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Paper still a must-have

The paperless office remains a pipe dream for the foreseeable future

By GARY HABER, The News Journal
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When 1960s futurists pondered what tomorrow would look like, they pictured a magical place called "the paperless office."

Gone would be the stacks of files and ledger books that cluttered workers' desks. Instead, computers, humming 24 hours a day, would free people from paperwork's drudgery.

Forty years later, the computers have become a workplace staple. And Americans have readily adopted paperless innovations like online banking and electronic tax filing -- up from 3.7 percent of filers in 1990 to 53.4 percent this year.

But paper has remained an enduring part of the scene. It has even seeped into American pop culture.

A fictional Scranton, Pa., paper company is the setting for the hit TV comedy, "The Office." The opening credits include footage of a photocopier churning out copies and a shredder tearing into sheets of paper.

"The paperless office remains a myth," said Michael Gartenberg, vice president and research director for JupiterResearch, a New York-based firm that tracks technology's impact on businesses. "We have a love affair with paper that won't go away anytime soon."

Indeed, companies that help manage the never-ending flow of paper are booming.

At Douron Corporate Furniture, which has a showroom in Greenville, sales of file cabinets "remain unabated" said Byran Simmons, the company's executive vice president.

Douron is doing a brisk business in high-density, movable storage units, which pack more records into the same amount of space than fixed shelves.

Last year, the company sold 10 of these systems, which retail for \$30,000 and up. The number is up to 20 so far this year, Simmons said.

Iron Mountain Inc. is a global document storage and record management company with 700 storage facilities around the world, including one in Wilmington. The company stores about 300 million cubic feet of paper, a number that's been growing by between 7 and 8 percent a year, said Kenneth Rubin, senior vice president for corporate marketing.

"We'll see the paperless office when we see the metric system in this country," Rubin said.

The National Association of Professional Organizers, whose members help people



Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children is making strides in reducing a mountain of paper records. (Buy photo) The News Journal/BOB HERBERT



Richard Weinblatt, an attorney with Fish & Richardson, says, with a snap of his fingers, that "I can find anything on his desk like that." (Buy photo) The News Journal/CARLA VARISCO



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TIPS

Jocelyn Coverdale, a productivity trainer and president and owner of Ballantrae Organizing Solutions in Newark, offers the following tips on how to stem the flow of office paper:

manage the avalanche of paper, is growing tremendously. The group started in 1985 with five members. This year, it has more than 4,000.

"They're turning to us for the solution, and the solution is managing the paper, because the paper is never going to go away," said Barry Izsak, the organization's president.

Experts point to a variety of reasons why the paperless office remains unattainable.

Companies generate more paper because they compete in a frenzied, global business environment where they have to process more information.

E-mail allows for the instantaneous exchange of data, but many workers still print out paper copies because they find them easier to read. While many documents are transmitted online, companies still keep paper copies in case their computer system crashes.

That's not to say that businesses aren't trying to cut down on their use of paper, said Frank Romano, professor emeritus in the School of Print Media at Rochester (N.Y.) Institute of Technology.

Romano, who tracks paper consumption, said U.S. consumption of printing and writing paper -- the kind used in offices -- was 29 million short tons in 2006. That's the same as it was in 2000.

E-mails have largely replaced the written memo, and some companies have yanked printers from workers' desks, in favor of centralized printers, to discourage workers from printing out so many documents, Romano said.

"I don't believe we'll ever have a paperless office, but we'll have a less-paper office," he said.

Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, in Rockland, is in the vanguard of the fight against paper.

It has moved its outpatient record-keeping online, no longer making duplicate paper records. Instead of handwriting notes in a patient's chart, doctors and nurses make their entries online. The hospital plans to move to a fully online system for inpatient records by next year.

With 316,000 outpatient visits last year to the hospital and its nine Delaware clinics, the paperwork reduction has been stunning, said Mary Zier, the hospital's director of health information management.

Two workers used to spend four hours a day pulling the 800 outpatient charts needed on a typical day.

Now, "We don't pull charts because there aren't any," Zier said. "They're all online."

Zier estimates the hospital has cut its paper consumption by 75 percent, and since it no longer opens paper files for new outpatients, it has reduced the number of closed files that need to be sent off-site for storage.

In a typical year, it would send between 5,000 and 10,000 files to storage. So far this year, the number is less than 300, Zier said.

The Wilmington office of Fish & Richardson, a national intellectual property law

- Avoid the temptation to print out e-mail and attachments. Read them online, if you can.

- Organize your e-mails and delete those you don't have a reason for keeping. That way, you'll be less likely to print them.

- Look through your paper mail and toss items you don't need to keep.

- Instead of keeping a document on your desk as a reminder you need to do something with it, file it and write it down on a to-do list.

- Avoid scribbling notes on Post-It notes and scraps of paper. Keep a to-do list in a notebook, or use an online list manager, such as the one in Microsoft Outlook.

firm, is also trying to push back the tide of paper.

As at many law firms, online law books have replaced the bound volumes that used to line lawyers' shelves. The office's lawyers file many of their patent applications with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office electronically.

"I can't remember the last thing I could have filed electronically that I didn't," said Gwilym Attwell, one of firm's principals, who handles patent applications for biotech and pharmaceutical companies.

Firmwide, Fish & Richardson's 400 lawyers file about 200 patent-related documents electronically each week, he said

Still, the firm is far from paperless. It keeps backup paper copies of its patent applications, e-mails and other documents -- "the fail-safe to the fail-safe," Attwell said.

That means a crowded in box on file clerk Teresa Church's desk. On a recent morning, it held a stack of documents more than a foot high waiting to be filed -- about a typical day's worth.

"We have an electronic database, but the paper still comes in," Church said. "Sometimes the piles are higher than that."

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