

On Becoming an e-Agent— Paperless Offices, Portable Drives, and PDFs Part 32

By Jo Becker, BA

I can remember the fuss about the coming of paperless offices when I licensed in the late 90's and still haven't seen it come to fruition for the masses. Granted, some large corporations have invested in technologies that get at it, but for the average small business owner, I haven't seen it yet.

According to a survey of more than thousand office workers by Logitech, paper is the biggest cause of clutter in the workplace (61%), with file folders accounting for another 36%. For many, productivity is tied to the condition of their workplace and 60% of those surveyed said they feel more productive when their workplace is clean and tidy.

In an effort to streamline our business I researched online document services and transaction management platforms. Of the latter, I was unable to find a practical solution available in our area, but the idea was to provide an integrated online venue for all professionals in the closing stage of transaction to keep the client and each other informed thus providing a higher level of service.

My parents/partners and I did try an online document storage service that charged a monthly fee to store our documents (form letters, database, marketing materials, etc.; anything really) on their computers, which we could access via any computer with Internet access by logging into the company's site. The problem for me with this service is that I already had a *ton* of files when we subscribed to the service and uploading each file was a slow, tiresome, and time-consuming chore. The added fallacy is that you may be able to get to your file from any internet access, but if the computer you're sitting at at the moment doesn't have the same program you used to create the file you won't be able to open it. This was true for us with our database program, which would have been one of the most useful files for us to be able at access, open and search from anywhere. The added hassle of organizing and maintaining files and folders online as well as on my own computer was too much to take (at the time, transfer speeds were too slow to consider saving files on the service's computers only).

It's been a few years since I researched these particular services and I trust whole-heartedly that great strides have been made, yet I still see few paperless offices. Two technologies that I feel really have helped move us toward greater efficiency are truly portable drives and PDF files. In both incidences, these technologies work when and because you need access to a file you can change or update or you want to share the file with others and/or you don't want them to be able to change the file. While these tools are highly functional and are becoming indispensable, they don't eliminate paper records; they have separate purposes in my mind.

Today's USB portable drives are small enough to fit in your pocket (you could, in fact, fit several in your pocket). They simply plug into a computer—virtually any computer—via one of its USB ports. They're relatively inexpensive and extremely handy. For permanent storage CDs are still the way to go, but the USB drives are faster to copy files to and make for easy transmission of files from one computer to another.

As for PDF (portable document format) files, Adobe created the standard when they launched their Acrobat software. What most of you have and are familiar with is Adobe's free Acrobat Reader. This bit of software the company makes available to anyone and everyone free of charge in order to read PFD files. This is the success behind Acrobat's market dominance. However, in order to *create* a PDF you have to purchase Adobe's full version of Acrobat, which costs several hundred dollars. While I've gotten my money's worth out of mine, I had to take a big gulp before making the purchase.

Some interesting alternatives available today include a try-it-free-online offer from Adobe at <http://createpdf.adobe.com>. If you sign up you can make five PDFs free. Chances are (and, of

course, they're betting) that five files won't last you long. Adobe offers a monthly online subscription for \$9.99 that allows you to make unlimited PDFs (available at the same address above).

Some alternative options include PDF995 (available at <http://PDF995.com>), CutePDF (at <http://www.acrosoft.com/products/cutepdf/writer.asp>), Gymnast (found at <http://www.oakworth.demon.co.uk/gymnast.htm>), Win2PDF (at <http://win2pdf.com>), and PrimoPDF (available at <http://www.primopdf.com>). Each of these products is either freeware (free to download and use) or offers a free downloadable version, often with an expanded and advertising-free version available to purchase. I haven't personally used any of these alternative products and, while I hate to be a bandwagon rider, there's something to be said for going with the industry leader and Adobe's \$9.99 a month option seems quite reasonable.

To once again quote Gary Taylor with RE/Max equity group, "these are just my opinions and sometimes I'm right." Suffice it to say that, for the average computer user or businessperson, the paperless office remains a myth. Nonetheless, there are incredible computing tools out there to make us all the more efficient!

If all of this seems too overwhelming, ask for help, but keep trying! Before long you will get the hang of it. In the meantime, *hang it there!*

Jo Becker has eight years of licensed real estate experience. As a former broker, she knows how important, and sometimes scary, technology and self-promotion can be. Jo has provided personalized one-on-one marketing consultation and computer software training to the industry since 2002.

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