everyone's super excited by where things are going. We've been inundated, particularly over the last 6 months, with interest, given what's happening in the world. And our team is just excited to see new people signing up. And when they run their first meeting and they sort of had that punch the air moment and we get great feedback from our customers, it really motivates the team and everyone continues just to put a lot of hard work to continue the progress we're making.

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Amanda Farmer: Yes. I imagine with more people using the platform, you get that great feedback about what they're achieving and how excited they are and impressed they are, and then you also get all the bugbears coming to the fore. The technical issues. So it's interesting to hear you're constantly in development with those, I suppose, and trying to iron out the system for everybody across the country. Am I right, that you're across the country now?

Matt Larwood: Yes. We haven't got any Northern Territory customers, but we have customers in every other state, as well as New Zealand. I guess one of the good things about StrataVote is that it's owned and built by a software development company that's been around for 20 years. So the technical side of things, we can give that a big tick because that's all day, every day. But we enjoy getting the feedback from customers. And I always say that our system is only as good as what it is because we've had feedback from literally thousands of demos and thousands of conversations and hours standing in front of people at trade shows. And we actually listen. We take onboard the feedback that we get from our customers, and that's also something we hear regularly is that we receive feedback and then a week later something's built into the platform based on that feedback. So we like to be responsive and we like to build a platform that's designed around how people want to use it, not necessarily what we think they should use.

Amanda Farmer: It sounds like a good approach to me. Give us a quick summary, Matt, for people who may not have used StrataVote before, what is this software achieving for owners and for Strata Managers?

Matt Larwood: Okay. So it's a little bit different depending on whether you're within the company or outside a company. So for Strata Managers and Assistant Strata Managers, we've designed a really simple and easy to use system that takes away a lot of the manual work that's currently involved with preparing and sending out meeting agendas. We're pretty big on integration and reusing information from elsewhere. And we've designed what we think is a pretty good workflow that means that people can spend less time administering and more time focusing on customer service and so on and so forth.

From a lot owner or a committee member's perspective, we've put the decision making back into their hands and made it super simple for them to participate in the process. So electronic delivery of agendas, the ability to pre vote, or indeed vote online if they choose to do that. The Strata Manager can also use their platform in a meeting, where there's face-to-face meetings that are allowed, to be their support mechanism during a meeting. And then one of the really cool things is, once the meeting's finished, the minutes can be sent out within 5 clicks because they're automatically generated and customised for each company. So the concept of having to sit at home on the weekend doing your minutes because you forget to do them or you don't have time, is kind of in the past.

So internally it's about efficiencies, accuracy, making sure you're working in line with legislation. Externally, it's allowing more people to participate in the decision making process in a very easy to do way.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. So you actually supply the platform. If someone's going to have electronic voting, say for example, pre-meeting electronic voting, which we are able to do here in New South Wales, you have the system where an owner who wants to vote at that meeting or before that meeting logs on and they are on your platform. They're not within the Strata Manager system or the buildings system. They are on the StrataVote platform. Is that right?

Matt Larwood: Absolutely. Yes. Yes. So they'll receive an email with a link, they'll click on the link and it takes them to a secure voting portal. And then they can read the information relevant to the meeting and then make their decisions and submit their decisions. And then that information is automatically in the StrataVote platform. So whilst we interface with the strata managers core platform to get all the right information into StrataVote, once people click on that link, then they're in our platform. So yes, that's correct.

Amanda Farmer: Okay. And the Strata Manager would have access to, or a version of, everything that's in that platform for their record keeping duties, and to be able to meet their obligations to know who attended, who voted, how they voted. They still either own or have a copy of a version of that data?

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Matt Larwood: Yes. So the agenda, the minutes, are all retained in StrataVote. And some customers have an integration piece that pushes it elsewhere into a different document management system. The system actually produces a spreadsheet once a meeting's finished, which details; everyone who was sent an invitation electronically, everyone who voted, how they voted, whether it's in person or electronically, and also records the IP address of where they voted from. So that doesn't tie it back down to a device, but it ties it back down to a location. So all that information is available for all time for the Strata Manager to simply log in and find that information. So, yes, it's all maintained forever so they can meet their record keeping obligations.

