

VOTE BY MAIL AUTOMATION

Improving Absentee Voting (Vote by Mail) Processes

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INTRODUCTION

The percentage of votes cast through Absentee Voting (or Vote by Mail/VBM as it is more commonly known) is steadily increasing in most of the United States. In response to this trend, many election officials are looking for ways to improve their efficiencies and reduce their processing costs, while improving process integrity, transparency and responsiveness. Our observation is that much of the processing done today is manual and adopting proven automation practices can result in significant improvements across multiple areas of Absentee Voting/ Vote by Mail processing.

ABSTRACT

The National Conference of State Legislatures notes that 30 states and the District of Columbia offer a form of absentee voting that does not require a reason to be provided. Eight states and the District of Columbia offer permanent absentee voting.

Most jurisdictions that have recently adopted “no excuse” absentee voting see a sharp increase in voter preference for voting by mail in as few as two major election cycles. Other jurisdictions that have been “no excuse” for many years have seen a steady increase in the percentage of voters choosing to vote by mail year over year. Many jurisdictions realized that practices that were sufficient in a low volume environment became quickly overwhelmed with higher volumes resulting in delays and processing errors.

However, while the challenges facing election officials are clear, the awareness of relevant and available automation is low. This paper describes the key challenges faced, how standard automation practices from the mailing industry are applied to voting by mail, and the associated benefits.

PROCESSING CHALLENGES

Some of the relevant processing challenges that are effectively addressed by automation are:

- » Processing Time: While mail typically arrives from voters over a three to four week period, a large percentage of mail typically comes in during the last two or three days of election processing. It is extremely difficult for existing staff to process this in a timely manner in addition to their other election duties and there is often a heavy dependency on temporary staff and/or delays in processing VBM responses.
- » Training and Staffing: An increased volume of VBM ballot requires a corresponding increase in temporary staff when processing is done manually. Since elections are periodic events, it can be a challenge to staff the required number of people. As staff sizes increase, keeping everyone trained on the required processes for all stages (mail preparation, mailing, receiving, signature verification, exception handling etc.) can be extremely difficult.
- » Monitoring Compliance: With temporary staff and/or outsourced vendors undertaking key



processing tasks, it is important to monitor their activities carefully to ensure compliance with required processing standards and laws, as well as the maintenance of a verifiable audit trail. A manual process will require a greater effort to provide effective oversight

- » Avoiding Mismatched Contents: The contents that need to be included in each voter's package could vary depending on multiple factors such as precinct, language, party affiliation, etc. Ensuring that the right contents are included in each package can be very time consuming and error prone with a manual process.
- » Tracking the Status of Individual Ballot Packages: There are periods where there may not be visibility to the status of the ballot packages (for example during the delivery process within USPS), or during the incoming processing of the ballots. This makes it challenging to know if the delivery of the ballots is proceeding per plan, or to respond accurately to a voter that is requesting the status of their mail that is returned. There are situations where a voter may have dropped off their ballot using a drop location, and the status will not be available until it is processed manually.
- » Signature Verification and Other Verification Steps: Verification steps to be performed such as validating the unique barcode identifier for the ballot envelope, thickness verification and signature comparison consume more time as the processing volume increases.
- » Precinct Sorting and Opening: Some jurisdictions require the ballot envelopes to be sorted by precinct prior to extracting the ballot for tabulation, whereas others that are not required to sort by precinct may choose to do so for ease of recounts or manual auditing. In most jurisdictions, it is possible to open the ballot envelopes only

during the last few days of the election. Both of these steps can result in significant increases of manual labor for staging and oversight

- » Exception Reporting and Handling: Ballot envelopes that are assigned an exception code, either due to a mismatch (or absence) of signatures or due to other status changes based on county rules may require priority processing. With a manual process, it can be very time consuming to locate and separate out these envelopes. Ballot packages that could not be delivered to the voter by the USPS form another category requiring special handling.

AUTOMATION OPTIONS

There are various software and hardware automation options applicable to different stages of VBM processing based on best practices in high integrity commercial mail handling:

- » Address Quality: Software products that utilize change of address data provided by the USPS and cleanse addresses to fix insufficient or incorrect information will help to reduce undeliverable mail, and will help the USPS deliver

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mail efficiently. These functions are available integrated with software that can assign the right USPS barcodes to enable the best possible delivery timeframe within the USPS network.

- » Mail Preparation: High integrity automated inserting machines are available in the market today with the ability to validate that the right contents are included in each ballot package, while creating the ballot packages very efficiently with minimal human intervention.

The systems are typically modular and depending on the options chosen, the system will be able to:

- Import a database that consists of the unique barcode identifiers for all the ballot envelopes to be sent out as well as the specific contents that should go into each ballot package.
- Validate that the right contents have been inserted into the ballot package during the creation process, by either reading markings or barcodes on each of the contents or by noting the station from which each of the contents are taken.

