

## **PAPERLESS OFFICE – FACT OR FICTION?**

By Diane L. Drain, counselor and attorney at law, 2004

Not long ago we were writing articles entitled "The Paperless Office". Many experts in law office management were predicting that the paperless office was a near certainty. Electronic communication technologies were hailed as the office saviors - designed to reduce the amount of paper consumed and speed up the operation of the business of practicing law. For small to medium sized businesses the digital process was touted to be a financial and organizational savior.

Virtually no one anticipated the tremendous reverse impact the Internet, electronic mail, personal digital assistants and even electronic calendars would have on the number of documents printed and the amount of paper used. Realty - the unthinkable happened - more documents are being created and printed than ever before.

The impact of these trends on printing output is startling:

- Paper use is growing six to eight percent per year <sup>1</sup>
- E-mail is increasing printing volumes by 40 percent <sup>2</sup>
- Employees, on average, are printing 33 Internet pages each day <sup>3</sup>

What remains constant is that the hardcopy document is still a critical part of every law firm's requirements. Nearly every business document, whether correspondence, pleadings, invoices, or payroll documents, requires information to be printed on paper and stored electronically. For most firms their current equipment is ill equipped to handle the daily demands of the modern practice. These processing inefficiencies cost law firms more money than ever before.

Equipment cannot be passive – it must be designed to integrate into the operation of the office. Poor management of hardcopy and electronic documents will slow down the pace of the business, impact client service and increase the cost of doing business. To address these issues, a firm needs hardware and software solutions to help them effectively manage the increased volume of paperwork and document processing associated with today's fast paced business environment.

A small office should consider using equipment that will integrate printing, faxing, copying and scanning of their information. Perhaps one unit that does all these functions – this type of unit is called a "four-in-one". Equipment that can offer solutions to the above cited problems include: Canon, HP and Lexmark multi-units, also called "four-in-one" units. Reviews can be found at [www.pcworld.com](http://www.pcworld.com), [www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com), [www.zdnet.com](http://www.zdnet.com), and [www.pcmag.com](http://www.pcmag.com). Larger firms will need stronger workhorses.

Also the firm needs to have set office procedures that follow basic rules of organization:

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<sup>1</sup> Gartner Group, "Rightsizing Output Fleets: The Hidden Gold Mine," March 19, 2001

<sup>2</sup> [www.aiim.org](http://www.aiim.org) AIIM – The Enterprise Content Management Association

<sup>3</sup> XPLOR – [www.xplor.org](http://www.xplor.org) - a worldwide association of users and suppliers of the products and services used to create, modify and deliver customized information using a variety of document technologies.

- (1) Handle paper only once. Convert to electronic form on receipt, store original in central location, but use only the electronic version for processing.
- (2) Centralize storage of all electronic information: Each office should have one location for all electronic documents – both incoming and outgoing. If a document is not electronic form then convert it to the proper format (PDF for tamperproof use and Word for editing).
- (3) Fully utilize all resources (e.g. software and hardware) before purchasing new. Many programs have multiple purposes. The current version of word processors can be used for word processing (duh!), graphics design, web design, and integration of words and pictures for courtroom and other presentations; just to name a few. Buy software and hardware only after researching your current tools.

Moral – if paperwork is handled expeditiously it will save time and money for the firm. This equates to lower overhead and greater more personal time. A well integrated processing of documents will reduce the chance of misplacing documents, confusion as to most current versions of pleadings or documents and more control over the firm's operations. Electronic documents can be retrieved from any where in the world. This is good and bad – make sure to have security systems that are updated and procedures in place which are enforced for every employee.

Are we ever going to have a truly "paperless office"? Most likely not – at least not in our lifetimes. Paper is integral in the legal world. We have rules requiring that only the original document have certain power. The rules makers are trying to modify many of the rules, but we still pay great homage to the paper form. This should not chill setting a goal for your office to be as paper free as possible.