M-Files®

7 Simple Steps for Going 100% Paperless in the Professional Services Industry

One of the biggest challenges facing most professional services organizations today is that there's likely more competition than ever before.

Not only are you battling with the fact that more and more competitors are cropping up on a daily basis, but you also need to consider the biggest threat to your business of all: The Internet. In a world where people can find the answer to most questions they might have in a manner of minutes with a keyboard and an Internet connection, specialized services like the ones you offer are increasingly falling out of favor. Therefore, you have to do absolutely anything you can to provide people with the type of experience that the Internet simply cannot match.

To do this, you need to re-examine your existing operations to eliminate any and all obstacles that prevent your employees from doing exactly that. For far too long, one of the biggest obstacles has also been the one that a lot of people seemingly overlook:

P A P E R

Consider the fact that, to best serve your customer, your organization needs to guarantee that customer information and documents are easily accessible and secured. Doing so in a world that is entirely paper-based isn't just difficult — oftentimes, it's largely impossible. Paper documents take too long to find, and they can easily be lost or misplaced. All of this serves as a major delay to the outcomes that your customers demand.

In the modern era, professional services companies have a very real need to digitally manage data collected through different touchpoints like customer onboarding, customer relationship management and more. Doing so is one of the best opportunities to get rid of the types of silos that are commonly (albeit accidentally) built around certain processes and departments. It's equally important to note that documentation bottlenecks and mismanaged information isn't just unfortunate — it's incredibly costly. Not only does it distract staff members from their core tasks, but it can also negatively impact revenue and increase risk at the same time. Companies like yours MUST take any step available to eliminate their document management bottlenecks to reduce costs and increase agility as much as possible.

Both of these things are pivotal goals for the future success of your organization, and they're made all but impossible by the paper-based world you're currently living in. Is it a complicated situation? Yes — but thankfully, it's also one with straightforward solution.

If so many of your problems exist due to paper, the easiest thing to do would be to get rid of it entirely. If you take the steps to move into a 100% paperless office, so many of those roadblocks come crashing down and absolutely nothing is standing in between you and the valuable, unbeatable experience you're trying to create.

No, transitioning into a paperless office isn't quite as simple as flipping a light switch. But it is absolutely possible, and it's probably going to be a lot more enjoyable than you think. All you have to do is understand why it's so important to go paperless to begin with and keep a few important steps in mind along the way.

WHY GO PAPERLESS? BREAKING THINGS DOWN

By far, one of the biggest arguments in favor of creating a paperless office for your own business ultimately comes down to the often-dramatic costs associated with storing, filing and (of course) paper itself.

According to one recent study, it's estimated that about **45% of all paper documents that are printed in offices end up getting thrown in the garbage by the end of the day**. All told, the same study estimates that companies spend more than **$120 billion per year — every year — on printed forms**. When you consider the sheer amount of time that people also need to spend storing and organizing these files, and also the fact that most of them become quickly outdated in as little as three months, it's beyond clear that you're looking at a situation that should be addressed at all costs.

Along the same lines, it's also important to consider the sheer amount of money you're spending in terms of the inefficiency of paper-related processes. Consider the fact that according to another recent study, your average office worker makes approximately 61 trips per week to the fax machine, printer, and copier. Even if the entire experience only takes five minutes, that's still five minutes that they're not spending on more important tasks. Five minutes times 61 trips also work out to about five hours of time spent for week — all without much, if anything, to really show for it.

Obviously, all of this contributes to another one of the biggest costs of a paper-filled office: productivity drain. Gartner estimates that on average, about four weeks' worth of productivity is lost every year while employees wait on misfiled, mislabeled, untracked or outright lost documents. Essentially, you could give every employee a four-week vacation and you'd have accomplished roughly the same amount of work thanks to paper.

