

# Pulp fiction?

Was the paperless office just fantasy...

IT'S 35 years since the idea was first mooted, but the concept of the "paperless office" still looks like a pipe dream rather than an imminent reality.

Take a quick look around your office and the likelihood is you'll see paper everywhere, in the shape of reports, invoices, statements, spread sheets.

The computer was supposed to signal the end of paper clutter. Surely when everything could be stored and sent electronically, filing cabinets and overflowing in-trays would become a relic of history?

But practice often lags behind the theory. Futurists envisaged a time when offices could be run using computers alone, with no paper at all. But the advent of new technology had the opposite effect. According to the 2001 book *The Myth of the Paperless Office* paper consumption **doubled** between 1980 and 2000.

So what happened? It seems rather than cutting down on the production of paper documents, all this new technology simply made it easier. Rather than having to

type out documents afresh, people could simply print out multiple copies of the electronic version. Email meant infinite copies of the same document could be dispatched all over the world at the touch of a button - and printed out by the recipients. The technology had changed but not the mindset. Workers still wanted a hard copy to flick through, mark with a red pen, and archive somewhere. Something wasn't real until they had it in their hands.

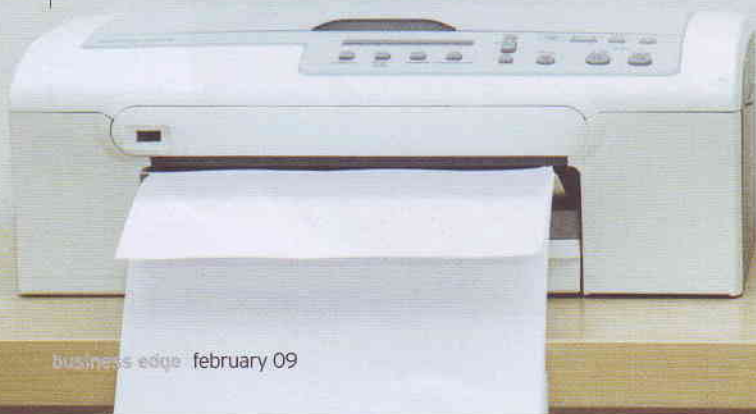
Take another look around your office. Now ask yourself how much of the paper you see is a print-out of information sent in an email. *The Myth of the Paperless Office* claimed e-mail increased paper usage by a massive 40 per cent.

The UK is the fifth largest consumer of paper in the world. A study by Fujitsu Siemens Computers, in October 2007, revealed how British offices were printing up to 120 billion pieces of paper every year, the equivalent of a paper mountain more than 8,000 miles high. The survey found the average British office worker printed out a 22 pages

every working day. More than half admitted to having printed the same document several times by mistake. Two in five had picked up someone else's printout by mistake and eight per cent said they had printed emails before even reading them. So much for the paperless office!

So has the dream of a digitalised office been a failure? On the face of it yes. But could there be signs of change? Some analysts say paper usage, in the office at least, has not only flattened off, but has been in steady decline ever since *The Myth of the Paperless Office* was published in 2001. It all

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depends whose figures you believe, but a recent article in the Economist quoted statistics from paper consultancy InfoTrends that showed US paper usage reducing from a peak of almost 150lbs per white-collar worker in 2000 to just about 125lbs in 2008. It is still an awful lot of dead trees, but the InfoTrends' data showed a year-on-year decline for seven years, suggesting an underlying trend was developing. Meanwhile figures compiled by the Confederation of Paper Industries, the UK organisation which represents the paper-related industries, also seem to show paper consumption levelling off, and declining slightly, in the UK since peaking eight years ago. Its data shows the UK used almost 13 million tonnes in 2000 compared to 12.1 million tonnes in 2007. So if paper consumption has peaked - what's the explanation?

One theory is that the cause is sociological rather than technological. Some analysts have pointed to a new generation of university graduates, who have grown up with email, word-processing and the internet, are driving the change. Unlike their older colleagues they are much happier to work entirely 'online' and will not print something out, unless they really need to.

**"A NEW GENERATION OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES, WHO HAVE GROWN UP WITH EMAIL, WORD-PROCESSING AND THE INTERNET, ARE DRIVING THE CHANGE"**

They are much more confident using digital information and make better use of its features - such as keyword searches, tagging documents so they can be filed into many different folders, and using online document sharing facilities. The whole process for them is more tidy, flexible and secure than dealing in paper.

Cliff Jenkins is the marketing director of Brighton-based Yoolaa, which provides small businesses with online phone and data-storing systems.

He thinks any reduction in paper use has more to do with the internet coming of age. He says the internet's next stage of development will be defined by the absence of paper. It will be about working anywhere at anytime.

He said: "You can't participate in Web 3.0 unless you are paperless. Web 3.0 uses technology which is around today, so that with a laptop, a 3G dongle to give you broadband access virtually anywhere in the UK, a VoIP telephone system and an internet-based corporate management system to keep your data in and shared with your colleagues, you can operate as if you are in your office anywhere, anytime."

It's too early to tell if the apparent decline in paper consumption will revive aspirations

## Waste not...

- On average 60-80% of office waste is paper (source: Envirowise)
- 115 billion sheets of paper are used annually for personal computers. (source: Worldwatch Institute)
- Office workers get through 50 sheets of paper a day (source: Envirowise)
- Recycling paper uses 60% less energy than manufacturing virgin timber paper. (Source: American Forest and Paper Association, November 1996)
- 3.1 billion sheets of paper used every month by office workers across the South East - enough to reach the moon and back laid end-to-end. (source: Envirowise)



for a truly paperless office. For the medium-term it looks like paper is here to stay. But while the paperless office may never come to pass - even if it were desirable - there are plenty of reasons why businesses should try to reduce their paper consumption, not least to save space and money. Perhaps the term "paperless office" is now best regarded as a simile for sustainable business practice - rather than a specific aim. ■

## Sustainable working

### Building awareness of technology

The use of computers and technology does not of course provide some magic wand to make all business processes sustainable, any more than it necessarily makes them more efficient. However, there is strong evidence that technology can be used to make business behaviour more sustainable.

Make the technology work for you. In order to achieve this, however, there has to be awareness at the outset in introducing new ways of working and online delivery of services and products. The "sustainability effect" can also be built into business plans for persuading investors, partners or employers of the worth of a project.

Make sure that you are letting your customers know why you are choosing to make the most of technology. For example, let them know how much paper you save by emailing letters to them rather than printing them. Ask customers to check drafts, invoices etc online or via email rather than sending hard copies - and tell them why you are trying to be paperless.

As a home based business it is always difficult to be available for your customers and suppliers as all times. Make the most of your voicemail and out-of-office reply on your email. When someone tries to contact you, and you can't take the call/email, let him or her know that you will be getting back to them shortly. As a home-based business you may want to consider a hosted IT system - this allows you to have all the services that a larger company would have but without the intensive IT infrastructure.

For a quick win, add the follow text to your email signature:

"Please help to save paper by NOT printing this email unless absolutely necessary."

SOURCE: Business Link

