

Review: Paperless society remains a distant dream

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The dream of a paperless society may need to be crumpled and tossed out due to the realities of American life.

Last month, Adobe announced that it's turning its document-creation software into an Internet service. Consumers and business people will now more easily be able to view, edit, share and even sign digital documents in Adobe's widely used PDF format, meaning that there will be less cause to print them out, the company says.

Adobe's new Document Cloud may live up to its billing, but don't expect [paper](#) manufacturers to start closing up shop. The company's new service is only the latest effort over the last 40 years to try to reduce our reliance on paper. While plenty of work gets done these days without paper, the old reliable medium hasn't gone away.

"Somebody once said the paperless office is as likely as the paperless bathroom," said Angele Boyd, an analyst with technology research firm IDC. "As much as people think they're getting rid of paper and putting things in place to get rid of paper, somehow it keeps growing."

Our continued reliance on paper is costly. Paper and printer cartridges aren't cheap. Having to resort to paper to get an ink signature or to fill out a form can take time away from more productive work or lead to costly delays in business deals. Sensitive paper documents carry security and privacy risks, particularly when they are sent somewhere or disposed of. And then, of course, there are the environmental impacts of

producing, shipping and disposing of all that paper.

Print continues to grow despite the development and mass adoption of technologies like word processing, cloud storage, e-signatures, smartphones and tablets.

But the use of paper has grown in spite - and sometimes because - of these new technologies. The spread of Internet- and network-connected PCs to workers' desktops allowed them to more easily print items out, Boyd noted. And while many business processes have become digitized, a recent study by IDC found that even when they are, nearly 80 percent of the time, documents end up being printed out anyway.

Companies in particular "seem have to have a tremendous problem in getting rid of paper," said Craig Le Clair, a principal analyst at Forrester Research.

Analysts attribute our ongoing addiction to paper to numerous factors. Some companies are stuck with old systems or processes that require paper and have found it too costly to upgrade. Many companies that do have digital systems in place have many of them that vary from department to department or from process to process because they were acquired at different times or from different vendors. In many cases, those systems won't talk directly to one another - or won't interact with digital systems used by other companies - requiring employees or managers to rely on paper as the lingua franca.

Jim Van Dyke, chief executive of Javelin Strategy & Research, pays close attention to the use of technology in the financial services industry. While some companies have been more successful than others at moving from paper-based to paperless systems, "almost nobody has an all-digital experience," he said.

But our continued reliance on paper is not just due to the shortcomings of businesses. The average American worker is 42, Boyd noted. As people get older, their eyesight tends to worsen, often making it more difficult to read text on screens, particular small ones, she said. At their offices, many workers have resorted to using multiple displays with their computers, a worrying sign for those who might want to replace paper with documents displayed on screens, she said.

"If they can't get a job done with one large display, how can they get a job done with a smartphone or tablet?" she said.

People like the control they feel with paper, said Van Dyke, citing that as a reason why many Americans continue to receive paper statements from their banks and credit card companies. Many people find certain tasks easier to do with paper, particularly when they involve long or complex documents.

Doug Free, for example, is well steeped in technology, having worked for years in Microsoft's public relations department and now as a consultant to Silicon Valley startups. But while he largely runs his business electronically, he still takes notes by hand. And before reading or editing a long document, he'll print it out first.

"I find more mistakes," he said.

Although there's been talk about moving to a paperless society for 40 years, we're still using lots of paper both in our personal affairs and at the office.

"I think people kind of assumed that print would fall off a cliff, like analog cameras," Boyd said. "But right now, we're not seeing it."

Paperless? Not quite

The notion of a paperless society has been bandied about for decades, but recent data indicates its still a far-off dream.

3.5 trillion: Number of pages printed worldwide in 2013. 1.6 percent: The compounded annual rate by which the number of printouts grew globally between 2009 and 2013.

1.7 percent: The compounded annual rate by which the number of printouts is expected to grow between 2013 and 2018.

80 percent: The portion of document-based business process that result in a printout.

45 to 55 percent: The approximate proportion of business documents across industries that are still paper-based.

50 percent: The proportion of U.S. consumers with Internet access who still receive paper checking account statements.

56 percent: The proportion of U.S. consumers with Internet access who still receive paper credit card statements.

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