Amanda Farmer: How do you deal with secret ballots?

Matt Larwood: Secret ballots is particularly tricky, but we have a returning officer type login, and we give the returning officer their login and credentials. The strata management company doesn't. So if there's a secret ballot, the system allows the Strata Manager to click a button saying, "*This is a secret ballot.*" If that's the case, it triggers a different workflow. So people can vote electronically, of course. We integrate with Bing, and if it gets sent to Bing, then Bing knows that it should print that ballot or that particular motion on a separate piece of paper. It will notice that it should produce an envelope which is addressed to the returning officer, and so on and so forth. So that's all done automatically. And then the returning officer receives their envelopes as per normal.

When they get to the meeting, they log into their own version of the software. And then it follows all the normal standard procedures around obfuscating who voted which way. And the system never records ... it records that there was 12 votes and 7 were yes, 5 were no, one was an abstain. If I got my sums right, maybe I haven't. Need to go back and check on that one. But it doesn't record who voted which way so it maintains the privacy and the integrity of the secret ballot process.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Wow. Isn't it amazing how technology can resolve these difficult situations for us? I'm very interested to hear you say that here is the ability to auto-generate minutes. How does that work?

Matt Larwood: We customise our software. We save a copy of our customer's agenda and minutes documents, and then we customise those when we're doing the set up phase. And then that style essentially, or layout or design, is embedded in the platform. So what they end up sending out through the agenda and the minutes is what they currently send out, from a style and our look and feel point of view. The system knows the trigger for closing off either a purely online meeting, such as what is fairly common up in Queensland, or if there's a pre voting period and then a face to face meeting. Once the meeting's concluded, the system has automatically and instantly generated a version of the minutes. It's generated as a word document, first of all, so the strata manager can get in and make some edits to the notes that they've taken and maybe merge another document with it.

But once they've done that, then they click literally 5 buttons and it either goes out this way, via email, or it goes to Bing automatically through our direct integration. So, great level of customer service, a committee or a group of lot owners could have the minutes for a decision or a meeting within 30 seconds of that meeting being concluded, as opposed to sometimes never. Things get lost in the post sometimes. So, yes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. And what this tells me or reminds me of is the importance of having clear agenda items and motions that are clearly capable of resolution by a yes or no vote. Right? Clients often say to me, "*Amanda, shouldn't we have in the minutes everything that happened at the meeting and everything that everybody said and what the debate was?*" And I say, "*Look, that's not really the purpose of your minutes. The purpose of your minutes are to say whether the motion was resolved or not resolved. Or maybe it was deferred, or maybe it was withdrawn. The real work is done in articulating your motions in such a way that it gives owners who are thinking about attending or voting or wondering what's going on, enough information to know what the topic is, but also be put in such a way that a yes or no decision can be recorded and it's clear what's happened.*"

And I suppose if you've got the motion right on your agenda, what you're saying is your system then picks up whether it's resolved or not resolved and simply puts the aye or nay next to it and turns the agenda into a set of minutes. Experienced Strata Managers out there will be telling me, "*Yes, Amanda, that's what my Assistant has been doing for years.*" Fascinating that we now have technology that can do that for us.

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Matt Larwood: Yes, it does all the calculations on the spot. So a couple of quick examples and one that always gets a standing ovation during demos, is where someone calls for a poll vote after the initial vote. And instead of having to bring along your advocates, send a spreadsheet and a calculator, and putting the meeting on pause for half an hour, you can click a button and the system automatically converts the votes to a lot entitlements, because it knows that. And it can immediately determine the outcome. And then, another good example is a special resolution, which we know has to go through all sorts of hurdles to be approved. The system knows all the rules around how to determine a result through special resolution, and it automatically applies those rules, which takes away the uncertainty that someone may have got it wrong. It removes the time it takes to work it out manually. It just removes a lot of risks and a lot of concern from everyone's minds. It just, it introduces more certainty.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. So I can see how this is being used, even in our face-to-face meetings, to help Chairpersons and Strata Managers get the result. You said there Matt, that in Queensland, you guys have been there for a while I think, and you've been running electronic voting. It's much more common up in Queensland. They didn't need a global pandemic to push them into electronic voting, as we've needed in New South Wales and maybe other parts of the country. Why do you think that's the case? What's so different about Queensland? Why are they ahead of the pack here?

