Paperless Office: A New Name to Technology

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Abstract
Going paperless can immediately affect your company’s bottom line. We all know that “time is money”, but it is still less expensive than real estate. An expanding business can fit more workers into space once occupied by filing cabinets and record rooms. Plus, electronic records are easier to search and retrieve, meaning that if you can digitize more of your paperwork, you can probably operate more efficiently.

Keywords
Papless, Technology, Business, Less paper, Storage, Security, Solutions, Office

I. Introduction

A. Green Business
The term ‘green businesses’ is defined by Smith (2003) as businesses and practices that are viewed as environmentally sound, including the use of organic and natural products to build factories, tighter protection against emissions and environmentally friendly sourcing of materials. Zsolnai (2002) defines green business as a business that has adopted the concept of environmentalism across the various functions of the business. Gilbert (2007) identifies a green business activity as any activity that is performed in a manner that has either limited negative ecological impact or directly benefits the natural environment in some way. Morebusiness.com (2009) describes a green business as using less natural resources to complete the tasks needed and using sustainable methods and materials such as recycling (paper, plastic, electronics, glass and aluminum) and using sustainable products (recycled, plant-based or organically grown).

B. Paperless or Less Paper?
As long ago as the late 20th century, people began talking about the possibility of a “paperless office.” The first prediction of the paperless office was actually introduced in an article in Business Week in 1975 on “The Office of the Future.” It became a buzzword in the 1980s. It coincided with the advent of the personal computer, and the hope was that all documents could be processed electronically and that paper would become irrelevant. Since then, a number of technologies have made it seem within our grasp chief among them desktop publishing, the web, e-mail, XML, content management systems, e-books, and more. Today, digital information flies around the world and into, through and out of our organizations, is managed and secured in digital repositories and drives business at lightning-fast speeds. But has paper disappeared? Not at all! Actually, paper consumption is still increasing, soaring to extremely high levels. Paper continues to predominate in activities that involve knowledge work, reading and collaboration. Paper is becoming a more temporary medium as people print, use and discard documents rather than keeping everything they print. Paper has become a display medium for human collaboration.

Over the past thirty years, many people have proclaimed the imminent arrival of the paperless office. Yet even the World Wide Web, which allows almost any computer to read and display another computer’s documents, has increased the amount of printing done. The use of e-mail in an organization causes an average 40 percent increase in paper consumption. In The Myth of the Paperless Office, Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper use the study of paper as a way to understand the work that people do and the reasons they do it the way they do. Using the tools of ethnography and cognitive psychology, they look at paper use from the level of the individual up to that of organizational culture. Central to Sellen and Harper’s investigation is the concept of “affordances” -- the activities that an object allows, or affords. The physical properties of paper (it’s being thin, light, porous, opaque, and flexible) afford the human actions of grasping, carrying, folding, writing, and so on. The concept of affordance allows them to compare the affordances of paper with those of existing digital devices. They can then ask what kinds of devices or systems would make new kinds of activities possible or better support current activities. The authors argue that paper will continue to play an important role in office life. Rather than pursue the ideal of the paperless office, we should work toward a future in which paper and electronic document tools work in concert and organizational processes make optimal use of both. So, despite all of the advances and all of the talk and promises, we’re still using a lot of paper, and the vision of a paperless office is looking more and more like an illusion.

The average office worker uses 10,000 sheets of copy paper each year according to Reduce.org. Multiply that by the number of employees you have, and you can see how going paperless could save your business money. Of course, doing business using much less paper is easier said than done. Anyone working in the office of a lawyer, accountant, or health care company can tell you: the paperless office is still for many elusive, buried under ever increasing stacks of paper. But with careful planning, the dream of the paperless office can be a reality. This step-by-step guide will present you with strategies for weaning your office off paper, one step at a time.

1. Assess how likely it is that you will be able to go paperless.
2. Set a deadline.
3. Hire an outside firm and buy new equipment.
4. Replace your invoices.
5. Store key documents.
6. Identify your “super-users.”
7. Pat yourself on the back.

C. Reasons to Go Paperless
• Easy storage: With a digital document management system in place, all documents that come into your office can immediately be scanned and electronically stored, making it easy to send them electronically to everyone who needs it.
• Automatic audit trail: Increasingly, businesses need to adhere to strict guidelines on compliance and need to store records for many years. With a digital document management system, there are no limits to the amount of documents you can store, and every document will have a unique number – automatically generating an audit trail. This also gives the ability to make changes to documents and still keep the original, helping with compliance and audit guidelines.
• Time savings: It is no longer necessary to waste time looking for documents. Document searches can be done quickly and gives results in seconds. All the documents are stored in the same organized manner, and are easy to retrieve.

• Simplicity: With a digital document management system, you can simplify many business processes. Users can action or authorize tasks and transfer data with the touch of a button. Ordering goods and authorizing invoices, are just two of the best examples of daily tasks that become more efficient when done digitally.

• Accessibility: Digital document management lets you create security settings and give all authorized users the ability to view the same document. This makes it easy when more than one user needs access to a single document or in cases when the company is on multiple sites.

• Business development: With time saved, executives can spend their time more productively, on developing the business. According to the YouGov survey, 30% of business managers and directors would spend the time they save on business development.

