The challenges of running a paperless office

Raad A. Jarjees

President of South East Queensland Branch, IPWEAQ

Program and Technical Services Manager, Ipswich City Council Queensland, Australia

Email: raad.jarjees@ipswich.qld.gov.au or raad@y7mail.com

ABSTRACT: In this time and age, we think that running a digital office is very easy and made possible with all the current technology. Based on this thinking, I decided to take the lead and run a paperless office since 1 June 2018.

I was excited to see a photo of my office distributed through the council intranet and other internal channels to all staff. Soon after I started, I was faced with many challenges including but not limited to the following:

- Attending meetings without a paper copy of an agenda or minutes;
- Taking notes through formal and informal meetings
- Reading notes to your team when standing in an outdoor function
- Internal and external stakeholder management and expectations
- People's mindset and hardwiring towards using paper
- Keeping engaged in meeting while you are writing or typing
- The format of my digital diary compared to carrying a notebook.

These challenges and others forced me to rethink the effectiveness of a paperless office and to consider abandoning the endeavour altogether. But I persevered in the hope that we would adjust.

At a team level, I removed the need for large design plan plotters. I challenged myself and my staff not to print anything and make the best use of the available digital technology.

The paper will discuss implementation, challenges and the overall acceptance from staff and management of a paperless office. The paper will also reflect on the amount of paperwork that we consume every day including supermarket catalogues, newspapers and all kinds of paper advertisements.

KEYWORDS: paperless, office, digital, leadership, hardwire, change management.

1 Introduction

Changing to a paperless office seems very easy and maybe anyone can do it. But it is not that easy when you start to implement it.

Like any other change, a paperless office is not a smooth transition, and it involves adjustment to some hardwiring of the brain to accept it.

Change is viewed as a threat to stability because it seems like it is correcting people's faults which can be uncomfortable and unwelcomed. This may push some policy holders out of their comfort zone and increase stress across the organisation.

Change will also involve dealing with some red tape and disruption to the day to day operations. It may present a challenge to existing organisational culture and also to people at all levels.

Change can be very easy or hard, it can be well organised and structured and have an element of fun to it.

With every change there will be champions, winners and losers, people with and people against. People will see it positive and other will see it negative.

Change may be very welcome by all when the objective is very clear and the strategy is well communicated and executed.

It should have the vision, reasons and projected outcome.

2 Transformation of the design office

2.1 The design office before the change

The design office was full of paper, 3 large plotters, scanners, large plan reading tables, boxes full of paper and large roles of paper everywhere.

Designers and drafters used to print large plans to be able to read the fine details and to conduct design checks and produce mark ups.

The final plans would then be certified by a Registered Professional Engineer of Queensland, RPEQ using a wet signature. The signed plans would then be scanned and a few copies would be produced to issue to construction thereafter.

The original certified plans were barcoded, stored away or sent offsite for storage. It was a very long process to recall any of the old plans from the offsite storage facility. The original plans were scanned and multiple copies produced and issued for construction.

2.2 The Vision

The vision was to digitise the design office and minimise the paperwork to the bare minimum.

The strategy was to follow the following steps:

- Reduce the design plan sizes to A3 size paper instead of A1 and A0.

- Use a digital signature in lieu of wet signature on final plans.

- Use existing corporate document management systems to store and recall design plans.

- Use available software to check and mark-up design plans.

2.3 The Implementation

The first step was to remove the plotters and the scanners from the design office. Then to train staff on the use of the document management system and the PDF writer software. A new file structure was implemented to allow for revisions and track changes to make sure that the final drawings were always used as a reference in construction and not old revisions.

Very close coaching, monitoring and control took place to make sure that this change goes very smoothly without disruption to the day to day business and flow of work.

The process was mapped out and a flow chart was drafted and communicated, then endorsed by all staff.

2.4 The Results

The outcome was very pleasing to see the design office without plotters, clean and tidy. The hidden results were far better than the visible and that includes but is not limited to:

- Staff have better control of their plans

- Easy access to revisions and old plans

- Easier to read digital mark ups comparing to hand written notes

- Easy to recall old plans within seconds and without frustration

- Quieter workplace and no more plotters noise

- No plotters and scanners means no lease contract, maintenance, cartridge, toner, equipment management. Generally no software or hardware issues to worry about

- No plotters and no large plan tables means more free space in the design office

- Aesthetically pleasing workplace comes with high morale

3 Paperless Office

3.1 The initiative

After the success in transforming the design office I started thinking of the next step and the next challenge which would be a completely paperless work environment. This was near-impossible when staff and many people in management and executive roles still preferred to see paperwork.

