

A PAPERLESS EUROPE

JULIA CASALE DISCUSSES HOW, IN THIS DIGITAL AGE, A FORMALISED CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM COULD BRING THE PAPERLESS OFFICE CLOSER TO A REALITY.

With the European Union's next phase of expansion, characteristics of the single market are shifting, driving a continuing evolution to the way the EU does business. For companies in the accession countries, strategies that will help lower costs and boost productivity have worked their way to the very top of the corporate agenda. Why?

The reality of the growing single market continues to have a marked effect on the competitiveness of the European economy. When competition heats up, companies need to act rapidly to maintain their market share. These businesses are turning to content management technology as a means to increase efficiency, lower operating costs and enhance customer service.

Like many buzzwords that have taken the European IT industry by storm, the term 'content management' is, right now, a sizzling topic. Organisations are discovering that content management can deliver real business benefits through not only the efficient creation and repurposing of content, but also through the near elimination of paper. Properly implemented, a content management system can help businesses succeed by increasing the accessibility, searchability, timeliness, and quality of company information. Indeed, a content

management system is the answer for many, coupling the twin benefits of faster, more efficient access to information with lowered operating costs.

THE BAD HABIT

Computers haven't exactly eliminated the need for paper. Some would say the need to print things out has made paper ever-present, and technology has allowed reams of copy to be printed with incredible speed. According to an Analysphere article: "In 1981, US business consumed an estimated 850 billion pages of paper. By 1986, amid claims that the paperless office had arrived, the total had risen to 2.5 trillion pages... In 1990, business was using four trillion pages." That's a lot of paper.

For one reason or another, offices have been unwilling or unable to take the necessary steps to realise a fully paperless environment. One report cites human psychology, entrenched business practices, and labour-saving technology as the three factors preventing the move to paperlessness. Of course, it's true: despite the almost complete permeation of modern life with computers and digital technologies, we still think of paper as



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somehow more permanent, more tactile and visually appealing, and more official. The human race has been working with paper in one way or another for over a millennium. Naturally, it's not going to be easy to break free from such a tradition.

BREAKING THE HABIT

But against those reasons for our reluctance to change, there are plenty of good reasons for seeking to reduce, if not outright abolish, our tendency to print everything out. Environmental concerns alone should be sufficient motive for going paperless. But these too frequently go ignored if corporations believe paperless solutions will harm them financially. Yet this is not the case. In fact, there are good indications of why the opposite is true.

First, because competition is fierce, corporations need to be quick in getting things done. That goes without saying. But paper is not fast, neither in printing nor distribution, and waiting for information in any form does not make good business sense.

Second, technology is at the point where a paperless office is actually within reach. Scanners are faster, computers are more powerful, storage devices are more capacious, and content management systems are ever more reliable, functional and intuitive.

Finally, the cost has never been lower. The marketplace for paperless office technology has exploded, and intense competition has brought prices down. Not only is the hardware half of the solution within reach of even today's smaller companies, but the software half – the content management system – is more reasonably priced than it has ever been.

Paperlessness is no longer a dream for the future – it's closer to a reality of today. Digital alternatives to paper are becoming more sophisticated, and more predominant, every day. For example, new

legislation in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada has made it possible for businesses and governments to effect legally binding transactions electronically. Electronic books and magazines printed on reusable, electronic paper are in the advanced stages of development. And everyone knows what e-mail has done to the traditional letter.

The fact is, digital alternatives to paper are relatively inexpensive, considering that they're less wasteful and much faster than paper solutions. Today, most establishments recognise how digital databases, electronic invoices and computerised records are much more cost-effective than their hardcopy counterparts. What not all of them recognise is that implementing a content management system for the upkeep of their intranet, extranet, or information portal can radically reduce not only the costs associated with storing data, but those associated with maintaining, modifying and transmitting that data throughout their organisation.

THE CONTENT MANAGEMENT SOLUTION

A formalised content management system (CMS) is the surest way to achieve, and then take full advantage of, the paperless office.

For starters, a CMS makes your content available to those who need it. And, equally important, it keeps sensitive material out of the hands of those who don't. The managers of your intranet or extranet can stipulate exactly the degree of access that every user is to be allowed. In this way, not only is the storage and distribution of information effected electronically, but so too is the security. Keys and passcards, like paper, are replaced by rights designations and access privileges.

Additionally, a CMS makes content widely available. Users from many different departments can access the same commonly used



documents, depending on their needs. No longer must one person wait for another to finish with the file he needs, or waste time and resources photocopying the information she is borrowing from someone else. And though content is viewable by an unlimited number of users, a CMS puts in place safeguards against different users modifying the same content at the same time, so that inconsistencies and redundant work are avoided.

A CMS also makes data highly searchable. No matter where within the system an item or document is stored, any user with appropriate access can find it, and begin working on it, within moments. This sort of speed is simply unimaginable in a paper-centric office.

The easy and instantaneous distribution of information can be taken for granted with a CMS. In fact, the word 'distribution' is not entirely accurate. Whereas paper documents need to be copied and physically transported to their intended recipients, a CMS-driven intranet or website is more accurately imagined as a common repository of information. Instead of sending and receiving information, users all access the same content from the comfort of their desk – or home office, or hotel room, or virtually anywhere else on earth with an internet connection.

Thus, the sharing of information in the paperless world is less like a bustling post office than a quiet, virtual library – one with an infinite number of copies of every volume, one whose catalogue can be endlessly added to or taken away from, and one you can visit instantly, no matter where in the world you are. Not only that, but this library's texts are encoded in a language universally legible, internationally comprehensible. And there's no such thing as an overdue fine. Now that's some library. ■

FOUR STEPS TO ACHIEVING THE PAPERLESS OFFICE

1. ACQUIRE SCANNERS TO BEGIN DIGITALLY ARCHIVING HARDCOPY DOCUMENTS

The old paper documents will have to be rendered digitally. They can be stored either as pictures or converted into text. Even companies not intending to go entirely paperless will see the benefits of keeping an additional back-up of sensitive documents, no matter what format they are stored in. As optical character recognition (OCR) software becomes more sophisticated, however, converting those digital snapshots of documents into searchable text documents becomes easier.

2. PLACE PRIORITY ON INFORMATION BASED ON IMPORTANCE AND FREQUENCY OF USE

It must be recognised that many people within an organisation may need access to the same document at the same time. Working with hardcopy, this could rarely be handled. But working with digital documents, this becomes quite easy. By prioritising information based on its frequency of use, firms going paperless know which documents will need to be made available first.

3. SETTLE ON ONE STANDARDISED DOCUMENT FORMAT

If all levels of the organisation are to be able to access all information, it is imperative that a standardised document formatting system be decided on before beginning the move from paper to paperless. For guaranteed longevity and interoperability, it is best that open standards, not copyrighted ones, be employed to this end.

4. LOOK FOR WAYS TO DISTRIBUTE INFORMATION ELECTRONICALLY

It's not enough that all paper documents be duplicated digitally – it's important to discover new ways to share and distribute those documents electronically. But that's one area in which the paperless office excels. It would be nothing less than shortsighted to fail to take advantage of the increased distributability of electronic information. For example, rather than printing to distribute, companies should consider distributing then printing – and then only as necessary.

Source: The Practical Accountant

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