Reducing your paper waste

Tips on how to curb a hidden source of waste — paper — and save money too

Paperless… or less paper?

Whatever happened to the paperless office? That prediction has been around for decades, and hasn’t happened yet. In fact, a 2008 study from Xerox called The ‘Less Paper’ Office estimated that in 2010 offices worldwide will print 53 trillion pages of paper.

If the paperless office is a myth, another goal remains: the “less paper” office. Paper — how it is procured, used, stored, replaced or recycled — has become a key business concern, environmentally and economically. Consider that:

- Demand for paper accounts for about half of the commercial timber cut globally, reports the World Wildlife Fund;
- A two-decade long United Nations Environment Programme study found that deforestation has contributed to decreased biodiversity, with more than 12% of the world’s plant species becoming critically rare as a result of unsustainable forestry practices.
- Deforestation also contributes to climate change, as forests are a natural absorption and storage mechanism for large quantities of carbon;
- 39% of the pages printed by Canadian workers end up tossed in the wastebasket according to a 2008 survey by Leger Marketing;
- Xerox notes that paper represents over 20% of the cost for office and commercial printing, and that 30% to 40% of commercially printed material goes to waste;
- By some estimates, office paper accounts for 1% to 3% of an organization’s expenses. More broadly, Xerox says that document-related activities can consume 15% of your revenue.

For organizations today, better managing the paper they have — and reducing their paper footprint — has become a significant sustainability challenge.

“Your paper footprint and costs can be bigger than you think when you consider elements like storage and shipping.”
— Jennifer Thompson, master black belt, LEAN Six Sigma, RBC

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Assessing your paper problems

To achieve financial, environmental and operational benefits in your company through better paper management, start by asking four key questions:

1. Are your goals clear?

Making a form simpler, streamlining a process or using electronic communications and transactions can all save paper — but they can also make work more efficient, reduce errors and delays, keep information more secure and enhance customer convenience. Paper reduction measures, beyond the environmental benefits, are an opportunity to review and improve your operational procedures. Framing the issue broadly can increase acceptance and inspire action.

2. Do you know your paper footprint?

Assessing your paper footprint is a relatively simple exercise. Here, you want to examine your paper use from every angle — how much you use, how much is recycled, how it is disposed, ancillary costs (from toner to postage), policies and procedures, etc.

3. Do you understand what your employees are doing with paper?

Could a paper report be just as useful if produced electronically? Perhaps. But you could just as easily be creating an unintended problem if you overlook some issues of functionality.

“We all have hidden processes attached to our paper processes,” says Jennifer Thompson, a master black belt, LEAN Six Sigma at RBC.

For example, consider a report in an electronic format. What would people do if they had it in paper form?

4. Are you embracing the range of solutions?

Many office paper programs focus primarily on recycling, notes Ecoverde, an Ottawa-based firm that advises on corporate responsibility and sustainable development. That is important, but is only part of waste reduction. Look at the bigger picture — how you print, where you print, what you print and why you print. The specific solutions to cut paper use and waste, from digitization to distribution, will flow from that.

How big is your paper footprint, really?

Getting a handle on your paper use can be a matter of simple math: what volume do you order, produce or use? For instance, at the Canadian head office of a food-services company, the elimination of the distribution of certain reports saved 500,000 pages a year, or $24,000 in paper costs. The material costs are obvious, but there is more to getting a handle on your paper footprint than adding up pages.

Jennifer Thompson assists RBC with making processes for clients as efficient as possible. She says your paper footprint and costs can be bigger than you think when you consider elements like storage and shipping. Viewing it that way, paper use actually becomes a real estate issue.

Factoring in the costs to buy, store and retrieve paper, Thompson says paper can actually cost you 10 cents per page. To decrease your paper use, she says, start by understanding the entire footprint and the full expense.

Quantifying the savings

How do your paper choices benefit the environment? To find out, use the Paper Calculator from the Environmental Defense Fund (www.edf.org/papercalculator). You can enter information like paper type, grade, quantity and recycled content to quantify your impacts and measure the environmental results of different choices. (Please note that the Paper Calculator was designed using U.S. based pulp and paper performance metrics and is not always applicable to Canada, specifically when calculating the carbon footprint of Canadian paper products.)

Since 2006, for instance, over four million RBC bank accounts have switched from paper to electronic statements. The paper savings alone amount to approximately 800 metric tonnes — the equivalent of more than 22,000 trees, according to the Environmental Defense Fund’s Paper Calculator.

