

The Paperless Office



People have been talking about the ‘paperless’ office for at least two decades, yet progress is very slow. Recent research by Iron Mountain found that only one per cent of European organisations had achieved something that could be called a ‘paperless’ working environment. Worldwide, information industry organisation AIIM found that only 24 per cent of organisations have any programmes in place towards a paperless office and that paper consumption is increasing in 19 per cent of organisations.

Nor is it just the commercial sector that is dragging its heels: the public sector has a long way to go too. For instance, YouGov research found that 80 per cent of UK organisations print documents out just to get signatures and this figure rises to over 90 per cent in the public sector, making it the worst culprit of all the organisational categories surveyed.

All these research statistics underline a gap between intent and achievement that should be considered by any organisation wishing to improve its sustainability efforts through ‘greener’ offices. While there are some moves afoot – for instance the NHS’ mission to be paperless by 2018 – specific programmes and commitment to reducing office paper consumption is far from universal in the public sector.

WRAP’s Green Office Guide says that the average office workers uses up to 45 sheets of paper per day, of which around half is considered waste. Printing on paper accounts for around 10 per cent of total ICT-related energy consumption in UK organisations. That paper then has to be stored, shredded or disposed of in another manner. Of course, some of it is recyclable, but given the energy costs involved in that process, it is probably better to avoid paper use in the first place.

In the US, research from K2 shows that an average four drawer file cabinet containing 15-20,000 pages costs \$25,000 to fill and \$2,000 to maintain. Clearly those figures are going to be different for the UK and its public sector, but it does provide a sense of scale for the overall problem. Then there are the other costs that surround the use paper at any point during a business process: buying paper, posting (or couriering) paper documents, scanning, etc.

Return on investment

On the plus side, when organisations do adopt paperless processes, AIIM found that the payback is generally achieved within 18 months. Even better, when digital signatures are introduced as part of paperless workflows, return on investment is less than one year in the majority of cases.

However, it’s not just about the tangible cost benefits and environmental arguments: there are some ‘soft’ issues too. AIIM’s ‘Winning the Paper Wars’ found that over 40 per cent of processes are interrupted by the need to collect a physical signature (in other words, ‘manually’ signing a piece of paper), adding 3.1 days on average to most processes. That makes sense when considering an example such as a contract: print, post or fax, await signature, counter-sign, send on to the next person in the process, repeat until finished.

Also, paper just does not lend itself well to future retrieval. According to Going Paperless from K2, 70% of time is spent processing paper; 90% of documents are paper; 7.5% of documents are lost; 15% of documents are misplaced; 30% of the work day is spent searching for hardcopy documents; and 30% of documents contain obsolete information. These are US-based figures and again, may not be exactly the same in the UK, but just think how much time many of us waste looking for the right document?

Overcoming the barriers

So, given the amount of time and money that could be saved by introducing paperless processes into a sustainable office strategy, let’s now focus on what is stopping the UK public sector from adopting paperless offices.

Some of the reasons are obvious, others less so: for instance, the previously mentioned example of printing out documents

just to get them signed. Some organizations are still hesitant to automate their signature-dependent processes even though there is powerful testimony to the fact that digital signatures are a robust and secure way to remove paper from a business process. In fact, digital signatures are legally enforceable and supported by a raft of local and international legislation and standards.

For example, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is using digital signatures to sign over 500,000 letters per year. About 200 of the 760 employees at the ECHR now digitally sign documents on a regular basis, as part of a fully automated paperless workflow system that enables the Court to keep its hundreds of thousands of annual cases on track. Documents – which can be in any one of 1000 templates within the court’s OpenText eDocs system – are typically in Word or PDF.

With just a couple of clicks, authorisers can insert a time-stamped, verifiably genuine signature that is tamper-proof and remains part of the document for its entire life. The originator of the request is notified automatically once the document is signed by all the required authorisers, and the signed electronic document is then published directly into the court’s online repository. This means that the information, including the signature’s certificate of authenticity, can be easily accessed should there be a query about it.

Concludes John Hunter, Head of ECHR’s IT department: “The idea of switching from ink to digital signatures can be a cultural challenge, but its benefits are indisputable. Using digital signatures along with our workflow and document management systems means that we can process applications more efficiently and rapidly, helping us to serve European citizens the best way we can. I estimate we’ve digitally signed around three million letters since we started using digital signatures six years ago.”

Business process transformation

The ECHR is a good example of an organisation that is using a range of technology tools to enable better process management and at the same time, reduce paper consumption. Business process, ediscovery, document management and content management tools are – by and large – able to help users eliminate paper from the workflow, yet many organisations are not using these tools to their best advantage.

Indeed, the potential effectiveness of these systems is negatively affected by the fact that users often need to break the digital process and unnecessarily revert to using paper-based documents when they require a signature. Of course, paper documents can be scanned in, but once again, that is laborious, usually expensive, and depends on a highly sophisticated ediscovery system in order to retrieve that information at a later date.

There is of course a huge cultural issue here as well: much of the workforce today has been using paper for years. Yet we need to ask ourselves why do we really need to print? The quality of digital displays means that electronic content is a lot easier to read than it used to be. I’m certain that the next generation is going to be far less inherently dependent on paper and indeed, mobile workers – who depend on laptops, tablets and smartphones to keep in touch – are already far less likely to use paper than their office-based colleagues.

Seven practical starting points

There are some initial steps that any public sector organization can start doing straight away with the goal of reducing paper consumption.

1. Carry out a paper audit – where is paper being used in your organization, by who, when and why.
2. Build a business case – WRAP’s Green Office Guide has models that you can use to calculate the financial cost of paper in the office.
3. Find heroes – locate people in the organisation who care about this issue, turn them into champions and establish a paper-free committee.
4. Evaluate how technology can help remove paper from processes - Content, collaboration, document and business process management tools, many of which are probably already in place somewhere in your organisation.
5. Investigate digital signatures – map processes that require signatures and determine how you can use signature automation as an alternative to physical signatures.
6. Reduce the equipment that encourages paper-consumption – reduce the number of filing cabinets and encourage online storage; eliminate personal printers and make people have to walk to centralised ones (the extra effort may just stop them printing unnecessarily); use e-faxing software rather than paper-based fax machines.
7. Talk to your suppliers and customers – encourage them to submit content digitally to reduce the volume of paper coming into your organisation in the first place.

Some of these are quite major steps for any public sector organisation to take, while some require less of a cultural upheaval. Digital signatures, for instance, are pretty simple to implement and provide an immediate, tangible benefit. Similarly, looking at ways in which to use existing IT systems in order to cut paper out of processes has the additional benefit of improving return on investment. No-one has ever claimed that it's easy to establish a paperless office, but it is not impossible and, at the very least, paper reduction should be the goal of any public sector organisation that has a focus on sustainability.

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