



White paper

5 reasons consulates are going paperless



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Summary

Technology experts have been forecasting the imminent arrival of the paperless office for decades. But until recently, many government offices have resisted digitising records.

That’s starting to change in European consulates.

Five different developments are encouraging governments to rethink their paper-based processes and digitise more.



The paperless dream

Business leaders and technologists have long fantasised of a world where paper is no longer necessary. Back in June of 1975, *BusinessWeek* magazine published an article titled “[The Office of the Future](#)” that asked various business executives how the workplace would change in the coming decades.

Several of the interviewees thought that the paperless office would become a reality within just 10 or 15 years. For example, Vincent E. Giuliano, who worked for management consulting firm Arthur D. Little, told the publication that offices would be using much less paper by 1980, “and by 1990, most record-handling will be electronic.”

Similarly, George E. Pake, who then led Xerox Corp.’s Palo Alto Research Center, predicted that by 1995, he would have a TV-like display on his desk. “I’ll be able to call up documents from my files on the screen, or by pressing a button,” he said. “I can get my mail or any messages. I don’t know how much hard copy [printed paper] I’ll want in this world.”

Whilst Pake’s description of 1990’s computing seems eerily prescient, he was entirely wrong about how long and how much paper companies of that era would want to keep.

Evelyn Berezin, founder and president of Redactron, which made early word processors, was also quoted in the same article. But she took a more pessimistic – and ultimately realistic – view. When asked when the paperless office would arrive, she replied, “It will be a long time—it always takes longer than we expect to change the way people customarily do their business.” She added, “The EDP [electronic data processing] industry in the 1950s thought that the whole world would have made the transition to computers by 1960. And it hasn’t happened yet.”

Berezin was right.

The transition to paperless took far longer than most of the early prognosticators forecasted. It wasn’t until the early 2000s that entirely paperless processes began to catch on. And the public sector has continued to rely heavily on printed forms and records into the 2020s.

However, recent years have seen a sharp increase in the rate at which offices – particularly EU government offices – are becoming more paperless. For example, there are currently initiatives underway in Spain and Portugal to digitise approximately 4 million pages of older government records. And France is working to scan and digitally store approximately 4.2 million pages.

This rapid change begs a couple of questions: First, why are so many different European governments deciding that now is the right time to go paperless? And if agencies are not currently working on digitisation projects, should they be?

Why now?

Consulates have long relied on manual, paper-based processes to meet the needs of the citizens living outside their native countries. However, five factors are driving accelerated digitisation:

1. The RRF opportunity

One of the reasons why governments sometimes hesitate to embark on digitization initiatives is that these efforts can require an upfront investment. Consulates and other government agencies might have millions of pages of records stored in their filing cabinets. Organisations need scanning hardware, as well as digital storage systems with appropriate security to protect citizens’ personally identifiable information.

Top government records challenges

- > **Security and governance:** Most countries require consulates to store all documents – both physical and electronic – on the physical premises. This means each office needs to be able to manage its own security and information governance risks.
- > **Limited space:** Many consulates are located in small, historic buildings in urban centres, where space is at premium. But many must store millions of pages of documents.
- > **Disconnected data:** Staff often struggle to find and verify data for citizens because it resides in disparate systems, or only on paper.
- > **Manual processes:** The workload at many consulates is increasing at the same time that the number of staff is decreasing.

But even more significant than the financial investment, is the time investment. It can take hours to scan documents, double-check the results for accuracy, and securely dispose of the paper files. If consulates try to hire and train staff to handle these projects on their own, it can quickly overwhelm their budgets. And, it might take decades to complete the task.

However, the EU's [Recovery and Resilience Facility \(RRF\)](#) is providing countries with the funding necessary to contract with third-party vendors to handle digitisation tasks in a small fraction of the time it would otherwise take.

Passed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and later enhanced to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the RRF provides member countries with funds for projects that line up with the EU's priorities. More specifically, it makes available to European governments a total of 723.8 billion EUR, including 385.8 billion EUR in loans, and 338 billion EUR in grants. According to the European Commission website, "The RRF helps the EU achieve its target of climate neutrality by 2050, and sets Europe on a path of digital transition, creating jobs and spurring growth in the process."

Each EU country has its own plan for using the funds. Many have set aside funds to become more environmentally-friendly, and digital transformation projects like digitising consulate records. And some consulates are using the funds to get the initial investment they need for their transition to paperless processes.

