

The paperless office

by Donna Neff

INTERESTINGLY, IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED THAT “THE FIRST STEP IN GETTING TO A PAPERLESS SOCIETY IS GETTING RID OF THE LAWYERS.”¹ DESPITE SUCH SENTIMENTS, WITH CAREFUL PLANNING AND PREPARATION, LAW OFFICES CAN AND ARE GOING PAPERLESS WITH TREMENDOUS SUCCESS.

Benefits

Law practices have always relied heavily on physical paper documents. Much time and effort is expended in the filing, storing, locating and retrieving of physical documents. Every facet of this process is simplified by converting to a paperless practice, with the actual physical handling of a document reduced to a single occurrence, scanning, making electronic filing far more efficient and less time-consuming.²

With the implementation of a well thought-out naming and storage process, going paperless can dramatically decrease the amount of time spent locating and retrieving documents, both current and archived.

The actual use of documents is also improved. Documents are instantly accessible and can be simultaneously accessed by more than one staff member. The cumulative effect of these benefits is increased productivity and efficiency for all staff members.

Most firms have a finite amount of on-site storage for both current and archived files, and the cost of off-site storage is often prohibitive, especially for smaller firms. A paperless office can greatly reduce, if not eliminate, this cost.

More and more, people are choosing to work away from the office. A paperless office allows staff to remotely access the firm’s files and work effectively and productively off-site.

Last, but certainly not least, is the reduction in the firm’s environmental impact — the amount of paper saved is tremendous. Similarly, valuable real estate is not needed for the storage of physical documents.

The process

An absolutely critical first step is the development of a plan as to how your firm’s transition will be realized. Buy-in by affected staff members is also crucial.

The initial planning stage should involve brainstorming the goals you hope to achieve in going paperless. These should be prioritized according to importance. Ongoing reference should be made to your goals while developing your plan in order to ensure your ultimate objectives are met.

Scanning

The standard for electronic documents in the legal profession is a Portable Document Format (PDF) file.³ The advantage of PDF is that it affords a



practical and user-friendly format for working with electronic documents which is consistent across varied applications and platforms.⁴

Every document received, whether electronically or in paper form, by your office, should be turned into an electronic or digital copy (PDF). Electronic documents, such as incoming and outgoing e-mails, are also converted to PDF files.

A process for scanning should be created that addresses when a document is to be scanned or printed to PDF, by which staff member, and what is to be done with the original document. This process should be routinely reviewed and revised until you are able to determine the most efficient practice for your firm.

At our office, the administrative assistant who opens incoming paper mail is the person who scans each letter, invoice or other document, and electronically names and files it in the correct folder.

As a practical tip, it is advisable not to scan existing documents and closed files. We found that it made sense to commit to going paperless for all new files from a specific date forward. Another approach may be to select a practice area or a small committed group as a pilot project, and then to expand to other areas once you have a standardized practice in place.

Document naming

Once scanned (or converted to a PDF file), all electronic documents should be named in a consistent, standardized manner by creating a standardized protocol.

Develop a naming process that will allow documents to be easily identified in order to facilitate retrieval. For many offices, it will be practical to begin the name of each file with a date to ensure that all documents in a given folder are sorted chronologically.⁵ We use the date of the document and not the date on which it was scanned or printed. It may also be helpful to develop a system to differentiate

between received and sent documents; for example, we include “SENT” in the file name for all documents that have been physically and/or electronically delivered.

Storing

A logical storage structure for electronic documents is critical to the success of a paperless office. It may be helpful to think of the storage structure of your electronic documents in terms of basic filing cabinets which exist in virtual space and are shared over a local network.⁶

You may have various filing cabinets with names such as “Clients,” “Closed Files,” “Administrative Work,” etc. Each computer, whether in the office or at a remote location, links to the filing cabinets by mapping a network drive, e.g. C:\Clients. The cabinet called “Clients” may have subfolders within it labelled A to Z, e.g. C:\Clients\S.⁷

You may have subfolders for each client, e.g. C:\Clients\S\Smith\Real Estate. Within each matter subfolder, there may be subfolders to aid in the organization of the various types of documents particular to each matter, such as correspondence, drafts, etc., e.g., C:\Clients\S\Smith\Real Estate\Correspondence. The entire path and file name should not exceed 128 characters as some software is unable to deal with longer names.

