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Extension's Progress in the Paperless Revolution: Balancing Digital and Paper

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Abstract: This article examines the theory of a paperless workplace and its possible implementation in Extension, based on the advantages and disadvantages involved. Despite decades of discussion, many organizations, including Extension, have still failed to fully implement a paperless system. Paper is an integral part of our work; however, with budgetary cutbacks and the "going green" move, we need to reevaluate our dependency on hard copy documents. Consider the benefits of a paperless workplace and impacts of implementation for Extension and the community we serve.

Introduction

In 1975, *Business Week* published an article titled "The Office of the Future," which predicted the arrival of a paperless office by 1990. Decades later, it appears as though we still have much debate around its integration. The idea captures our attention for discussion, but rarely do we act upon the change.

Consider the following statistics:

- Eighty percent of information is still retained on paper, even though more than 80% of the documents we work with exist in electronic form (K2 Enterprises).
- Office workers spend 40% of their time looking for hard copy information.
- Electronic Document Management (2006) reported that 22.5% of printed documents are lost or misplaced.
- Thirty percent of paper documents contain obsolete information.
- Of the paper filed, over 80% is never referenced again.

As Extension merges hi-tech advances with today's focus on "Going Green" and budgetary cutbacks, this combination makes paperless offices seem more of a viable way of doing business. Perhaps it's time to truly examine the concept and create a change, adoption of a paperless office, or dismissal of the concept.

Overview

Going paperless begins by scanning all, or a majority of the hard documents into a "document management system" where they are converted to electronic media and indexed for easier storage. The software allows faculty and staff to file, review, and reference the digitally stored documents.

Some universities, such as the University of Phoenix, Western Governors University, UK Open University, University of California, and Hong Kong University, are playing a pioneering role to achieve this paperless environment in the respective campuses (Reaz, Hussain, & Khadem, 2007). But can that application be completely applied to Extension?

Advantages and Disadvantages of a Paperless Workplace

An office has important issues to consider before a transition to paperless is made.

Advantages

There are advantages to going paperless. Documents can be password protected as well as protected from intentional or unintentional modification or destruction (Helms, 1998). Most universities back up computers at off-location sites; however, this only works if the documents are in electronic form. Once all documents are digital, off-site back-ups are easily done, eliminating fears of losing files.

Paperless filing systems improve client service due to:

- Streamlined workflow,
- Customizable templates for frequently used documents,
- More consistent work product,
- Simultaneous access to documents by multiple users, and
- Enhanced collaboration among staff members (Phelan, 2003)

With Extension faculty frequently working non-traditional hours from various locations, portable systems are necessary. Paperless environments allow employees to access information from any location. If an employee needs to work from a hotel at a conference, he or she can easily log into the network and access needed information.

Extension clients request a variety of documents. With a paperless system, staff can electronically locate the requested document and fax or e-mail it to the client with a few clicks of the mouse. Our client receives the

information faster, and the employee can return to other duties sooner.

Currently, we use various technologies such as Web-based outreach, distance education, digital presentations, and online resources like eXtension. By further incorporating paperless processes into our everyday work, we can increase efficiency and expand communication with our communities.

Additionally, a paperless system generates time and cost savings. In current budgetary shortfalls, improved faculty/staff efficiency is crucial as we are faced with accomplishing more with less. Implementing a paperless system allows employees to be more productive, complete more work, and thus increase the services provided to the community. Almost entirely paperless, Oregon noticed a drastic increase in time efficiency by using electronic database systems (Burt, 2006). Another example is Maryland 4-H, which is currently transitioning to ACCESS 4-H, an online enrollment system, where families would enroll online, eliminating paper processing by administrative staff.

Disadvantages

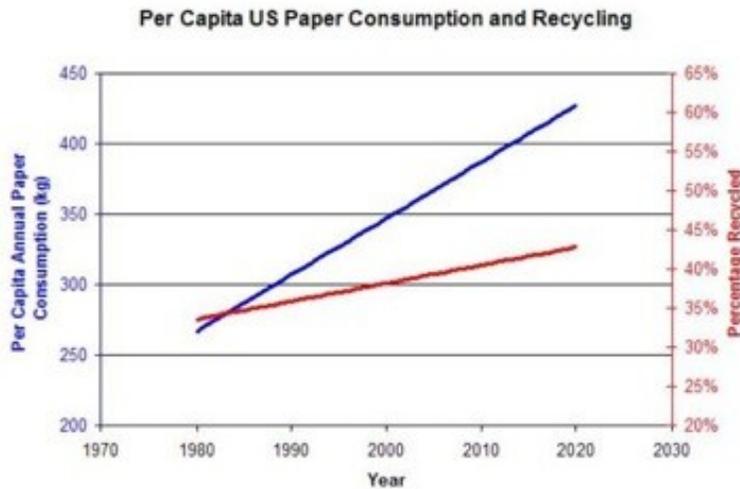
Technological changes are not effortless. Going paperless requires a great deal of planning and progressive transition. Thinking that the paperless journey will be fast and easy will only lead to frustration. Employees must receive training and learn new skills. Additionally, time is needed begin scanning all hard copies. This process can take months or even years.

There may also be generational resistance from employees as they accept new technologies. Older employees may be resistant due to their skill sets and lack of technological knowledge. But with changing age demographics in the workforce, paperless environments and other technological advances are taking over the business world and will likely follow into university and Extension systems.

Another deterrent can be the initial financial investment. Offices typically need to invest in the computer software, scanners, training, and possibly even new computers. Our clients' needs should also be considered. Only 58.8% of households use a computer at home, and 49.5% use Internet at home, leaving almost half of the households in the U.S. without access to these paperless educational resources (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

While we frequently have immediate access to information, we often need to print it for review and clarification. Figure 1 below shows an almost linear increase in paper use in recent decades. "The introduction of new technology does not get rid of paper; it shifts the ways in which it is used: (Sellen, & Harper, 2002). In the past, documents were photocopied and circulated; today, they are sent over computer networks and printed by each receiver.

Figure 1.
Per Capital U.S. Paper Consumption and Recycling



(Gernand, 2008)

According to *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, by Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H. R. Harper, technology hasn't replaced paper yet for a reason. The authors contend, "Paper is still an important medium in work because it is better suited than many current technologies for certain tasks" (2002).

Conclusion

We have been referred to as change agents in the community, but are we ready for a change to paperless? For Extension, paperless technologies can produce improved efficiency and effectiveness while reducing costs. However, paper is still a basic element of our job. Therefore, for paperless strategies to succeed, organizations must understand that it is a goal that must be motivated by significant organizational changes, rather than a "green" desire not to use paper anymore.

As in *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, "paper will continue to occupy an important place in office life but will increasingly be used in conjunction with an array of electronic tools" (Sellen & Harper, 2002). Paper will always serve a crucial purpose. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of this 35-year discussion. Is digital data the way to go? Can Extension make the transition? Will we make the change to a paperless office?

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