

Paper Vs. Digital Records

By Steve Mackes

What's an Organization to Do?

The migration of records and other information away from paper, toward paperless environments, has been going on since the advent of the computer. As information increasingly flows to, lives on and is created through electronic media, many have declared paper passé. But by all indications, the predictions of paper's demise are greatly exaggerated. You have only to look at the stack of it on someone's desk or count a department's numerous filing cabinets to realize that paper is not only still here, but flourishing. Call it what you will—necessary evil, inconvenience, archaic information platform—paper, according to an estimate by Coopers & Lybrand, is expanding at the extraordinary rate of 22% per year.

This, despite the oft-cited advantages of abandoning paper and going all-digital, namely a smaller impact on the environment, no security risk of loose papers and lower costs. The savings, so the reasoning goes, would be achieved by reducing or ending the need for ink, printers, copy machines and yes, paper. The Coopers & Lybrand statistic, however, suggests that a lot of organizations have yet to embrace this logic. So, what is going on? In the midst of our current digital-obsessed world, what could possibly account for paper's extraordinary resiliency? And even more importantly, when it comes to handling paper or paperless information, what's an organization to do?

It's Complicated

We humans have had an incredibly long relationship with paper. Apparently, being creatures of habit, this isn't something we can easily throw away (even if it is paper we're talking about). After all, we can touch, hold and feel close to it, which are qualities digital information clearly lacks. And it's this physical nature that actually makes the information paper holds seem all the more substantive and tangible. That may partly explain why many organizations have, so far, been reluctant to digitize their paper documents. Of course, the additional cost of making such a transition is also a big factor.

What's more, while paper can burn, yellow, fade and disintegrate, the digital universe brings its own set of vulnerabilities. Think data corruption, viruses, misfilings, accidental deletions, software/hardware failures. Still, there is no denying that digitizing information provides significant advantages, especially in areas such as distribution and information sharing, storage space, quick access, editing and overall flexibility of use.

Taking a Hybrid Approach

The truth is, there are environments where paper and electronic records can capably co-exist and support each other. Even in a transitional state, both paper and electronic records are needed at least until the transition is complete. In moving records from paper to paperless form, striking a balance (even if temporary) between paper and digitized records, and trying to reduce information volume, a company like GRM can really help.

Drawing upon its knowledgeable experts and extensive resources, GRM works in partnership with each client to devise a custom, optimal solution. What is recommended, and what more and more organizations are adopting, is a paper/electronic hybrid approach along with an ongoing program to eliminate unnecessary information in both formats. This response delivers a number of advantages that include quicker and easier accessibility, secure backup and the gaining/maintaining of better overall information control. Having vital documents both on paper and digitized also provides added backup insurance over the 2vulnerabilities inherent in one format or the other, i.e. paper deterioration or data corruption.

Paper/Digital Support Services

An information management specialist like GRM supports the entire lifecycle of paper and electronic records. It enhances a client's operations and ability to thrive and expand by providing a range of best practice services that include:

- **Reliable Offsite Backup**—providing insurance against natural and manmade disasters, employee errors and system failure.
- **Timely Pick Ups and Deliveries**—within 2 hours in the case of an emergency.
- **On or Offsite Scanning**—quickly converts paper documents to digital; streamlines and facilitates the storing and retrieval of important paper-originating information.
- **Legal Compliance**—keeping clients current with all relevant regulations; able to track chain-of-custody from the moment a record is received.

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- **Litigation Support**—maintaining a state-of-the-art system for locating and delivering files quickly and efficiently; scanning paper documents and electronically delivering their content when needed.
- **Security**—boxes are stored by barcode numbers only and, in the case of multiple boxes, stored randomly and in multiple locations. These procedures minimize the risk of corporate sabotage and disaster-related loss or damage.
- **And More Security**—tapes and media (including film and sound) as well as all electronic and paper documents are stored offsite in state-of-the-art vaults and warehouses that are temperature/humidity controlled, protected against fire, accessed by password-protected key cards and monitored around the clock by cameras and security guards.
- **Built-in Retention, Destruction Dates and Proof of Destruction**—with retention schedules prepared to an organization's specific needs; designed to maintain control over information, eliminate unnecessary information and minimize legal, financial, security and privacy risks. Final client authorization is required for actual destruction to proceed.

Cost-effective in Every Way

The notion that internal storage/preservation is more efficient and less expensive than contracting with an outside provider is faulty in every regard.

In 2006, *The Boston Globe* newspaper reported on a study by The Delphi Group, a Boston consultancy. Key findings showed that approximately 15% of all papers handled in businesses became lost and that 30% of an organization's time, on average, was spent trying to find lost documents. In a separate study, Coopers & Lybrand determined that U.S. companies spend approximately \$120.00 in labor to find a misfiled document and \$220.00 to reproduce a lost document. These studies show that organizations are paying a steep price, in lost and misplaced documents alone, by choosing to manage information themselves. And it's an unnecessary cost given that the use of a reliable outside provider like GRM virtually eliminates misplaced and lost documents.

Even with information storage, enlisting an outside provider costs far less than what is spent when organizations do it themselves. The State of Michigan, in a study comparing onsite and offsite records storage made the following determinations:

- Estimated costs of onsite records storage--\$32.50 per cubic foot per year, including space and filing cabinets.

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- Estimated costs of using an offsite records storage vendor—between \$1.50 and \$3.00 per cubic foot per year.

That's not even close. And the benefits don't stop there. A provider such as GRM, with its web-based inventory system, ensures quick, easy access, comprehensive tracking, exceptional security and reliable backup throughout the information lifecycle. The bottom line is better information management at a significant reduction in cost, not just in terms of money, but also in relief from worry and stress.

About GRM

GRM Document Management is a leading provider of records and information management worldwide. Currently in 11 major markets (8 U.S., 3 international) GRM continues to grow. What differentiates the company is its ability to apply, on behalf of its clients, top notch expertise, unparalleled technology and superior service in the assessment and implementation of fully integrated document management solutions.