

## The Paperless Office – 12 months on By Peter Garsden



*It's not like this anymore!*  
Graphic from [www.shredit.co.uk](http://www.shredit.co.uk)

On 6<sup>th</sup> September 2010, Abney Garsden McDonald solicitors took the plunge, and went paperless. In a previous article I described the process of evolution from conventional paper files, through scanning all incoming correspondence in 2003, to “paperless” a year ago (see <http://www.infolaw.co.uk/newsletter/index.asp?p=260>).

We now have clean desks, fewer filing cabinets, large bins for shredding on each floor, and 2 screens to look at, rather than one. Here are some practical points about how we operate:

- We do child abuse compensation cases, which involve the receipt of large bundles of records. We have to choose whether to scan them in or not. Large files can take a lot of processor power out of the server. The rule is that if the paper is more than an inch thick it probably will not be scanned in. One can always buy more speed and capacity for the server these days quite cheaply. Our terminal server has not been upgraded since 2005.
- We planned to use pdf bundles for all Counsel and Medical Experts. Not all expert and Counsel will agree, hence we have a hybrid situation where some bundles are sent on paper, and others electronically.
- Drop Box ([www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com)) is a secure online delivery system for digital documents, and is free up to 2 gigabytes of data. It comes into its own when the firm's in-house email box limit is exceeded, and the vital bundle you want to deliver in a hurry simply does not arrive. Our email box limit is set at 30 megabytes. Large Court Bundles can easily exceed this limit, hence the need to send the bundle by some other method.
- Many judges and Counsel prefer Lever Arch files than digital images. We find that if we send digital bundles, they are often converted into paper at the other end. I hesitate to suggest that people tend to use tried and tested systems, rather than change to something new.
- To make image files searchable, one has to use OCR (optimal character recognition), which is possible with Adobe Acrobat, but not always successful, particularly if some of the documents are of poor quality or handwritten.
- We appear to have saved only 23, rather than the forecast 65, trees according to our Shredding Company – Shred-it ([www.shredit.co.uk/](http://www.shredit.co.uk/)). This is because our forecast was based on the first month's shredding, which was disproportionately large. We are, however getting rid of filing cabinets, as the paper files are closed, and space appears in drawers.
- We no longer need to carry huge files of paper up and down 3 flights of stairs.
- One of our solicitors used to live in Manchester, but wanted to move to Brighton. She dials in every day. She works without paper, and cannot imagine a world of files. In a paper world she might have left us. We have some fee earners who, for perfectly

understandable domestic reasons prefer to work at home for some of the time. They no longer need to transport huge files backwards and forwards.

- We share a broadband ADSL line with up to 20 other users. It keeps cutting out, and we cannot understand why. BT have failed to come up with a diagnosis. It is not a problem for internal users, but for those that dial in. Thus we are converting for no increase in cost to a leased line. We await the new speed with interest. It is not commonly known that the upload speed of broadband is only about 300 meg. rather than the commonly advertised 20 megabytes download speed. Those that dial in only get our upload speed. The new leased line has a forecast 4 megabyte upload and download speed which we hope will cure the problem.
- We are also converting to the new BT internet telephone lines with a new digital exchange with the usual whistles and bells that we don't have with our existing analogue telephone system eg Direct Dial, Voice Mail etc.
- Two screens have proved a big hit in the office, and a necessary addition when going paperless. 3 screens would be even better. If you think about it, you might have at least two documents open at once, so it makes sense to replicate the desk with screens and the filing cabinet with computer folders.
- We could not have achieved the seamless nature of the conversion without our Proclaim Case Management system from Eclipse Legal Systems ([www.eclipselegal.co.uk](http://www.eclipselegal.co.uk)). Computer Document management is essential. The latest version has a very efficient folder system for each case, so that all essential documents can be filed, and organised in the same way as the conventional Word folder system. It also a good batch scanning system that saves the incoming mail direct to the case.

In summary

So has it been a success? Undoubtedly. We are no longer heavily reliant on the conventional typing process, as it is much easier now to do urgent things yourself as quickly, if not quicker than using a dictating machine. The downside is that after sitting at a desk for about 3 hours, your hips begin to ache, but there again, that is probably my age.....

I would recommend that any firm big or small take the bull by the horns, and engage in cost saving. We are a sole principal 30 staff firm and our calculated conservative saving is £65,000 per year. However, it takes someone at the top to have the courage of his/her convictions! There will be many objections along the way. Do not be diverted, and have the patience to work through them.

If you do not have a case management system it is not impossible, just easier with one which has a batch scanning capability like Proclaim. We started scanning incoming post in 2003 without Case Management, then did not go paperless until 2010. We have managed it with large document intensive cases. I cannot think of a type of work where it would be impossible.

We have invested in two industrial scanners at a total cost of about £5000, but it would be easy to just start with one and get there gradually. At the beginning we calculated how much incoming post we receive per week and then asked for advice from our hardware suppliers. Not a difficult exercise.

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