



The Importance of Document Imaging

A reflection on why we don't use this useful technology as much as we should

Document imaging or the scanning of paper documents, has been around a long time. Along with workflow, it was the real beginning of office automation.

Document imaging did for office automation what barcode technology did for physical records management and asset management. That is, it allowed manual processes to be automated and improved; it provided tangible and measurable productivity improvements and as well as demonstrably better access to information for the then fledgling knowledge worker.

Today we have a paradox, whereas we seem to take document imaging for granted we still don't utilize it to anything like its full capabilities. Most people use document scanners of one kind or another, usually on multi-function-devices, but we still don't appear to use document scanning nearly enough to automate time-consuming and often critical business processes.

I don't really know why not because it isn't a matter of missing technology; we seem to have every type of document scanner imaginable and every type of document scanning software conceivable. We just seem to be stuck in the past or, we just are not applying enough thought to analysing our day to day business processes; we have become lazy.

Business processes based on the circulation of paper documents are archaic, wasteful, inefficient and highly prone to error because of lost and redundant copies of paper documents; in fact they are downright dangerous. Yet, every organization I deal with still has critical business process based on the circulation of paper. How incredibly careless or just plain stupid is that?

Let's look at it from the most basic level. How many people can read a paper document at any one point in time? The answer is one and one only. How many people can look at a

digital image of a document at any one point in time? The answer is as many as need to. How hard is it to lose or damage a paper document? The answer is it is really, really easy to lose or damage or deface a paper document. How hard is it to lose or damage or deface or even change a secure digital copy of a document? The answer is it is almost impossible in a well-managed document management system.

So why are we still circulating paper documents to support critical business processes? Why aren't we simply digitising these important paper documents and making the business process infinitely faster and more secure? For the life of me, I can't think of a single valid reason for not digitising important paper documents. The technology is readily available with oodles of choice and it isn't difficult to use and it isn't expensive. In fact, digitizing paper will always save you money.

So why do I still see so many organizations large and small still relying on the circulation of paper documents to support important business processes? Is it a lack of thought or a lack of imagination or a lack of education? Can it really be true that thirty-years after the beginning of the office automation revolution we still have tens of thousands or even millions of so called knowledge workers with little knowledge of basic office automation? If so, and I believe it is true from my observations, then it is a terrible reflection on our public and corporate education systems.

In a world awash in technology like computers, laptops, iPhones and iPads how can we be so terribly ignorant of the application and benefits of such a basic and proven technology as document imaging?

Some of the worst example can be found in large financial organizations like banks and insurance companies. The public perception is that banks are right up there with the latest technology and most people look at examples like banking and payment systems on smartphones as examples of that. But, go behind the front office to the back office and you will usually see a very different world; a world of paper and manual processes, many on the IT department's 'backlog' of things to attend to, eventually.

Here is a really dumb example of this kind of problem. I recently decided to place a term deposit with an online bank. Everything had to be done online and the website didn't even offer the download of PDFs which would have been useful so you could read through pages of information at your leisure and find out what information they required so you could make sure you had it handy when completing the forms on the website.

I managed to find a phone number and rang them up and asked for the documentation in PDF form only to be told they were paperless and that everything had to be done online. So I persisted going from page to page on the website, never knowing what would be required next until the last page and yes, you guessed right. On the very last page the instructions were to print out the completed forms, sign them and mail them in. Paperless for me; much to my inconvenience and paper for them, again much to my inconvenience. There is really no excuse for this kind of brainless twaddle that puts the consumer last. Their processes

obviously required a signature on a paper document so the whole pretence of an online process was a sham; their processes required paper.

Hopefully, when they received my paper documents they actually scanned and digitized them but I am willing to bet that if I could get into their back office I would find shelf after shelf of cardboard file folders and paper documents. Hopefully, next time I ring up they can actually find my documents. Maybe I could introduce them to the revolutionary new barcode technology so they could actually track and manage their paper documents far more efficiently?

The message is a simple one. If you have business processes based on the circulation of paper you are inefficient and are wasting money and the time of your staff and customers. You are also taking risks with the integrity of your data and your customer's data.

Please do everyone a favour and look carefully at the application of document imaging, a well-proven, affordable, easy to implement and easy to manage business process automation tool.



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sales@knowledgeonecorp.com
www.knowledgeonecorp.com