



And the Oscar for most secretive vote goes to ...

KARLIN LILLINGTON

There is no technology used to count Oscar votes – but security is tight and the process is shrouded in secrecy

IN THIS much-anticipated election, technology is shunned. Although electronic ballots have been suggested in the past, once again this year all ballots will be filled in manually by the voters, and then all will be carefully hand-counted.

And no one will know the result until this weekend, when those famous words are heard: "And the Oscar goes to..."

"It's really quite straightforward. PricewaterhouseCoopers has been counting master ballots for the Oscars for 77 years now, and both we and the Academy are very comfortable with hand counting," says Brad Oltmanns, a PwC partner and one of only two people – the other is his colleague Rick Rosas – who will know the winners in advance of Sunday's Academy Awards extravaganza.

The reasons for eschewing the technology you might expect for the annual Hollywood event are simple, he says.

"One, it does guarantee 100 per cent accuracy. You don't have to worry about a machine eating a ballot. And two, it also ensures 100 per cent security," because there is no chance that data can be hacked.

Oltmanns says every year his Oscar-counting team, which includes four other hand-picked PwC employees ("an incredibly coveted role within PwC"), is amazed to see at least one story that will claim someone has hacked into the computers that hold the final list of Oscar winners. Such a list and such a computer simply don't exist.

Instead, the team waits for 5,755 voting Academy members to return the final ballots sent out to them on February 2nd (he won't say how many actually come back, but notes "there's of very high percentage return").

The deadline to receive them was 5pm on Tuesday in Los Angeles. On Wednesday morning, the six employees will have met at a secret location and began the hand count,

putting in "long days, long days" and about 1,700 hours to sort through the 24 categories of nominations and have a final list – checked, double checked, even triple and quadruple checked – ready by today.

The entire process is highly secretive, done on a need-to-know basis that would impress the international covert intelligence community. Only Oltmanns and Rosas know any – and all – of the results. Oltmanns says the four team members only ever see a proportion of ballots in any category and are forbidden to discuss their results with other team members.

"We make sure the sub-totals add up to the total number received as a check against someone misplacing a ballot. We ask people to double check. Then Rick and I double check their work and if it's a close race in a category, we might check three or four times."

But the secrecy and security doesn't end there. PwC prepares two separate sets of envelopes containing the category winners and places them into separate briefcases, which are then driven individually to the ceremony via secret routes, accompanied in one car by Oltmanns and in the other by Rosas. They are guarded by an off-duty police officer at all times.

And on top of all that, the two commit the entire list of winners to memory, just in case – an extra measure that goes back to a 1960s Oscars where a presenter was giving out two awards and accidentally gave the first winner the envelope for the second category along with a statue. Presenters are no longer given two envelopes.

On the night of the awards, Oltmanns and Rosas will be standing with all the envelopes at opposite ends of the stage, where they will hand the relevant envelope to whatever celebrity is doing the category presentation. They will each have a full set, it just in case there's some last-minute change to the program or a mix-up about what side someone is supposed to enter from.

Do they get star-crossed, surrounded by so many famous film celebrities?

Oltmanns laughs. "If you were to ever see us standing at the side of the stage, you'd see that instead of looking at all of them, we are looking at the envelopes. We don't want anything to happen to that envelope before it goes out on stage."

The stars themselves don't engage in much chit chat, either. Those that are getting ready to go out onto the stage "are very seriously focused on what they're going to do". They might be fixing their appearance or going over the ceremony script, which is contained in a large book backstage.

"I've heard some say that it's a lot harder than making a film, in terms of there being no second take. Plus,



Jeff Bridges receives an Oscar for Best Actor his role in *Crazy Heart* at last year's Academy Awards and ballot counters Brad Oltmanns and Rick Rosas from PwC on the red carpet at the ceremony

they are the focus of everyone's attention, and everything they do and say and how they look and what they're wearing is being scrutinised."

Some of the newer stars definitely are a bit nervous each year, he says. It's the old hands who've done the ceremony a couple of times who tend to be the most relaxed and chatty with others backstage.

When the last envelope goes out, they are all relieved.

Still, it's a pretty glamorous night for a couple of accountants, he says.

"It's something we have a lot of fun with," he says. "I'd be lying if I didn't say I enjoyed seeing the celebrities up close and in person. It's interesting to see someone you admire and whose movies you've enjoyed."

Spouses also get invited to watch the full ceremony in the audience and afterwards, they all get to attend one of the big parties of the evening, the governor's ball. "It's my one chance at redemption each year," he jokes.

In the seven years that he's been involved with the ballot count, Oltmanns says he's also enjoyed learning a lot about the craft of movie making from talking to Academy members.

And do they intend to keep the manual methods of counting, or might the Academy consider electronic or online ballots in the future?

"They have talked about it, and continue to talk about it. One of the things they'll probably consider is having the movies distributed online to Academy members," he says. "But we're happy with the system that exists."

