White paper

10 reasons to go paperless

IRON MOUNTAIN®

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Summary

While most organizations have begun to digitize some processes, many still have a long way to go before they become truly paperless. That's unfortunate because paperless processes offer significant business advantages.

This paper examines ten reasons for going paperless that can help you make the business case for digital transformation at your organization. It also includes five helpful tips for taking the next step in your paperless journey.

The not-quite-paperless office

By now, most organizations have digitized at least some of their processes. But paper continues to play a sizable role in most organizations. Consider:

› According to the U.S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), global paper consumption has quadrupled in the past 40 years. In the United States, each person uses more than 700 pounds of paper every year.

› A typical office worker consumes approximately 10,000 sheets of paper every year.

› About 45% of the pages that get printed in an office are thrown away before the end of the day they were printed.

› Paper accounts for 23% of the waste in U.S. landfills, and half of all business waste is paper.

These days, computers are everywhere. So why do organizations continue to use so much paper?

Many have older paper files that they are required to retain. Digitizing these older files can be a huge project that organizations are hesitant to undertake.

Many have forms that require employee or customer signatures. Transitioning to a digital process would require them to re-think their procedures and/or buy new technology.

And many continue to use paper simply because it's the way they've always done things. Organizational inertia makes change difficult. It's just easier to keep things the same. But just because something is easier, that doesn't mean that it makes the most sense. When you add it up, the business benefits of going paperless are overwhelming.

Reasons to go paperless

Different organizations see different benefits from going paperless, depending on their industry, product mix, market, customer base, and other unique characteristics. Here are ten of the most common reasons to go paperless:

1. Decrease the time spent searching for information

Depending on which research you read, office workers spend between 7.6 and 12.5 hours per week searching for information. If you add in the time spent governing and preparing data, as well as the time spent duplicating work that was already completed elsewhere, they waste about 20 hours each week — 50% of their time — on activities that would be unnecessary if they had better information management tools and policies.

Simply scanning your paper documents isn't going to solve all these problems, of course. You need a comprehensive solution that incorporates optical character recognition technology and advanced search to make it easy to find what you need.

It's much faster to type a search term on a keyboard than to walk down to the paper files and sort through a file manually to find what you need. Plus, electronic search does away with the problem of misfiled or lost records.

Your highly-paid knowledge workers could be doing a lot of other things that would be more valuable for your organization than looking for information in paper files. If you can decrease the amount of time they waste due to poor information management, your organization can become much more efficient and productive.

2. Free up physical space

The average filing cabinet takes up nine square feet of floor space to store about 11,000 pages of documents.

That typically costs about $1,500 per year, just in storage space (though it could be much more if you are in a high-rent location). That also doesn't include the cost for employees to do the filing. On average, companies need one additional worker for every 12 filing cabinets.

By comparison, you can store about 65,000 pages of document files in 1 GB of storage. That means a 500 GB drive could store about 3.25 million pages. If that 500 GB is on a single 2.5-inch SSD, it would occupy approximately 11 square inches or .08 square feet. If you do the calculations, the digital storage is more than 40 times more efficient than filing cabinets in terms of physical space saved. And that's even before you consider that in most data centers, many drives will be stacked on top of each other, taking up even less space. And a single IT employee can maintain hundreds of drives.

For organizations, space is an important consideration. According to research from CBRE cited in The Wall Street Journal, 52% of companies plan to shrink their physical footprint between 2022 and 2025. Reducing paper and getting rid of filing cabinets is one way to make that process easier, and help organizations trim their budgets.

3. Increase resiliency

The Covid-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters have sent a wake-up call to many organizations.

Before the pandemic, fewer than 6% of people in the United States worked primarily from home, although quite a few more worked from home part of the time. The sudden implementation of quarantines meant that organizations had to figure out how to transition to remote work practically overnight. Organizations that had already begun digital transformation projects were able to make this transition more smoothly than those that had not.

While we can hope that we won't experience another pandemic in our lifetimes, other emergency events are probable, even likely. As climate change progresses, fires, floods, hurricanes, and severe weather of all kinds are becoming more commonplace. You likely have a disaster recovery plan, including multiple storage locations, for your digital records, but what about your paper files? If a fire, flood, or earthquake wiped out your paper archives, would your business be able to survive?

