

Shredded: the paperless office

The first indicator that a paperless office could someday be a reality was when Samuel Morse developed the electronic telegraph back in the 1800s. More than a century later, computers and the internet have accelerated the notion paper will go the way of the typewriter. Yet today it's consumed more than ever.

Compared to the amount of digital information out there (which, if you adhere to Moore's Law, is doubling every couple of years), the ratio of paper-based documents is indeed shrinking. But its declining share of recorded information disguises the insatiable demand for paper that still persists.

Figures released by *The Economist* last year revealed paper usage increased by 50 per cent over the past three decades despite the explosive use of technological gadgets. Rather than eradicating the problem, the billions of new pages on the web have instead provided us with much more stuff worthy of printing.

According to environmental group Clean Up Australia, we devour more than 4.2 million tonnes of paper annually in this country. To put that in perspective, 20 trees are felled for every tonne of paper produced. And each office worker chucks away an average of 50 kilos of paper every 12 months.

Why is this happening?

One study published in the *Computer User* academic journal found people are 30 per cent more likely to remember information when it's printed or written down. But, when it's part of the mass of letters and digits overcrowding our monitors, a lot of that data is easily forgotten.

That might explain why so many of us resort to printing documents even though we could effortlessly read the words on screen. There's something about holding the hard copy in your hands that somehow enhances your concentration.

In their book *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper detail a series of case studies and research projects, including a major one at the International Monetary Fund, that demonstrate the reasons why so many of us are still addicted to those bright white sheets. There are five in particular:

1. While working on a computer, employees often need to be simultaneously referring to pieces of paper on which information is recorded.
2. It's easier for some people to review and edit their colleagues' documents on paper than it is to do so on screen.
3. Planning the upcoming workday seems to be more manageable when done with a pen rather than a keyboard.
4. Using paper-based products, especially in meetings, facilitates collaboration more effectively than a computer or tablet.

5. When company documents are printed, they're perceived as more formal and therefore of greater importance.

So, really, the reluctance to embrace a paperless office has less to do with technology and more to do with human behaviour. For some people, it's a habitual part of their workday that's just too difficult to give up, while others are kinaesthetic in nature, preferring a tactile work environment that isn't compatible with constantly staring at a monitor.

In some respects, a paperless office is slowly being forced on employees. One example is via the rise of activity-based working, which means people don't have a desk of their own. Where they sit today – or even this morning – may not be where they're sitting tomorrow or this afternoon.

That kind of workplace can only really work if the hoarding of paper is minimised because, in most cases, employees no longer have filing cabinets. Everything is stored online and this freedom enables them to work wherever they want with whomever they need.

If that's your work environment – and you hate the loss of your own personal workspace – just think, at the very least, of all the trees you're saving. Maybe that's some consolation.