

PAPERLESS PLCs

From Post-Room to Board Room

The legend returns

An enduring legend of the pre-computer world was the growth of public institutions and private enterprise through the dedication and skills of longservice 'cradle to grave' employees. Before further and higher education delivered highly qualified and trained people into the workplace, organisations had to train and professionalise their own school-leavers and prepare them for a lifetime of work in a single organisation. The legend of starting at the very bottom and working your way up was pervasive.

Structural changes in the labour market brought about by rapid technological change, rapid organisational change, global markets and global competitors now suggest that lifetime employment in a single organisation is history and continuous job changing, career changing and re-training will become the norm. The days of starting as a messenger or in the post-room and working your way up the organisation are gone forever.

Or are they? As we leave the 20th century we can see Paperless PLC's under development. Notwithstanding that there will not be any completely paperless PLC's in the 21st century, the most fundamental changes in white collar working since the introduction of telephone, typewriter, adding and copying machines at the end of the 19th century are now underway as business makes its most serious attempt to-date to cut down on paper-pushing.

Telephone, typewriter and adding machines have been transformed by information technology. Facsimile reproduction - from copying to scanning to image - processing has been revolutionised. If you put all the technologies together as integrated systems - using standardised compatible components and sub-systems - the artefacts are now in place to reduce business paperwork to the point of elimination for most intra-organisation work processes. Paper will still come into and go out of organisations but on a reducing scale given fax, internet, electronic document interchange and other forms of communication.

We have heard it all before - for at least the last ten years. But now it is happening. The first implementations are in, working and producing measurable benefits. The technologies have matured and the environment in which to deploy them has become very sympathetic.

The global market has triggered fundamental revisions to the mission, markets, organisation structures and baseline operating performance measurements of many organisations. These can be seen for example in the re-structuring of the financial services industry, mergers and acquisitions activities and even citizens' charters and compulsory competitive tendering in public services. With the bulk of the labour force in the 1990s employed in white collar activities and with technology available to dramatically increase white collar productivity - it is hardly surprising that serious efforts are underway to go paperless.

Redefining baseline operating performance - how to become customer-driven, defining and measuring the time to reply to a request for information, how long to take to quote for business, how to respond to a complaint, how soon to research, design and launch a new product, how quickly to respond to competition - is as much a product of ensuring survival as it is of ensuring improving profitability. It is part of business process re-engineering at the grand level or work process improvement at the humble workplace or both. Delaying of management, empowerment of staff, reduction in bureaucracy and enriched information technology support are all part of these change processes.

The resulting new organisations take on not only new management structures but also new physical shapes often located in different premises and different locations. Many of its activities are location independent given the availability of low-cost high capacity digital telecommunications. An insurance company might consist of a single national postal address where all the mail is delivered to a warehouse complex on a trading estate. At this place all the mail would be opened, scanned, date stamped and converted into images and then filed in the warehouse (or converted into something less bulky than paper if the paper record is not-needed).

Once scanned, the mail would be pre-processed by Indexers before being sent electronically anywhere in the country to be processed. The Indexers would examine each document and using very sophisticated processing rules would decide on the class of document, the competent authority to deal with it, the routing of the document, the standard elapsed time target for responding, the workflow process for the document and the supervisory monitoring system to be used including compliance with regulations issues. The Indexers thus record the entry of the document into the organisation and send it on its way for processing. We used to call this activity the post-room and the work used to be done by the most junior people because in the main it consisted of physically sorting the mail into batches, and moving it to where it had to go.

The New Mailroom is different. The Indexers are among the brightest people in the organisation. They are controlling the blood flow to the organisation. If they get it wrong, baseline operating performance cannot be achieved. The old excuse of 'organisational misadventure' is no longer acceptable or even sustainable. Organisational misadventure is terminal in today's markets.

ROCC's interest in the New Mailroom arises because of forms processing requirements. If all incoming mail is going to be scanned and electronically routed to where it is needed, this mail will include forms containing structured information for automated processing usually transaction and/or financial data. If the departments are no longer going to receive the actual forms - how can they "key-in" or enter the data into their computer systems? ROCC's SEECHECK Images software is designed to collect forms in image format (TIFF files), batch them for audit control and subsequent storage, and convert the images of the forms into computer records and fields either through automatic character recognition or keying from the images for onward processing by accounting and administrative systems. SEECHECK Images has powerful indexation, validation and workflow features for these tasks and can work in the New Mailroom or anywhere in the organisation.

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The New Mailroom may be in humble surroundings but it will be packed with high technology and bright people. These people will have in-depth knowledge and experience of how the organisation works and it is a fair wager that many of them will make the journey over time from the New Mailroom to the New Boardrooms. Working your way up in the organization will have a new meaning and the legend will have returned.

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