Matt Larwood: It's difficult for me to say why they are. I guess that the way that things tend to work in Queensland, there seems to be a lot more micro decisions made through flying minutes, as opposed to waiting for things to build up at a meeting once a year. And I don't think that's a bad idea, because if something's a good idea or if something bad is happening, then you kind of want to be able to deal with it on the fly, literally, as you're going along. You don't want things to fester and build up until you have your annual general meeting. So I think that the mindset must be that the decision making process can happen more incrementally. It can happen as it needs to. And therefore that leads to needing to be able to do that quickly and efficiently and cost effectively.

If you think about the cost of a large building needing to be able to approve a by-law with people who are living all around the world, the cost of doing that would be in the thousands, probably even 10 of thousands of dollars. And so that in itself is a disincentive to moving things along and getting decisions made. Whereas if it can be done, by and large, through electronic voting, then people see that they want to keep things moving. They can do it efficiently, cost effectively, and get a decision made as opposed to sitting on your hands for 12 months. So I think maybe it's just that nature of how they do things in Queensland is a bit different.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Maybe the higher rate of holiday and tourist accommodation, the higher rate of investment absentee owners may have driven that desire for electronic voting. It's a bit chicken and egg. Do they make decisions faster because they have electronic voting, or do they have electronic voting because they need to make decisions faster? Who knows? I'm definitely seeing here in New South Wales, now that everybody's becoming a lot more comfortable with electronic meetings, that more meetings are happening, that it is much easier to convene a strata committee meeting. We've always had the power in New South Wales to convene committee meetings in writing and have what we call a paper vote. But now that it's easy to either vote using a platform like yours, or to jump on a quick Zoom call, I am seeing committees meet more regularly to keep things moving, as you say. And I agree, I think that's a really good thing.

Matt Larwood: We're also seeing a greater participation rate in meetings because people are more empowered to participate. If you can imagine someone sitting on the train on the way home and they're scrolling through Facebook or whatever, and then they see a meeting notice, pop up, they can sit there and make their decisions whilst they're on the way home and it's done. So people are just more inclined to get involved, which is, I think that's really important. I think that one of the concerns we had, or we continually hear, is that decision making is in the hands of too few people. And it's a demographic situation. People have invested a lot of money in owning property and they certainly want the opportunity to participate. And it's not always convenient to have to cancel a meeting room at 6 o'clock at night in the middle of August where it's pouring with rain. Or stand shivering in the undercroft to have a quick committee meeting. So putting that decision making back in the hands of the people where it belongs is super important.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I agree. You've told us there, Matt, that your Strata Manager clients, when you're showing them the software, they love the poll feature where they can quickly convert the vote to a unit entitlement count. What else do your clients

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love about the software?

Matt Larwood: Well, it depends on what new feature we've just released, to be honest. One of the things that we can do now, and I've got something that I'll talk about because it's part of the questions a bit later on, particularly with our ... now we don't have any financial relationship with Bing, we've just built in the integration as a service to our customers. Through Bing we can put a QR code on a cover note for the printed version. When that goes out to people via a printed version, they can get their camera out on their phone, hold the camera above that QR code, and it automatically pops up the meeting. So even if they've received their agendas via paper format, they can still log on and vote electronically if they want, before a meeting. So that's something which is pretty cool. The other thing which we might talk about now is what we've just released, which is what we've called StrataVote Anywhere.