Paper records can also increase other kinds of risk, notably compliance risk. If your organization were sued or accused of a regulatory violation, finding the records to prove that you followed the law becomes more difficult if your records are on paper. Old-fashioned paper files may also make it easier for your company to experience a privacy breach.

4. Enhance security

Because we hear so often about cybersecurity risks, it can be easy to overlook the potential risks posed by printed documents. For example, while you can restrict access to a digital document in your organization using role-based access control software, any employee with access to a filing cabinet will be able to access any document stored inside it.

In addition, once someone has taken a piece of paper out of a filing cabinet, you have no way to track what happens to it. They could copy it, take a photo, or send it anywhere they wish. They could also easily destroy it, which could be costly if the document is important to operations or requires retention by law.

Even if an employee doesn't intentionally destroy a document, they might easily lose it. By one estimate, the average organization loses 7.5% of its paper documents each year. At a large company, that can mean losing a document every 12 seconds. And it can cost $125 to find a mis-filed document, or between $350 and $700 per document that is never found.

Of course, digitizing documents is no guarantee that they will be 100% secure. Companies will still need to invest in security technologies and ensure that they have the right policies in place. But when your documents are digital, it becomes much easier to track them and to prove that you are complying with any relevant regulations and best practices.

5. Improve customer experience

From a customer's perspective, a paper-based process tends to be slower and less accurate than a digital process. And if anything goes wrong, it's much harder to track down paper records than digital ones.

For example, imagine a situation where a patient fills out a paper form in a health clinic waiting room. After handing back the form, they have to wait while the office staff input all the handwritten information into the computer

system, perhaps even multiple systems. The staff then need to verify insurance and payment information, all before the patient has the opportunity to meet with a care provider. And if one of the staff members accidentally types something wrong, it can lead to hassles that persist long after the visit has ended.

But if the patient fills out those same forms digitally, either on a tablet in the office or on a computer or smartphone before they arrive, they have a chance to double-check that everything was entered correctly. And even if the staff simply scan the paper forms, and use optical character recognition technology to extract the pertinent information, it can speed things up considerably. Patients won't have to wait on the office staff, and instead can see a provider as soon as one is available.

This situation isn't unique to healthcare. Similar issues plague other industries that rely on paper processes. By digitizing their workflows, organizations can give their customers a faster, more streamlined experience.

6. Enable remote work

The pandemic changed potential employees' expectations around remote work. When they were forced to work from home, a lot of people enjoyed it. And many say they don't want to go back.

McKinsey's American Opportunity Survey found that 87% of people who have the opportunity to work remotely at least part of the time take advantage of that option. In addition, while hybrid work styles (partially on-site and partially remote) are the most common, 65% of people said that if they could work from home all the time, they would. And wanting to have a flexible schedule like remote work is the third most common reason why people leave one job to look for a new one.

Competition for talent remains fierce in many industries. At the time of writing, the current U.S. unemployment rate was just 3.4%. Many organizations are using remote work as a way to attract top talent.

But it can be difficult, or even impossible, to work remotely if your job relies on paper forms. Most organizations

don't want employees taking paperwork home, especially documents that are sensitive in any way. By implementing paperless processes, you enable flexible work styles and improve your ability to recruit top talent.

7. Encourage collaboration

Similarly, paperless processes can also make it easier for workers to collaborate. Even if your employees are coming into an office location some or all the time, chances are high that not all your workers are located in the same space at the same time. This can make it difficult to work together, especially if people are located in different time zones.

A comprehensive information management solution provides opportunities for employees in different locations to comment on and edit the same documents. It makes it easier to share files and ensure that only the people who should have access to a particular document actually do have access to that document.

Finding, sending, reviewing, and editing are all easier when offices go paperless. And that makes it more likely that employees will collaborate, ultimately yielding a better work product.

8. Streamline workflows

Many organizations struggle with siloed processes and single-purpose software. In the worst cases, employees may need to type data from paper forms into multiple systems in order for it to get everywhere it needs to go. They might waste hours every day re-doing work unnecessarily.

And when they do all that typing, chances are high that they could make a mistake. Correcting those errors later adds even more time to already unwieldy workflows.

