

Businesses trying to break their paper habits

By TY WEST / STAFF

The notion of storing year after year's worth of old documents in big, bulky filing cabinets once seemed like a necessary evil.

But in a world where office space is both expensive and limited, businesses are finding technological options to overcome the many burdens that storing paper creates.

Rather than trashing their old documents, many companies are looking to save the documents and space at the same time by converting to electronic document management.

For Milton Pierson, business officer at the Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, electronic document management paid immediate dividends.

Pierson said his office was dealing with a major space problem due to having between 18 and 20 file cabinets filled with data that was between 3 and 7 years old.

"People were just storing paper," Pierson said. "We knew we would have to reduce size."

So Pierson's office contacted Cabinet NG, a Huntsville-based company that provides electronic document management products for businesses.

By back-storing his office's old data in an electronic format, Pierson said the office went from having almost 20 file cabinets to just **four**.

A more efficient office

According to James True, vice president of business development for Cabinet NG, the main goal of his company's system is to help make offices more efficient - in terms of saving space, money and in processes.

Cabinet NG's electronic system allows invoices, contracts and other documents to be stored electronically and accessible via computer.

True said that has allowed many companies to get rid of filing cabinets and turn space that was once used for

storage into productive space.

The system is essentially the same as a filing cabinet and is set up to interface with many types of software, including QuickBooks, True said.

He said actual paper documents can be scanned or taken from existing electronic documents on computers or fax machines.

True said companies are becoming open to electronic document management because they are beginning to trust the technology and are also realizing that eliminating paper can reduce costs and improve efficiency in the office by making it easy to call up records from a computer, rather than having to go find a piece of paper in a cabinet.

About 70 percent of Cabinet NG's business is in the accounting sector, but True said the company has worked with all types of businesses, primarily small and midsize businesses in industries where documentation is a necessity.

Lewis Jones, managing partner for Haynes Downard Andra & Jones LLP, said his firm is beginning to transfer some of its paper files to an electronic format.

One of the hardest things about moving to an electronic system, Jones said, is breaking old habits.

"Because of years of history, there has to be a change in the mindset that it is housed in an electronic form - a virtual filing cabinet," Jones said.

Jones said his firm has been able to maintain its current level of filing cabinets and has not had to seek new storage options because of the transition to electronic document management.

The firm also has its system set up where it can be accessed from the field.

Security always important

But as more documents are stored electronically, Jones said, there will likely be a heightened need for security - and that encompasses everything from having a secure system to instructing

employees how important it is not to lose sight of their laptops or jump drives when they are out in the field.

True said electronic document management products like Cabinet NG do offer several advantages in terms of security.

Those capabilities are especially important in light of increasingly stringent SEC regulations.

For instance, True said, the system provides companies with the option of restricting access to certain files to those employees who are meant to see them.

Some users can also be allowed only to view certain files, while others can modify them.

"You're able to keep prying eyes out and are able to isolate individual users and control what information they have access to and how they can manipulate it," he said.

True said the industry also has witnessed increases as new compliance regulations are implemented.

"When (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) kicked in, we saw a tremendous jump," True said.

True said business in electronic document management has picked up as the cost of technology has gone down, helping the industry overcome a lot of obstacles that were present when the company first started in 1992.

"Now it costs less to store things electronically than on paper. You can take a four-drawer filing cabinet and put it on a dollar's worth of memory," True said. "The market is growing."



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