So StrataVote anywhere is something which we initially committed to at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, because we knew that people couldn't hold face-to-face meetings for a period of time. Unfortunately in Victoria, you still can't. And StrataVote Anywhere is large, remote voting. And people are doing that kind of stuff through Zoom or Teams or whatever it might be, but there's still a lot of technical challenges there with the demographic that we're working with. And so needing to have 2 screens or 2 browsers open, or a PC and an iPad and a phone or whatever it might be, it's just a bit of a bridge too far for a lot of people. What we've done with StrataVote Anywhere is we've built an AV platform directly into our system.

So people will register through a link and then they can join the meeting from the comfort of their own home. The Strata Manager then fires up the AV link. There's also a two way chat mechanism. And so everything is happening on the one screen, on the one page, so that people can listen to a discussion from the Strata Manager, they can ask questions through the chat mechanism, and then the Strata Manager clicks the button that says Open Voting, and then they can vote directly into their devices. And then their vote is recorded instantaneously, alongside everybody else's vote. So to me, that's a massive step forward in the strata industry, because it really brings in that concept of video conferencing, but it does it in a far more simple and effective way so that people feel comfortable participating in a meeting in that forum.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. I'm already seeing Strata Managers trying to patch that together in a way. They're using Zoom and they're using the poll feature in Zoom, and I've had one strata manager say "*Absolutely love it. Works really well.*" And another one will say, "*It was a disaster, it didn't work. Nobody knew how to use it.*" So I can definitely see.

Matt Larwood: It's kind of like pat your head for yes, scrunch up your nose for no, and scratch your chin for abstain, and people trying to hurriedly ... it just introduces unnecessary risks from my perspective. And we all know that there are some stakeholders in the strata world who look to pick up on those kinds of things like that. And the strata management, and indeed the strata management company, doesn't really want to be heading to NCAT or VCAT or whatever it might be any time soon. They've got better things to do with their time. So the way that we've done it by pulling it all together, again it's about efficiency and convenience, but it's also about reducing the risk of things going wrong.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. And I think you're very polite reference there to some strata stakeholders who likes to take advantage of mistakes at meetings, you're referring to the Strata Lawyers, right Matt?

Matt Larwood: No, no, no. Not necessarily, but they might be involved in some way in the process. But let's make things as easy as possible for people who are being forced to adopt to a new way of living and working. And let's remove the risk of things going wrong by actually building a targeted solution for the strata industry, which is what we've done. So what we've done is specifically targeting strata. We don't target any other industries. Everything we do and everything we build is aimed at solving problems in the strata industry.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. And just speaking of the legal side. Having to deal with the different legislative provisions around the country and the recent changes to those as well, when it comes to the ability to have electronic meetings in New South Wales for example, it has now been clarified that we cannot have pre-meeting electronic voting for the election of a committee. And that is something that has only come through with our emergency COVID legislation. How do you guys keep across what is going on with

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with meeting rules and regulations in our various jurisdictions?

Matt Larwood: It's a good question. So there's 2 ways that we do that. A lot of our customers have legal counsel themselves, so we tap into what they know. But we've also employed our own legal counsel. We've actually had our legal counsel for quite a while, but progressively more and more of her time is spent on strata. And so we also keep across podcasts such as yours. We're a member of the SCA across most of the country. So we're getting all the feeds with regards to changes in legislation. And we reach out and ask the questions. And we have hundreds of conversations every month with people who are all in the know.

So we synthesize all that information, and then we road test our solution to make sure that it's keeping up with the changes that are appearing. So, yes, it's a difficult task because each state has its nuances. Each state has its nuances from a terminology point of view as well, which means that for it to be a good fit, we've got to make sure that our platform also understands that in Western Australia, you don't have a committee, you have a council of owners. And then you have a body corporate and owners cooperation and all those kinds of things like that.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. A big task, but we are definitely glad that you have taken it on. What is your prediction, Matt, for the next big tech innovation, if I can call it that, for our strata community?

Matt Larwood: I'm not necessarily sure whether there's any big bang stuff out on the horizon. From my perspective, it's things which I think are fundamental to good technology. And that is integration. Making sure that the platform is user friendly. One of the big things that we've noticed is that there's a real lack of availability of data for strata management companies. And without fantastic data, it's very difficult to make decisions. It's very difficult to know what's going on in their own businesses, what's going on in the industry. Of course, there's the Macquarie Report, which is pretty good, but it tends to be fairly high level.