• Security: A digital document management system stores the documents on secure servers. This means that only authorized users are able to retrieve the documents, making it more secure than paper, which could fall in the wrong hands.

• Better customer service: A digital document management system allows you to access all customer data, retrieving information such as customer orders and documents, allowing your business to proactively provide customer service, and respond to enquiries faster.

• Email efficiency: A digital document management system that communicates with your server-based email system will allow you to save emails into the system just like any other document, making it easy for you to search your email history.

• ROI: Businesses do not need to spend a lot of capital in order to have a digital document management system. There are cost effective choices that will allow you to see a return on investment in as little as 6 months.

1. Challenges for making an office Paperless

Having a review about what are the various issues that hinders an organization for going paperless are as follows:

• Online security. Once we decided to go paperless, we then needed to be certain that our data was backed up at a few off-site locations. What if the building burned down? What if the off-site server went corrupt? While highly unlikely that these things would happen, we felt the need to develop a plan to address that possibility. Thank goodness for cloud-based technology, this resolved this problem very efficiently.

• Storage of paper files. In evaluating our options, we were • technology, this resolved this problem very efficiently.

1. Economical Solutions

• Savings on paper costs (obviously!) but also on all related stationery costs such as folders, furniture (e.g. filing cabinets), pens and pencils, staples, envelopes.

• Savings on office/storage space thanks to electronic storage — at a time where office space costs can become astronomical!

• Savings on time: Studies also show that administrative staff can spend up to 30% of their time organizing and filing.

D. Some Useful Solutions Out of Making an Office Paperless

There have been talks for over forty years about achieving paperless offices – the holy grail of the business world – and though companies have reduced their consumption of paper in the office, thanks to the increasing rate of conversion to electronic tools (tablets, smart phones, wireless, broadband, laptops...) – the paperless office is still to be achieved. Going from a classic office environment with trays, filing cabinets, archive rooms, fax machines, printers and photocopiers at every floor to a digital working environment can be a challenging experience in which everybody in the company needs to join the cause and buy in the new process. For older generations of employees, it may be harder to get rid of their ocean of hard copies to embrace the on-screen filling in, reading and filing — whereas younger, tech-savvy staff will take it in their stride. The question is not to get rid of any paper – some people do prefer holding a hard copy and who would deny a customer’s request? – Other services still need to use paper especially where staff design, proofread or edit. At a time of budget reduction and lesser outlets, it is worth considering converting your work area to a paperless place and reap the multiple benefits: economical, environmental, efficiency and security—not mentioning the pleasure of looking at neat work spaces, rid of paper trays and overflowing bins.
2. Environmental Solutions
- Save the forests! Though 80% of paper now used is now recycled paper, reducing one’s consumption would greatly benefit the environment.
- Whatever paper and ink you use can be recycled; you can try and bring together other local businesses to save on waste disposal costs.

3. Efficiency Solutions
- Electronic documents are often far easier to retrieve and share.
- Handling time is dramatically cut: Staff does not need to print, stuff, stamp and post daily dozens of documents, whether letters, pay slips or invoices – all are sent and filed directly from the computer – with shorter and more reliable delivery times.
- Bespoke forms: adopting digital documents makes it easier to standardize forms and work habits throughout the different services or subsidiaries, whether local or international.
- Planning is easier: deliveries, chasing, correspondence, etc. – all can be automated to be sent or archived at a given date.

4. Security Solutions
- Password protection and dedicated server areas for services keep things private wherever needed.
- A daily back-up grants peace of mind in case there is computer or network failure – there will only be 24 hours of work to catch-up with in case of a digital disaster – far better than years of catching up in case the office burns or the wrong papers are disposed of.

II. Conclusion
Converting to a paperless office requires a long-term preparation both internally and externally. Businesses will need to engage staff and external partners (suppliers, clients...) and to prepare the organisation: arranging and password protecting your server into relevant areas, finding a good back-up system, scanning of documents and digital archiving, find a process to name and store documents so that they can be easily retrieved in the future, group databases and train employees and managers. Managers may need to invest in a document managing system to help the company with the transition and facilitate the capture, indexing, storage, retrieval, search and access to documents. Centralizing the printing to one powerful copier/printer/scanner (set by default on using both sides of a sheet of paper) instead of using different printers in each service will help reduce costs and the use of paper; it will also generate data on how much is printed, wasted, and who are the biggest paper users. And on a lighter note, when employees need to get up and walk to retrieve their printed documents, they think twice before pressing the “print” button. Businesses will need to think about how and when to dispose of old documents – Make sure they find the right partners to help with recycling or shredding in big quantities and in compliance with the local regulations. Communication with external partners (customers, suppliers and other service providers) will be crucial to control the amount of incoming paper – this can be achieved by getting taken off mailing lists and opting for electronic delivery of invoices, bank statements, and utility bills, pay slips etc. This methodological planning and organisation may at first glance seem overwhelming and time-consuming, especially when staff must first dedicate themselves to their daily activities and core business; however there is always the option to delegate the task to external consultants who, thanks to their knowledge and experience, will recommend bespoke solutions, encompassing if needed software and organizational processes for the company.

References