Is The Paperless Office A Reality?

Anyone who talks about the paperless office becoming a reality any time soon may want to think again! The amount of paper that is used is not actually decreasing. Paper is simply used in a different way than it used to be. No matter how much you reduce your pulp consumption, computers will never completely eliminate the need for hard copies of certain documents. Technology has simply changed the way we interact with our paper and in some instances, its misuse has actually increased the amount of clutter on people's desks! However, it doesn't have to be that way, if you follow a few simple rules:

Consolidate and Coordinate

A lot of the battle between electronic and paper comes down to label confusion. You named it something different on your hard drives than you did in your hanging files, and now you can't find what you're looking for. The key to resolving this conflict is consistency. Try to make sure that your electronic system mirrors the one in your filing cabinet. Whatever you called a folder in one place should be what you call a folder in the other. If the paper copy is named “utilities,” don't label it “monthly bills” on your computer, or you'll just get confused later on.

Another solution would be to choose one format for each category of information you maintain, and store everything related to that topic together in one place. So if you like to keep your bank statements on your computer, do it consistently for every single account. This could mean signing up for e-billing or scanning in the paper statement when it arrives. If you prefer to organize utility records in your file drawer, that's a good reason to request a paper bill. Just find something that works for you and be consistent. Storing half of one file electronically and the other half in paper format is going to increase the amount of time spent searching for a document.

Think Twice Before You Print

It's almost a Pavlovian response -- you create a document or receive an email, and the knee-jerk reaction is to hit the “print” button! So instead of helping you reduce the paper in your life, that high-tech box on your desk is actually doubling the stacks and piles you have to deal with! The next time you feel the urge to print, stop and ask yourself why. Do you have a specific reason for needing a hard copy of that item, or can you refer back to it just as easily in

electronic format? “I might want to read it later” probably isn't a good enough reason as you can save a copy on your hard drive. “I should share this with so-and-so” doesn't cut it either when send them the document as an email attachment. Some people simply prefer to have hard copies so that they can take specific notes directly on the document. In this case you would want to have something to hold active papers. A Smead Project Folder or a wire rack with labeled SuperTab® Folders would be good solutions for this issue.

If you're worried that you might forget to take care of an action item without a mound of paper littering your desk to remind you, your method of dealing with electronic to-do's may be at fault. Keeping track of computerized follow-ups should be no different from handling paper ones. Set up a folder in your email program for each action file category (“to read,” “to pay,” “to contact,” etc.) As requests come in that require your attention, put that message into the appropriate folder. Then set aside time on your weekly admin day to empty each in turn, the same way you would your paper to-do files. If you follow the same steps for processing email as snail mail, there really is no need to print every document out.

By Ramona Creel, Professional Organizer