So I think the next big thing is going to be just a combination of better integration, providing a better outcome for lot owners and committee members, the ability to strip away manual processes through automation, giving people back their time to spend meeting with their customers and providing excellent customer service. No doubt there's people who talk about AI and VR and all sorts of things like that. And that's all ... some of that stuff is here and now, some of that is sort of in the future. But yes, it's essentially, it's also making sure the platform is current and continuing to invest in it so that it continues to meet people's needs well into the future.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Not being distracted, necessarily, by the next big thing, but focusing on what you do well and making it better. That's often the hardest thing, isn't it?

Matt Larwood: Well, we have that internal struggle all the time. There's so many things that we could do, but we've always maintained that whilst we'll continue to broaden what we do, we're better off focusing on one aspect as opposed to getting distracted by all the things that we could do. And I think that's why we've got a feature rich, sophisticated, easy-to-use, very effective platform, is because we've not allowed ourselves to get too distracted. And I think that there's heaps of people looking at the industry of building great customer portals and building facilities management software and those types of things like that, and that's fantastic. We'll pretty much stick to the workflow that we're focusing on and continue to do a great job of that. And then everybody will be a little bit better off.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Good on you. I am definitely seeing your platform being used by more and more Strata Managers that I'm working with, and buildings. I'm seeing that logo pop up in my inbox. Is there anything, Matt, that you want to add that we haven't quite covered, that you want to make sure our listeners hear? And definitely let everybody know how to get in touch with you if they're interested to find out more about StrataVote.

Matt Larwood: Yes. Okay. To the first question, be open to change. The industry is changing very, very rapidly, and if people aren't open to change, then they'll find themselves having the change forced upon them. And a big part of that is adopting technology, which is not easy, but I think people just need to, might sound like a cliché to say, move with the times. But it's not that scary if the technology's well designed and it's designed to suit Strata Manager's needs, then it shouldn't be too difficult. So be

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open to change, be open to putting yourself into a little bit of an uncertain situation, but come out the other end smiling and in a better place.

Take your team members along for the ride. And team members include internal team members and external stakeholders. Take them along for the ride when you're adopting change, because that's going to make life a lot easier if you're able to co-opt people and bring them along with you. So that's a couple of things that I'd just like to add. Keep your eyes out for more and more cool features that we're building over the next 12 months. And if people would like to contact us, the best thing is to head over to our website, which is stratavote.com. And on our website, there's a fair bit of information regarding StrataVote. Also please check out StrataVote Anywhere. It's awesome. Maybe SVA could stand for StrataVote Awesome in the future as well.

Amanda Farmer: SVA. StrataVote Awesome.

Matt Larwood: StrataVote Anywhere. StrataVote Awesome. StrataVote Always.

Amanda Farmer: The ideas. Just keep going.

Matt Larwood: Head there and have a look around. And if anybody wants to reach out, then there's several ways. They can book in a demo or send us a message, and we'll certainly get back to people and happy to have a chat with anyone.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. Well, we will make sure that that link to your website is in the show notes for this episode. Thank you so much for taking the time out, Matt. I'm sure I'm sending you back now to a long list of things to do and client inquiries and troubleshooting and new work. So keep it up. As I said, we feel lucky to have you. Innovations like yours, helping us to do things better during these times and into the future. It's all good stuff.

Matt Larwood: Thanks, Amanda. I must reinforce that it's a team game here at StrataVote and I'm just a very small part. Sometimes an annoying part because I create work for other people, but certainly a team game and we're certainly up to the challenge. And we just love getting great outcomes and signing up new customers and having conversations. So please, I'd encourage everyone to get in touch for a chat.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. Thanks so much, Matt.

Matt Larwood: Thanks, Amanda. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Outro: Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners, reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at www.yourstrataproperty.com.au. You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?