Finally, you also have to carefully consider all of the various security risks that are associated with a paper-filled world. If a paper document contains critical client information, you need to make sure that you're storing and protecting that document in accordance with the rules and regulations in your industry. If you don't, you could find yourself on the receiving end of a hefty fine — another cost you would do well to avoid.

But also remember that paper documents are tangible by their very nature — which means they're very easy to lose. They could also get stolen, representing a significant security breach for your business that has absolutely nothing to do with the viruses and malware of the Internet that you're probably worried about.

All of this is to say that while paper certainly had its era and its place within the office environment, that time has officially ended. These days, it doesn't just make business sense to shift towards a 100% paperless office in the professional services industry. It's common sense, too.

Thankfully, it's not nearly as difficult as you probably think it's going to be. The transition really won't take that long, either. You just have to follow a few basic steps and keep a number of key things in mind along the way.

THE 7 STEPS FOR GOING 100% PAPERLESS

Generally, there are seven core steps that you should be following on your journey towards a paperless (and more productive) office for your professional services business. Remember that doing so can absolutely save you a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy per year — meaning that the effort will be more than worth it in the long run.

Scan the old documents

Digitize Moving Forward

Cover Your Hardware Bases

Apply Workflows to Documents

Apply Permissions and Security

Get Everyone on Board, Even Those Outside Your Organization

Be the Leader People Need to See

Step 1: Scan in Old Documents

The most important step towards moving paperless is also, for many organizations, the first. You need to take important documents you've already created and scan them into your document management platform, thus giving yourself a solid foundation upon which to build from moving forward.

At this juncture, organizations often take the opportunity to "clean house", eliminating redundant, obsolete or trivial paper documents, scanning in only what is needed.
Create some type of unified organization system that makes sense to you. You could organize documents by client name, by year, or something else entirely — so long as you create a system and stick to it. Then, divide all work between your departments and make sure each department is responsible for their own files.

Determine appropriate retention and disposal dates for your documents in accordance you're your company's information governance policies.

Finally, scan your documents into your digital solution of choice — an information management platform like M-Files. Ultimately, document scanning transforms paper documents into digital files that can be stored, searched and retrieved quickly, easily and reliably. What kinds of documents can be scanned? Essentially any business-critical paper document can be scanned and retained for electronic filing and compliant business operations, including:

INVOICES	FINANCIAL RECORDS	CONTRACTS	LETTERS AND OTHER CORRESPONDENCE
ENGINEERING DRAWINGS AND BLUEPRINTS	INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY SUCH AS DESIGN DOCUMENTATION AND PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS		CUSTOMER DOCUMENTS SUCH AS PURCHASE ORDERS

M-Files also offers advanced optical character recognition (OCR) extensions. With M-Files OCR's automatic text recognition feature, your scanned files become fully searchable documents – making them much easier to organize, manage and find later.

Step 2: Digitize Moving Forward

Next, you're going to want to make sure that you put a priority on operating in a digital environment moving forward. Information management platforms make it simple to execute on that initiative. Documents become native to a digital environment. Invoices are handled digitally. Standard operating procedures can be learned digitally. The need for paper swiftly diminishes.

In the event that there are paper documents funneled through your office, they should be digitized using the same basic system and structure that you created.

Note that at this point, it's important to understand that you'll have to do more than just get a document management platform to that end. You'll also want to make sure your employees are adequately prepared to use it, which may include some degree of training. In the larger picture, the paperless initiative requires a culture shift, a paradigm shift that staffers need to buy in to. If you want employees to use a particular tool like M-Files or another information management system, it stands to reason they need to understand why it's important and how to get the most out of it. If you take the time to make sure people understand what you're asking of them and why it matters, they're far more likely to follow through with those tasks.

Step 3: Cover Your Hardware Bases

At this point, you're likely scanning relatively few paper documents, but that means you'll want to make sure your office is filled with the type of equipment that can actually handle the task.

