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BUSINESSES MAY BE SEEING END OF PAPER TRAIL

The paperless age envisioned as the computer age took off may finally be coming into being

In the heady early days of the computer era, futurists imagined the coming of the paperless society. So far, ordinary people have proven them wrong.

Paper use in the United States has steadily risen, with office workers hitting the print command to produce reams of e-mails, reports and other documents. Many of those documents end up in desk drawers or file cabinets, often forgotten even by the people who printed them.

But the pattern could finally be changing. InfoTrends Inc., a Massachusetts-based consulting firm for the digital imaging industry, has forecast that 2007 will be turn out to be the high point for per-capita use of "cut-size sheets" of paper in the United States. In 2008, the organization predicts, each man, woman and child will use 4,847 sheets of the office paper, down from 4,883 sheets next year.

"No one is going to totally eliminate the use of paper, but more and more companies are realizing the benefits" of converting an increasing amount of paper into digital files, said Daryl Amy, president of Convergence Consulting, an Arkansas company that specializes in information management.

"This is happening more and more."

Paperless office systems --with records stored on computers instead of in file cabinets -- were until recently used primarily by large corporations and government agencies rather than small- and medium-sized businesses. Now, analysts say, falling computer storage costs and better electronic indexing systems are bringing paperless technologies to smaller companies.

Associated Business Systems, a Portland company that sells and services copy machines, fax machines and other office equipment, decided about three years ago to expand into paperless office systems.

The new business line made sense given what ABS was already doing. Many of the copiers it sells and services digitize documents as well as reproduce them. It was a simple matter to add information-management software --in ABS' case, a system called DocuWare --to the services the company sold.

Now information-management systems are 10 percent of the company's business, and its fastest-growing division.

Changes for companies

But ABS president Craig Knouf said corporate customers need to realize that cutting their paper use involves more than simply scanning pieces of paper rather than copying

them. Companies, he said, should rethink the way their work is organized from beginning to end if they want to maximize the gains.

"Document imaging is really about fundamentally changing the way you do business," he said.

In some cases, companies don't have any choice but to rethink their businesses.

The president of Design Craft Door Inc., a Clackamas firm that makes doors, drawer fronts and drawer boxes for the cabinet industry, is thankful he decided to go digital. The company, with 46 employees, was nearly wiped out by a fire in June that destroyed its equipment and paper records.

Luckily, an employee had spent three months in 2005 scanning those records --about 300 file boxes --into a computer. When company owner Dave Nelson arrived at the scene of the fire this summer, firefighters had pulled the company computers out of the building and put them in the parking lot, under a tarp.

The records had been backed up, and those tapes stored elsewhere. But having the computers allowed the company to set up in a new location and begin sending out invoices and paying bills within two days. "I see the day when we will go completely paperless," Nelson said. "Electronic data is so much easier to control than paper."

Educational users

The Oregon Education Association, which represents 46,000 state teachers and education support staff, uses a paperless document system to share information among 30 offices in 16 locations.

"You have to get it set up correctly in the beginning, but it saves a lot of time in the end," said Karyl Gothe, the labor union's office and administrative manager.

Each of the field offices now has instant access to legal documents stored on the central office's computers in Tigard, Gothe said, and membership applications are scanned into the system. The next steps are making government relations, education and accounting systems paperless. "I'm pretty excited about doing this," Gothe said.

Employees at Platt Electric Supply Inc., an electrical supply wholesaler with 95 branches in six Western states, are also excited about their paperless systems. Indeed, they show them off with a near religious enthusiasm.

"We wanted to find ways of eliminating waste and redundancy," said President Jay Platt. "If you have paper systems you have lots of people entering information, lots of times, in lots of locations. We wanted to find ways to have people do it once and never again."

Desks in the company's Beaverton headquarters are without drawers, and there are no signs of file cabinets. Matt Holt, the credit manager, last week showed a visitor a wall that two years ago was covered with file cabinets full of paper records. The records, scanned by two employees over a three-month period, are now stored on the company's computer disk rack, about 6 feet tall and 2 feet wide.

That rack has enough capacity to hold about one-quarter of the information in the U.S. Library of Congress, said Bill Currie, the company's chief information officer.

"I can't imagine going back to a paper-based system," Currie said. "To be able to collaborate electronically, rather than moving paper around manually, has been a huge productivity gain."

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