In a survey conducted by the Association of Intelligent Information Management, 70% of members said that getting the right information to the right person, at the right time is at the heart of their digital transformation challenge. Digitizing processes is the first step to smoothing out bottlenecks and getting data exactly where organizations need it, when they need it.

9. Become more environmentally friendly

An MIT Sloan Management Review article found that 90% of business leaders believe it is important for their organizations to become more sustainable. In addition, 88% of public companies and nearly 70% of private companies have an environmental, social, governance (ESG) initiative in place.

Going paperless can help organizations meet their ESG goals. According to the EPA, "Paper and paperboard products made up the largest percentage of all the materials in [municipal solid waste], at 23.1 percent of total generation." And, as previously mentioned, office paper is a huge contributor to that paper and paperboard waste.

By some estimates, "if the U.S. cut its office paper use by just a mere 10 percent, or 490,000 metric tons, greenhouse gas emissions would fall by 1.45 million metric tons. This is the equivalent of taking 280,000 cars off the road for a year."

10. Lower costs

Paper-based processes are expensive. First, you have the costs for the paper, toner or ink, and any printing services. In the U.S. alone, that can total more than $120 billion per year.

Then you have the cost of storing that paper. Filing cabinets, floor space, and the cost to hire employees all add to the bottom line.

But you can't forget about the inefficiencies created by paper as well. Those wasted hours that employees spend managing, filing, and searching for paper documents add up quickly.

And there are harder-to-quantify costs caused by a lack of effective collaboration, or customers who get irritated with inefficient processes.

In all, companies can spend as much as 15% of their annual revenue on the management of inefficient, paper-based processes.

Even if you can't go completely paperless, every step that you take in that direction can help to reduce expenses and make you more profitable.

How to get started

The business benefits of going paperless are undeniable. So why isn't every business 100% paperless already?

Digital transformation is a journey. You can't go paperless overnight — no matter how much you would like to. It likely took many years to create and evolve the processes that your organization relies on every day. Modifying ingrained habits across a large organization will take time.

In fact, looking at all the work involved in digitizing your processes may feel overwhelming. Many companies aren't sure where or how to start.

To make things easier, Iron Mountain put together a Digitization Checklist that outlines five steps that will help you get ready to go paperless:

1. Get your house in order. Before you dive in and start scanning documents, take inventory of the paper records you have. When you find outdated files that you no longer need to keep, shred them and dispose of them securely. For the records you do need to keep, make note of the reason for storage and the date when they should be destroyed.

2. Choose a starting point. Some workflows have a bigger impact on your organization's efficiency and costs than others. You want to start with a project that will generate noticeable results. That helps maximize the returns from the initiative, while also generating internal momentum for digitizing other documents.

3. Define success. Decide the outcome of the project. Make sure that it is meaningful, achievable, and measurable. Tracking key metrics will allow you to demonstrate success and identify potential areas for improvement during subsequent phases of the project.

4. Build a business case. To get executive buy-in, you'll need some numbers to back up your argument. The reasons in this white paper can serve as a starting point, but make sure you do some research and apply the principles to your specific organization. You'll have a better chance of receiving approval for your paperless project if you align the specific goals of your project with the broader business goals of your organization.

Iron Mountain InSight

If your organization is ready to go paperless, you need a content management system with intelligent document processing automation designed to help you maximize efficiency and security. Iron Mountain InSight provides you with a centralized view of your information. It allows secure access and retrieval for your employees in a single cloud repository for enhanced visibility and access.

InSight adds structure to your organization's unstructured content. The platform aggregates and connects physical and digital information, extracting key metadata out of documents and automating document-centric workflows to help you get to relevant information faster.

And if you need more assistance in setting up your paperless workflows, Iron Mountain's Professional Services team can work with you to further your digital transformation. To learn more, visit Iron Mountain's Go Paperless guide.

5. Put a team together. For best results, assemble a cross-functional team that includes stakeholders from all the groups that will be affected by the digitization project. Make sure that you have a mix of departmental leaders and working-level people who will run the project. Don't forget to include IT, Legal, Operations, and anyone else who will play a role.

Once you've completed these preparatory steps, you'll be ready to begin your digitization initiative. For more information, including tips and best practices, check out Iron Mountain's Go Paperless guide. It includes more white papers, infographics, customer success stories, and more.

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