This means doing your research and finding the right scanner to help make the transition as easy as you need it to be. Whatever solution you choose, make sure that it's easy to use and that your employees feel comfortable doing so. This is again important for a lot of the same reasons why you want to train your workforce on whichever document management solution you've selected.

Step 4: Apply Workflows to Documents

By digitizing your document environment, you can reap the benefits of automated workflows. Searching for and finding relevant information is important, but it is even more important to utilize that information in a way that improves collaboration and supports your business processes and workflows.

Manually managing day-to-day processes isn't a good use of your time. M-Files workflow automation helps you ensure consistency by verifying that every step in your business process is followed. Common workflows enable organizations to automate office work and avoid human mistakes with no more wasted time on inefficient manual tasks.

M-Files workflows help you free up working time by automating business processes — like contract approvals, controlled content, and invoicing — so you can stay productive and ensure compliance. M-Files automatically sends a notification when there's a task that needs to be handled.

M-Files automatically monitors each step of the business process. All workflow steps are tracked in the version history of each file. You can audit-proof your business while gaining full visibility into all your important business processes.

Step 5: Apply Permissions and Security

As mentioned above, one of the most compelling arguments for going paperless in your office ultimately comes down to the fact that paper opens you up to a wide range of different security risks.

But that doesn't mean that your digital world will be 100% risk free — at least, not at first. You still need to apply permissions and security protocols to all documents to help prevent this information from falling into the wrong hands, and now is the absolute best time to sit down and do it.

This is yet another area where a solution like M-Files will help you during your transition. Not only can you apply permissions and security on the user level, you can actually apply them specifically to certain types of documents. You don't have to set permissions for documents or even entire directories manually — you can allow the system to do so for you, making sure that the only people who can access information are those who absolutely need it to do the jobs you're asking of them. There is no reason why a temp worker should have access to the financial documents concerning your professional services business, for example.

At that point, you've gone a long way towards making sure that your sensitive business data stays protected, and you've also guaranteed that people have access to the data they need when they need it the most.

Step 6: Get Everyone on Board, Even Those Outside Your Organization

Once you've gotten ahead of all your existing documents and have started the process of filing everything new electronically, the next most important thing you'll want to do involves telling your clients to share information electronically whenever they can. Just because you have a paperless office doesn't mean you can expect everyone else to as well. But the paradigm shift in your own office bleeds over into business with external collaborators, vendors, clients, etc.

It might go unnoticed, but they'll get used to accessing, signing, approving and collaborating on digital documents rather than paper documents. If necessary, explain the shift to them. Explain the benefits of things like digital invoices and how it means that money will change hands faster. Make sure that all of your clients are familiar with whichever electronic sharing solution you choose to use. Once you start to get people outside of your organization onboard, it'll be much, much easier to maintain this new trajectory over the long-term within your own office.

Step 7: Be the Leader People Need to See

At this point, you've gone to a lot of effort in order to create a more efficient, productive office in line with your digital transformation vision. You've worked through an enormous backlog of old files and you've created a system to digitize everything new as it comes in. But there's still an opportunity for your initiative to fail if you forget about this final critical step: as an organizational leader, you absolutely need to lead by example.

According to a recent study, about 47% of employees say that one of the major reasons why they were unable to successfully go paperless ultimately came down to a lack of management initiatives or mandates. Keep in mind that a lot of these people were more than ready to go paperless — they already saw how it would make their lives better and they were more than ready to get started. It's just that even though management may have created a bunch of rules and installed some new software, they themselves weren't fully onboard.

In other words, you need to be ready to act as the light to shine the way through this period. Do more than just encourage people to go paperless — jump headfirst into the transition yourself and show people what it means in your eyes. Show people how satisfying it was to get rid of all those filing cabinets in your own office. Encourage people to share things digitally whenever possible and make it known that this is going to be the preferred method of communication and collaboration in the future.

Again — if your employees see you leading the way, they are far more likely to follow you than they otherwise would be. At that point, you won't have to drive home how critical going paperless really is because they'll have already seen it with their own two eyes.