The idea started with cutting the use of paper where possible. I stopped printing minutes and agendas for distribution for my own team meetings. I used the data projector to display information on the screen, take minutes and take notes.

All desktops were replaced by laptops to enable staff to take their laptops with them anywhere including to meetings. This action stopped many from taking paper to meetings.

To lead by example and considering available technology, I decided to remove all paperwork from my own office and rely 100% on my digital devices. I communicated my intention to all staff and management and it was received very well by all.

I was encouraged by the positive feedback and thought I could have a paperless office without any sort of challenge. The journey was not as easy as I anticipated. Like any other change, I faced many challenges and worked through them one by one.

3.2 The Challenge

3.2.1 People's perception

This was my first challenge as people are used to see each other going to meetings or walking the office floors carrying paper, not a tablet or a mobile device.

Looking at your mobile in a meeting is viewed as private business. People may think you are texting someone outside work, or playing a game or on social media etcetera.

Typing on your keyboard in a meeting is viewed as not being engaged in what is being discussed, and instead you may be responding to emails and not tuned in to the meeting.

Connecting your mobile or laptop through a Bluetooth device to a data projector to display a file or a document through a meeting might not be viewed positively by others.

People look at my empty office and they think that I am not busy or I am getting ready to move out.

3.2.2 Paper created by others

We appear to be using more paper than before as we print everything multiple times.

Copies of emails, documents, reports and spreadsheets are everywhere. We have printing rooms and stationery cupboards full of items. We have filing cabinets and paper recycling bins in every workplace.

Why do we need to recycle paper if we don't use it in the first place?

We all talk about smart cities and our primary schools are not using much paper like before, all kids have laptops and little use of hand writing. All notes to parents are now digital.

People visit you and bring paper to you, such as product and services catalogues, capability statements and more.

You attend a meeting and you will be given a copy of the agenda and a copy of previous minutes.

You go home and it is a similar situation, letter box full, junk mail everywhere, white pages and yellow pages delivered to your doorstep real estate and retail advertisements.

3.2.3 Change Management

Is it easy to switch to a paperless office? The answer is simply no, because of the following:

- This is a change and change is not easy
- Change goes against the brain's hardwiring
- Change is a threat to brain stability
- Change is to fix faults or improve things
- Change is emotional and increases stress levels
- Change deals with red-tape and means business disruption
- Change is a challenge to existing culture
- Change is an exciting adventure to some and gloomy to others

3.2.4 Challenge to generations

Switching from paper to paperless is certainly a challenge to the older generation who joined the workforce prior to the computer time. Baby boomers, Gen X, Y, Z and also to the digital generation (millennials) who found themselves in the middle of going back or moving forward.

It is also a big challenge to some people who are not comfortable in depending fully on the computer to manage their work.

Some managers and senior managers are still printing every email and report and writing comments for their PA to draft responses on their behalf. Others use hand-written notes and mark-ups as task management with their direct reports.

Workplaces should be prepared and made ready for the new digital generation to make

sure that paperwork will be reduced gradually and phased out completely in the very near future.

3.2.5 Benefits of paperless office

Running a paperless office brings the following benefits to the organisation:

- Compound and multiple environmental and financial benefits
- Tidy and aesthetically pleasing workplace
- Efficient and effective record management and document control systems
- Less noise in the workplace with no printing room
- Time and effort saved in printing and collecting copies
- Safer workplace when paper cuts are reduced to zero
- Reduced fire hazard material
- More office space when printers and filing cabinets are removed
- Less or nil stationery to manage
- The office is ready for the next generation
- No need for handwriting interpretation
- No paper, no recycling bins to manage
- No need for bookshelves in the office

4 Conclusions and recommendations

At some stage and in the very near future, paper will disappear from our workplaces and will be replaced with digital technology. The benefit of this paper is to highlight some of the expected challenges for individuals and for organisations. These challenges are real and currently exist in most workplaces. When the time comes and organisations decide to move on to the next step and adopt a paperless office environment, they need to be prepared.

Challenges will be different for each work place depending on the nature of the business and the culture. However it seems well overdue to transition into paperless offices.

Technology is very advanced nowadays that there is nothing that we can think of that can't be done without technology.

5 Acknowledgements

I appreciate and acknowledge all my staff at the programming and technical services branch at the Ipswich City Council for their support and encouragement as well as their agility in moving along with the change.

I also acknowledge upper management and council for their support and understanding of the challenges that I have faced in taking on this initiative.

6 References

Nil