The Role of Paper in a Digital World
By:Bill Fitzpatrick

If you believe in technology for technology's sake, then you are now advised to move on to other more pleasing articles. If you ignore this warning and elect to read the following, be aware that you will face certain unpleasant and unexpected realities, such as a dreadful error by a futurist, unsettling thoughts about the "all-digital world," a terrible confession, and a few exciting thoughts about … paper. All of these realities will be discussed against the backdrop of the multi-unit restaurant operator, as we answer the question, "If the world is digital, why does HP sell millions of printers and billions of cartridges, and what implications does this paper preference have to do with getting the attention of the restaurant manager?"

In 1970, futurist Alvin Toffler wrote, "Making paper copies of anything is a primitive use of machines and violates their very spirit." While that sounds very nice, according to a recent Lexmark analysis, no one cares about machines' spirits.

"Virtually no one anticipated the tremendous reverse impact the Internet, electronic mail, personal digital assistants and even electronic calendars would have on the number of documents we print and the amount of paper we use. But the unthinkable has happened. More documents are being created and printed than ever before. The impact of these trends on the enterprise information technology infrastructure is startling.

• Printing is costing corporations an amount equal to 1 percent to 3 percent of their revenue[1].
• The average $1 billion corporation generates 88 million sheets of paper each year[2].
• Paper use is growing 6 percent to 8 percent per year[3].
• Up to 60 percent of help desk calls are output related[4].
• E-mail is increasing printing volumes by 40 percent[5].
• Employees, on average, are printing 33 Internet pages each day[6].

What is it about paper? Why hasn't it gone the way of the slide rule? Why all this printing?

Edward Tenner is a Princeton University lecturer.

"What went wrong with the assumption that electronics would take the place of paper?" Tenner asked in a Harvard Magazine *essay in 1988 called 'The Paradoxical Proliferation of Paper.' "Why did almost nobody foresee that the microchip would be the best thing that happened to paper since governments got people to accept the stuff as money?*

"What is really happening is that the use of paper has shifted," he said. "For instance, from publishers who circulate products on computer disks to consumers who pop the disks in their computer to do the printing at their end."

The restaurant manager understands that paper is a workable medium, in the sense that it is much easier to print and annotate a suggested labor schedule than it is to modify the data in electronic form. Many printed reports are easier to read than electronic reports. It will take an unexpected paradigm shift that would involve application providers and corporate business practices to convert a restaurant to a paperless environment.

As any electronic book manufacturer can attest, people prefer the touch of paper to the colors of the screen. This has interesting implications. Is there a relationship between our preference for paper and the priority we assign to incoming communications? Simply put, if an unread fax is on our desk and the computer voice says, "You have mail," which do we process first?

Melissa Houston is vice president of information technology for Rubio's Restaurants. Rubio's recently announced record revenues and earnings. Several months ago, I asked her about Rubio's preferred method of restaurant communication.

Houston said, "When the district managers really want to get the attention of the unit managers, they fax. We have other tools, but they feel the fax works best."

With the opportunity of using a myriad of technologies, the lowly paper fax (circa 1980) is the preferred choice. The implication is interesting. Simply providing e-mail capability (or other forms of communication) may not be enough. The human element—what captures the attention or the personal preferences of the recipient—should also be considered. Employees might indeed prefer a paper fax to an electronic mailbox.

The digital world has brought important changes to the multi-unit restaurant operator. Over the past 20 years there has been a significant change in the speed and amount of data to and from the restaurants. Despite this, when I visit major restaurant operators (and restaurants) across the country, there is paper everywhere. I must confess I printed out 47 pages of paper of academic research while researching this very topic. Electronic mail, pagers and cell phones are useful business tools and have their place in a corporate messaging strategy. In this era of bits and bytes, however, the human preference for paper should be considered.

Jesse Shera, a librarian, perhaps expressed the most accurate thoughts about the possibilities of a paperless office. Shera said, "The paperless society is about as plausible as the paperless bathroom."

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Notes
[1]*Source: Gartner Group, "Rightsizing Output Fleets: The Hidden Gold Mine," March 19, 2001*
[2]*Source: AIIM*
[3]*Source: XPLOR*
[4]*Source:* InformationWeek*, November 24, 1997-Forrester Research*
[5]*Source: XPLOR*
[6]*Source: MarketTools*