Once the initial digitization is complete and consulates transition to digital processes, consulates often find that the savings realised as a result of paperless processes pays for the digitisation over time. Because digital storage takes up so much less space than physical filing cabinets, consulates can either reduce their real estate footprint, or repurpose their existing space to be more efficient. In addition, paperless processes generally require fewer staff and allow consulates to complete their work more quickly. Efficiencies like these enabled one government to save 120,000 EUR after digitising more than 1.1 million documents.

2. Lingering pandemic effects

The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread, long-lasting societal changes. Many individuals re-considered their work and living situations. Many resigned positions, or changed their line of work. Some now refuse to take positions that require long hours, whilst others only

want to take jobs that allow them to work from home. As a result, many organisations now struggle to find the workers that they need.

Consulates are not immune from these pressures. In fact, in some cases, they find it even more difficult to find staff because most consulate workers must be on-site.

At the same time that they were re-thinking their career choices, many people decided that the pandemic was the ideal time to move to a new country. And now that pandemic restrictions are lifted, people are travelling more. These factors have increased the workload at consulates, requiring more work with fewer staff.

Another key pandemic effect was to change how much we rely on technology every day. Analysts at [EY](#) note, "One of the most striking consequences of the pandemic has been the increasing reliance on technology in our daily lives." Video calls and online shopping became the norm. When people were prevented from going out of doors, much of their lives migrated online.

One [analyst firm](#) says that many government agencies responded to these changes by increasing their level of digitisation. "The pandemic has sparked and accelerated digital innovation across governments worldwide. The challenge now is to scale these efforts for governments to remain – or to become more – trusted, agile, and resilient providers of citizen services and value to the public."

3. Citizen expectations

The coronavirus accelerated an existing trend toward citizens expecting to be able to do most things online.

"There is a broad appetite among citizens for more digitally enabled public services," according to EY. However, they add, "But while governments have accelerated the shift toward the digitalisation of many public services, they continue to lag behind services provided by the private sector, such as online shopping and banking, in terms of expected improvements in service provision. . . Globally, only around half of citizens (53%) think governments and public services have effectively used digital technology to respond to the pandemic."

In other words, while the pandemic encouraged government offices to modernise and digitise, those government offices often didn't change quickly enough to meet citizen expectations.

Most people carry smartphones they can use to make purchases, communicate with friends and family, access news and information, entertain themselves, make banking transactions, and interact with companies of all kinds. These experiences inform the expectations they have of their governments.

Consulates are realising that they may fall short of expectations, and it's one of the factors leading them to consider going paperless.

4. Government mandates

Countries around the world have passed a variety of measures that require government agencies to digitise their operations. The EU has a '[Path to the Digital Decade](#)' policy programme that sets targets member states are expected to reach by 2030. It positions digitisation as far more than just a means to control costs and improve efficiency. It says:

Digitalisation can become a decisive enabler of rights and freedoms, allowing people to reach out beyond specific territories, social

positions or community groups, and opening new possibilities to learn, have fun, work, explore, and fulfil one's ambitions. This will enable a society where geographical distance matters less, because people can work, learn, interact with public administrations, manage their finance and payments, make use of health care systems, automated transport systems, participate to democratic life, be entertained or meet and discuss with people anywhere in the EU, including in rural and remote areas.

The programme requires digitalisation of public services with key public services being 100% online by 2030. That gives an additional push to consulates considering going paperless.

5. Climate change

Transitioning to a paperless office also has important environmental impacts. Under [the European climate law](#) passed in 2021, EU countries must achieve a net-zero emissions balance by 2050. And to help them reach this goal, countries must create 55% fewer emissions by 2030.

4 myths about paperless offices

Government workers who propose paperless initiatives sometimes encounter resistance from other staff. Often this resistance occurs because their colleagues hold one or more of these untrue beliefs:

1. Paperless processes actually generate more paper. In 2002, Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H.R. Harper published *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, which demonstrated that the adoption of paperless technologies actually led to an increase in the use of paper. That was true in 2002, but [newer research](#) shows that in the more than two decades since then, paper use has levelled out and begun to decline. You may remember the days of looking up digital directions and then printing out a paper map to help you find a location. As technology has improved and smartphones have become ubiquitous, people are now much more willing to follow processes that are entirely digital.
2. Scanning archives requires a lot of time and staff. Government agencies don't have to do the digitisation with their own staff. Third-party vendors can accomplish the work in a fraction of the time that it would require a consulate, or other office to complete the necessary tasks on their own. And by choosing a vendor with experience on similar projects, organisations can get a higher-quality, more accurate, and faster level of service.
3. Our security requirements prevent us from using an outside vendor. The EU has very strict privacy requirements that cover the types of records kept in most consulates. And many governments have their own internal requirements that documents not leave the premises of their consulates. However, many consulates have successfully completed digitisation projects with a third-party vendor while complying with all requirements.
4. Paperless processes are too expensive. In general, paperless processes actually save money. Digital records require less physical storage space, which helps reduce costs. In addition, digital processes are more efficient than manual ones, allowing staff to create and find records much more quickly than they could when working with paper files.