To ensure consistency, create a set of predefined folders and subfolders for each type of matter (we refer to ours as ‘folder templates’) your firm handles.⁸ When a new file is opened, the appropriate template is simply copied and pasted into the correct alphabetical folder and the client-specific information inserted.

Using these examples, anyone can create similar templates tailored to a firm’s needs and areas of law. By using folder templates, not only are all folders named consistently, but significant time is saved by not having to create the same folders every time a new matter is opened.

Do we have your e-mail address?

The Law Society is encouraging members to provide their e-mail addresses as an environmentally friendly means of exchanging official correspondence.

Members are requested to provide their e-mail addresses to Membership Services at records@lsuc.on.ca. Please specify if it is a personal or business e-mail and whether or not we can publish your business e-mail in the Law Society Directory. Personal e-mail addresses will be kept confidential, and only used when the Law Society needs to contact members.



Backups

As physical paper files will eventually be destroyed, reliable and frequent backups are the most important component in any plan to go paperless. At our office, multiple layers of backups have been established including incremental and full backups, as well as on-site and off-site backups.

When we reviewed our backup system, our goal was to be able to recover from a major catastrophe as quickly as possible. We also wanted to be able to recover a single file that was corrupted or inadvertently deleted. Our backup system addresses both scenarios. We also ensured there were different types of backup media and verified that a backup could be restored in the event of a hard drive failure.

We use four portable hard drives which are rotated out of the office each week. Each portable hard drive contains a full backup which is created on the weekend, as well as daily incremental backups that are created each weekday that follows. The portable drive is rotated off-site on Fridays and the next portable hard drive brought on-site. At all times, there are three hard drives off-site.

The equipment

The next step is to identify what tools will be needed to carry out your plan. One crucial piece of software is Adobe Acrobat Professional. This software, along with a scanner, allows you to easily convert physical documents to PDF, as well as documents from other electronic formats like Word and Outlook.⁹

You may also want to consider the use of a document management system, which can assist in organizing, managing and retrieving electronic documents.¹⁰

Despite a standardized naming and storage protocol, electronic documents can still go missing. Free or low-cost desktop search engines, such as Copernic, can be used to locate misfiled electronic documents. These create an index of your computer network allowing them to locate an electronic document quickly based upon a certain phrase, unique word or other criteria.¹¹

A critical hardware component is a scanner. In choosing scanners for your office, you will want to consider both speed (pages per minute) and size of sheet feeder.¹² The type and number of scanners your office will need depends upon the size of your practice and your scanning protocol. You may want to consider providing some or all staff members with personal (desktop) scanners, as well as a high-speed scanner placed in a central location. Personal scanners maximize efficiency as they allow for scanning contemporaneously with the creation or handling of a document.¹³

In my view, it is extremely important to provide each staff member with a second monitor. It should be possible to see at least two (or more) documents side-by-side on the monitors in the same way that we lay out physical documents on our desk.

In our office, all computers (including two that are home-based) are connected to our office network. This allows

everyone to access the central databases where documents and data are stored.

Our experience

Going paperless does not have to mean going completely without paper. At our office, going paperless has meant going with much less paper. We continue to open a physical paper file for each new client or matter and store papers in the file while it is active. When any document is received, it is immediately scanned if paper, or printed/converted to PDF if it arrives electronically.

Although most paper that passes through our office is eventually shredded, certain original documents such as wills, court orders and agreements must be kept in their original paper form. They are stored in the traditional manner in fire-proof, secure cabinets.

The advantages of going paperless have been tremendous. Locating documents is quick and easy due to our consistent naming and storage structure. Practically everything is available online from anywhere. Going paperless can result in increased productivity and efficiency, and reduced storage, filing and staffing costs. Who knows? Maybe the first step in getting to a paperless society will be taken by the lawyers. ■

This article has been abridged from a paper entitled: *Moving to a Paperless Office: It's Easier Than You Think* presented by Donna Neff to the 4th Annual Solo and Small Firm Conference and Expo, held May 7, 2009 at the Law Society. Donna Neff is the principal in Neff Law Office Professional Corporation, based in Ottawa. A full copy of this and other papers presented at the conference are available at <http://ecom.lsuc.on.ca/cle/product.jsp?id=CLE09-0050201->



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