When it comes to paper, waste comes in many forms. Mountain Equipment Co-op, a sporting goods retailer, switched to 100% recycled paper containing 83% post-consumer waste to print its catalogue on. For just one year’s production of the catalogue, that saved the equivalent of 2,098 trees, 3.8 million litres of water (equal to one swimming pool), 41,000 kg of solid waste (about three garbage trucks), 153,000 kg of greenhouse gases (the equivalent of taking 31 cars a year off the road) and 999 million British Thermal Units (BTUs) of energy (enough for 11 homes a year).

Quantifying savings like this is essential to keeping goals on track, conveying progress to staff and customers and encouraging other companies to take action on paper waste.
Better paper choices

To learn more about making sustainable paper purchasing decisions, two excellent resources are FSC Canada and the World Wildlife Fund:

› FSC is the Forest Stewardship Council, an international certification and labelling system that guarantees that the forest products you purchase come from responsibly managed forests and verified recycled sources.

At www.fsccanada.org, you can browse FSC-certified papers by category.

› The WWF Guide to Buying Paper includes information on the environmental context, including forest loss and degradation, and pollution and climate change.

For some practical tips on responsible paper purchasing and use, and success stories, see www.panda.org

Small changes matter

Redesigning processes and embracing technology solutions mean thinking big to cut paper usage. But when it comes to saving paper, think small too.

For instance, Walmart Canada says they reduced the size of business cards by 35% and now print them on recycled paper made from their waste cardboard boxes.

At RBC, Linda Capretta, manager of deposit and disbursement products, says that when enhancing or introducing services, she is mindful of how even small changes — like increasing margins or reducing font size to allow more text on a page — quickly add up.

“It doesn’t sound that significant, but it will make a difference,” says Capretta.

RBC’s commitment to reduce its paper footprint

In 2007, RBC made a commitment to convert to FSC-certified sources of paper where available.

In 2009, the bank increased the proportion of certified sustainably sourced office paper across its North American and British Isles operations to 84%, compared to 15% in 2008. The organization also increased the proportion of certified sustainably sourced marketing and direct mail paper across our Canadian, RBC Bank (USA) and British Isles operations to 52%, compared to 37% in 2008.

Did you know?

› A typical business office generates about 1.5 pounds or almost 0.7 kg of wastepaper per employee per day.

› 80% of paper from office printers is for draft purposes.

› Paper waste (commercial and residential) accounts for over 40% of waste sent to landfill.

› Every recycled tonne of paper saves approximately 17 trees.

› Paper manufacturing is the third largest user of fossil fuels worldwide.

› Recycled paper requires 64% less energy than making paper from virgin wood pulp.

› A single sheet of virgin pulp white office paper requires one litre of water in the manufacturing stage.

› One tonne of regular office paper (about 40 cartons of copier paper) requires the cutting of 19 trees.

Source: www.ecoverde.ca and www.conservatree.com
Paperless record-keeping

Just what kinds of results can companies expect from paperless record-keeping?

Beth Gordon, senior manager, global client strategies, RBC, describes a hotel management company that was issuing 400-plus cheques daily. They were couriered across Canada to be folded into envelopes, addressed, stamped and mailed — a hugely labour-intensive process. In addition, several cheques were intercepted and fraudulently altered for amounts as large as $75,000.

“By switching from paper cheques to electronic payments, this company estimated they saved $15 per cheque, plus courier costs,” says Gordon. Beyond the most obvious cost savings and the reduced paper waste, going paperless with records can offer a multitude of other benefits:

› Increased security, with documents in a single, safe repository (i.e. password-protected);

› Time savings through automated collection, authentication and organization of documents;

› A superior audit trail;

› Added convenience (accessibility, sharing of documents, ability to search, etc.);

› Better control of cash flow in the cases of electronic payments. “There’s no uncertainty about when a cheque is going to clear, and it makes it easier to claim supplier discounts for early payment,” says Gordon;

› Improved accuracy, as re-keying is not required;

› Better disaster recovery protection;

› The ability to convert records rooms into usable office space, or eliminate warehousing costs;

› Increased efficiency. If it takes five minutes to retrieve and replace a paper file, and an employee works with just one file an hour, that’s 40 minutes a day, or 173 hours a year. That is equivalent to a full month’s effort for a full-time employee.

For more information and advice on greening your business:

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› Visit us online at rbc.com/business-advice

To learn more about how RBC® is greening its own business, please visit www.rbc.com/environment