Digitising their offices can help governments achieve these goals in three key ways:

1. **Reducing deforestation.** Global paper consumption results in cutting down **4.1 million hectares of forest** each year. That's about 14% of the total annual global deforestation. Trees play an important role in reducing greenhouse gases. In fact, a single tree can convert **up to 1 metric ton** of carbon dioxide to oxygen during its lifetime. By reducing use of paper, governments can help decrease the number of trees being cut down each year.
2. **Decreasing emissions generated by paper production.** Not only does creating paper reduce the number of trees available to convert carbon dioxide to oxygen, it also generates a lot of greenhouse gases. The process of felling trees itself is responsible for about **10% of all worldwide emissions**. In addition, the factories that turn trees into paper generate about **190 metric tonnes of CO²** per year, or about 2% of all industrial emissions.
3. **Reducing waste.** Although most paper is recyclable, a lot of it gets thrown away. It is then usually either transported to landfills or burned, both of which further increase emissions. In office settings, printing on paper also requires ink or toner cartridges, most of which are not recycled. This creates more waste, emissions, and pollution, as ink and toner cartridges can take thousands of years to decompose.

Becoming a paperless consulate won't solve the climate change problem. But it can help to show that your government is committed to reducing emissions in every way possible. It sets an example for other organisations to follow. And it helps move the world closer to solving one of the most pressing challenges of our time.

Next steps: How to prepare for a paperless consulate

The combination of RRF funding, pandemic after-effects, citizen expectations, government mandates, and concerns about the environment make going paperless extremely attractive. However, many are still in the earliest stages of the journey. If your organisation hasn't yet gone paperless yet, here are some steps you can take in that direction:

- > **Research the RRF and other funding opportunities.** Because each EU member has its own RRF plan, the amount of money your government has available for projects like this will vary. You can start at the European Commission's [Recovery and Resilience Facility website](#), which has details about each country's plans. Your local or national government may have additional grants or loans available to assist with modernisation and digital transformation initiatives.
- > **Assess your needs.** You can't develop a plan or request vendor quotes until you have an understanding of your current situation. You'll need an inventory of your paper files, including approximate volumes, as well as descriptions of the key processes that will need to be digitised. This information will help you determine potential savings, as well as providing the details you will need to give potential vendors.
- > **Begin making the business case.** Once you know what funding sources might be available and what your needs are, you can begin crafting a proposal. Create a list of the benefits you expect to realise as a result of the initiative, including any potential savings and efficiencies.



- **Investigate vendors.** Many different companies offer services that can help you set up a paperless consulate. You'll want to look for one with extensive experience meeting the unique privacy and security needs of government offices, including completing the digitization work on-site when necessary. Consider whether the vendor has facilities near your consulate, and whether the vendor can help you meet your sustainability goals. Ask the vendors about their usual processes and make sure they understand the types of documents your organisation handles regularly.
- **Start thinking about change management.** Change is difficult for most people, and government can be more resistant than some organisations to trying new things. Any digitisation project is going to require gaining internal support. It's never too early to start

identifying key stakeholders and developing a plan to persuade them to champion – or at least not oppose – the paperless initiative.

Becoming a paperless consulate can be a challenge, however, the potential benefits are substantial. The current funding opportunities and other driving factors make this an ideal time to get the project started.

It may have taken much longer than those business executives of 1975 expected for a paperless office to become a reality. But now that it's here, the trend is unlikely to reverse.

To learn more about how your organisation might be able to better meet citizens' needs and fulfil your mandate, visit the [consulate transformation page](#).

"Our Iron Mountain solution was less expensive than purchasing new carousels and setting up additional office space. And we've now got all the productivity and collaboration benefits of digital workflows."

Christian Dolle, Project Leader, Stadtverwaltung Schwäbisch Gmünd, Foreigners' Registration Office for Immigration in Schwäbisch Gmünd



DE: 0800 408 0000 | ironmountain.com/de-de
AT: +49 40 521 08 170 | ironmountain.com/de-at
CH: 0800 00 24 24 | ironmountain.com/en-ch

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