

SCAN AT SOURCE - Who Dares Wins

The earliest preserved written records in the form of hieroglyphics are around 5,500 years old. The earliest modern written records are around 2,500 years old. Man's pre-disposition to record and communicate with pictures and ciphers could be said to be culturally ingrained.

Paper has been used for recording for over 2,000 years. As a communication medium it is the first record that most babies ever hold. As a commodity it is used for many things. There isn't a more ubiquitous manufactured product than paper.

Thus trying to stop using paper seems like a doomed venture. But that attempt is at the heart of the most revolutionary change in office work for probably a 100 years. After a decade of hype about office automation with paperless offices, white collar organisations are now getting serious about working without using paper.

If in any doubt stroll down the High Street and take a look at your typical Bank. It used to consist of a small banking hall for customers and a big back office papermill for bankers. Now it is beginning to look like a car showroom. The back office has vanished and the front office is broken up into cosy selling zones. The paper has increasingly gone electronic or it has gone for a time into paper factories on trading estates where it is in process of being automated into oblivion. Customers may continue to use paper to communicate with the Bank, but in future the Bank will not be processing the paper. The IT revolution is now eating the paper rather than just producing it.

Computers aren't actually eating paper in the physical sense. Computers are devouring the images presented on the paper, making the paper redundant, and it is being done by a process called 'scanning'. Scanning is one stage on from facsimile. Instead of reproducing a document at a distance as in fax, computers store and manipulate the image of the document.

With scanning, documents are stacked in a hopper, a button is pressed, the documents pass through the scanner one at a time, the image is captured and then, unlike fax, recognition software is used to recognise what is written on the document so that the information can be electronically manipulated. The recognition software, or intelligent character recognition as it is known, enables documents to be processed automatically by referring to what is written on the document. Thus documents can be sorted, prioritised, filed, rejected (for example, an insurance claim with no signature) or actioned automatically with (for example, recognising a tick box requesting more information). The document image is indexed and routed by networks to where it needs to be processed. Thus instead of physically moving paper around, white collar workers move images electronically. The image contains the logical entity of the document. The paper from which it originated is just the physical shell that may have to be kept for a time for legal and administrative reasons but doesn't have to be carried round the organisation.

Scanning is entering the white collar workplace at two levels. Firstly, there is the New Mailroom where large, expensive production-oriented scanners devour the in-coming post. The New Mailrooms are springing-up where there are big volumes to be handled. The

second level is at the desktop where convenience scanners are being used as general purpose input devices. Connected to PCs, convenience scanners are for casual users who want an easy way to capture information from forms and documents. It has taken PC users a decade to discover that data input is a bore and a chore and now they want something better.

Usage of desktop scanners is forecast to grow at around 40% per annum for the rest of the century, which even by IT industry standards is explosive growth. It isn't too difficult to see the emergence of a low-cost data capture utility software for every PC that meets the requirements of most users.

With production and desktop scanning forming a pincer movement on paperpushing, reducing paperworking becomes a very practical proposition. Paperpushing has its own organisational structure and decision-making hierarchy. Take away the paper and the structure, and decision-making can be streamlined by automating the rules system that governed the old paperpushing system. This is one of the reasons why insurance companies can reduce proposal processing time from a month to a few days. They are no longer pushing paper. They are pushing electronic images around at speeds that were not too long ago unimaginable based on rules designed to give customers a better service while still protecting the integrity of the transaction for the company.

The basic law of scanning is 'Scan At Source'. If you can completely eliminate paper, that is the ultimate goal achieved, but the reality is that paper will be here forever and, if you have to process paper, capture the image at the earliest feasible stage in the process cycle regardless of whether you are working with a production centre like a New Mailroom or a desktop over which paper passes. Scan at Source is the gateway to the world of information technology. Once you have the image, you are on the information highways and superhighways with the power to outperform the competition. Paperpushing in business can rarely compete in terms of service provision and economics with scanning and processing images wherever there is critical volume mass.

ROCC's SEECHECK™ range of information capture softwares are designed for both New Mailroom production and desktop environments. SEECHECK works on UNIX, Novell and MICROSOFT software platforms for Client/Server and networking configurations and uses commodity hardware products. SEECHECK is ideal for capturing data for subsequent processing using both automated and keyboarding techniques.

Scanning revolutionises office working and leading organisations are implementing systems for significant benefits. It is a case of who dares wins. Winners are scanning at source.

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