

filing and storage

Paper cuts?

Even though technology has evolved and we are increasingly using e-mail to communicate, people are still falling back into traditional ways. From printing off e-mail messages to 'keep records up to date,' to sending documents through the post, rather than attachments on an e-mail. Jessica Marshall-Davies of Triumph Business Systems thinks the ideal of the paperless office is further away than ever before.

The first paperless office was opened in the Spring of 1979. Designed by a management consultant as a model of the office of the future, the building in Washington DC was filled with the first generation of electronic scanners, microfiche readers and other products.

As legend has it, the launch demonstration was going extremely well until a phone rang. The tour guide sat down to answer the call, listened to the person on the other end and then sheepishly asked if anyone had a piece of paper.

It was a sign of things to come. A quarter of a century later we are no nearer to realising the paperless ideal of those early pioneers. In fact, we are further away than ever before. It is estimated that since 1979, the amount of paper used in offices has gone up by some 600% and continues to increase at up to 20% a year. Industry analysts now estimate that over 90% of business information is still stored on paper.

What happened?

The reason appears to be very simple. Far from reducing the amount of paper we use, technology increases it. A quick walk through any office reveals the paper hot spots that spring up around printers, copiers, faxes and scanners. Far from replacing paper, it is the machines that let us use even more of it. As is

so often the case, technology has an unintended consequence as the people who use the systems subvert the manufacturers' best intentions.

Even e-mail has failed to stem this wave of paper. E-mail may have cut down on the number of letters we send and receive, but it has also led to an increase in the amount of paper we all use. In the past, memo writing was time-consuming and the number of copies limited by the difficulties associated with cumbersome typewriters, awkward typists and messy carbon paper. Filing was often centralised with just one or two copies available.

Then came photocopiers and it became possible to communicate with larger numbers of people. Now we have e-mail and networks and the memo writer doesn't even have to print anything out. But guess what? Many of the recipients end up printing the e-mails out for their own files anyway. The storage of individual pieces of information is decentralised and duplicated dozens, sometimes

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hundreds of times.

You shouldn't really find a filing manufacturer complaining about this. More paper means more storage systems. But we recognise that this situation has to be managed for lots of reasons. For individuals, dealing with the sheer amount of information can be overwhelming and time consuming; for organisations, it means allocating valuable floorspace to filing what may be duplicates of the same information, and of having a workforce that spends too much time dealing with information rather than using it.



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Add in the ecological implications of paper usage and there is a real need for the more enlightened management of this deepening morass of information.

Holistic approach

This is a complex problem that needs a sophisticated solution. That is why an increasing number of organisations are taking a holistic approach to the issue. They are training people to better understand the way information works, when to print something off, when to send, delete or respond to an e-mail (preferably immediately), what to file and where and how. They are encouraging people to talk to each other for a change, sometimes by enforcing e-mail free days. And they are raising awareness of the environmental problems caused by the indiscriminate proliferation of paper.

None of this will result in a paperless office for most of us. We clearly love paper far too much for that to ever become a reality. But these measures might just be the first steps in learning how to better manage the knowledge that technology generates and dissipates on our behalf. ■



Dealing with the sheer amount of information can be overwhelming