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- Print a unique barcode provided by the county's registration system, USPS barcode and delivery address information (including other data specific to the ballot package) inline, as part of the process.
- Perform an inline quality check at the end of the ballot package creation process to validate that the right contents are included, and that the barcode and address data were printed correctly. If incorrect, the envelope will be diverted and the operator can recreate the rejected item.
- Outgoing Sorting: The USPS provides significant discounts for submitting mail that is presorted, while enabling the best possible delivery timelines. This could be accomplished through one of the following means, both of which can be integrated with the mail preparation process and data:
- Using presort software that will organize the print file used for mail preparation to obtain the best postage rates. This software will generate the necessary electronic and/or paper documentation necessary to submit the mail to the USPS.

- Using an automated sorting system after the ballot packages are prepared and addressed. The same sorting system could be used for incoming ballot processing and/or for processing other mail.

» Item-level tracking: Software products are available that can track unique ballot envelopes at various stages of the mail lifecycle covering mail preparation, outgoing sorting, delivery to the voter, return to the voter and incoming processing. The level of interaction between the different stages will vary by product, but it is possible to track individual items through all of these stages.

» Incoming Verification Sorting: A system can be configured to gain significant efficiencies by accomplishing the following activities in a minimum number of passes through the system:

- High-speed precinct sorting, at speeds ranging from under 5,000 envelopes/ hour to over 40,000 pieces/hour, depending on the throughput needs.
- Inline or offline automated signature verification that compares the signature on the envelope with the reference signature in the voter registration record, including the identification of situations where the voter forgot to sign.
- Validation of the barcode identifier, to confirm that the ballot belongs to the right election, and that it is an envelope that was sent out. This step also includes a check for any pre-existing challenge reason codes, and the ability to sort out problem pieces.
- Ensuring that the thickness corresponds to the right number of contents that should be in the ballot package (and does not contain multiple ballots)
- Selective opening if all other criteria are acceptable and it is within the allowable period where the envelope can be opened.
- Print a date and time stamp on each envelope processed

BENEFITS

» Time savings: Automation at one or more stages can result in significant savings in the time to completion, without sacrificing integrity because the process involves a verifiable paper

trail. This is most important for incoming ballot processing, where multiple verification steps can be performed concurrent with precinct sorting, resulting in ballot tabulation being able to be started earlier than ever before. Consequently, results from automated absentee voting/ Vote by Mail ballot processing could be obtained very quickly as compared to a manual processing.

- » Minimizes training and staffing needs: The labor savings from automation enables a sharp reduction in the number of temporary staff utilized for election processing. This reduces the associated training costs as well as the direct

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labor costs. In many jurisdictions, election officials are able to complete processing themselves or with only a moderate increase in temporary staffing.

- » Minimizes risk and monitoring needs: Fewer manual tasks result in fewer manual errors, and fewer people involved in the process results in reduced monitoring needs. Monitoring an automated system is easier both for election officials and observers. Lookup and query tools are available that can assist in getting relevant information to aid quality checks.
- » Improved integrity of ballot packages: Automated inserters can provide several integrated security checks as well as an item-level audit trail to confirm the pieces produced. Incoming mail

processing can apply date and time stamps and create detailed records to capture the history of various processing steps.

- » Improved visibility into all stages of the process: With item-level tracking throughout the different stages of the lifecycle, it is possible to identify bottlenecks and address them correctly, while being able to respond appropriately to voter requests for status updates.
- » Fast response to exceptions and undeliverable mail: Automation provides the ability to quickly separate items that are non-compliant and require immediate action, be it a situation where a voter forgot to sign, a signature mismatch or undeliverable mail. Exceptions can be identified earlier, enabling election officials to contact the voter and resolve the situation faster than ever before.

CONCLUSION

Automating Vote by Mail processes can provide significant benefits to jurisdictions looking to boost their performance while reducing costs and maintaining high levels of process integrity. Leveraging high integrity products and best practices from the commercial mailing industry can result in proven, affordable solutions that can transform a jurisdiction's absentee voting/ Vote by Mail processing.

To learn more about Bell and Howell Vote by Mail solutions, call us at 1-800-220-3030 or email us at marketing@bhemail.com.

ABOUT BELL AND HOWELL

Bell and Howell, LLC builds industry-leading products for simplifying your Absentee Voting/ Vote by Mail process. Our products cover data quality, outgoing mail preparation, USPS tracking and incoming mail processing that includes automated signature verification and precinct sorting. Since 2007, we have successfully deployed our products in several jurisdictions and look forward to working with election officials nationwide.

Our Absentee Voting/ Vote by Mail products are based on our proven product platforms. With over 2300 systems installed and several decades of serving multiple industries, we have the depth and expertise to offer the right solution for mail related challenges.



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