THE BENEFITS OF GOING PAPERLESS WITH INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

In the steps outlined above, we talked a lot about how important it is to enter into this transitional period with the right piece of technology by your side. For many organizations, an information management solution like M-Files is that tech — this is true for a wide range of different reasons, each one more important than the last.

For those unfamiliar, M-Files is a [unique intelligent information management platform](#)that was built from the ground up to improve how organizations like yours secure, process and manage data and other content. This can include not only documents but also images, emails, customer information and much, much more.

The key to M-Files' success is that it organizes and manages information — not based on where it is stored — but with regards to what it actually is. So, where the file exists matters less than the information contained within that file.

It doesn't matter if the information you're looking for exists within M-Files or within another repository that you're using like SharePoint or a network drive. It can be easily accessed and managed through a single view — all without requiring anything even remotely resembling the costly and time-consuming data migration that you were probably expecting.

The most immediate benefit of going paperless with an information management solution like M-Files is that it can help you free up a tremendous amount of office space, practically overnight. Not only does this create a much cleaner looking office (something that can be helpful if yours is the type of business that does in-person client meetings), but it also frees up valuable real estate that used to be taken up by filing cabinets, manila folders and endless stacks of paper.

In fact, you may even realize that you have so much free space available that you don't need to be renting that enormous office in the first place. Or you can choose to fill all of that new room with fee-earning employee workspaces — the choice is finally yours to make.

[Another one of the major benefits of going paperless](#) with an information management tool like M-Files has to do with the fact that you'll **no longer be dealing with operational and organizational costs**. Remember how employees take an average of 61 trips to the fax machine or copier on a weekly basis? That doesn't even account for the amount of time spent looking for documents that they need to continue on with the important work they're doing. You don't need to pay someone to find files or destroy files once they've outlived their usefulness. But most importantly, all of that is money that can be funneled right back into the most important thing of all: the business you've already worked so hard to build.

Along the same lines, going paperless with an information management platform brings with it productivity and efficiency gains across the board. Consider the fact that when everything is digital, that means literally every piece of critical information that someone could need can finally **be accessed by any device on Earth with an active Internet connection**.

If you suddenly found yourself faced with a situation where your entire workforce unexpectedly needed to work from home, you don't have to worry about figuring out how people are going to safely get back to the office to get the critical files they need. You won't have to force them to spend time photocopying documents just so that they can collaborate with one another remotely. Everyone will have access to all documents at the exact same time, regardless of where they happen to be.

Remote work has been gaining popularity over the last decade and many have long seen it as the future of business in general. Not only does going paperless with an information management platform like M-Files help you better prepare yourself for unexpected events, it also gets you ready for a future that will be here before you know it.

Going paperless with an information management platform like M-Files also brings with it another advantage in the form of **digital workflows**. When workflows are digitized, you suddenly have **no reason to shuffle physical paper from desk to desk for approval, review, and signature**.

Again — everything is available to all employees by way of a single, easy-to-use tool. This can move files through the system itself incredibly quickly, thus allowing your employees to spend less time on menial administrative tasks and more time on those jobs that really need them.

All of this proves that the paperless transition is more than worth it — and that's before you even get into the information security benefits that you'll also receive. **M-Files in particular once again allows you to** set permissions **for directories, documents, and even certain types of information — all based on what makes the most sense for your organization**. By limiting access to documents to only those who need it to do their jobs, you dramatically reduce the risk that information will fall into the wrong hands or will be used for malicious purposes in some way. Oftentimes, the peace-of-mind that comes with this alone is more than worth the effort for most people.

But maybe the biggest advantage of all of going paperless with information management can be summed up in three simple-yet-powerful letters:

R O I

[According to one recent study](#), an estimated 59% of businesses going paperless achieved a full return on investment in less than 12 months. About 84% of those who were left achieved their desired ROI in less than 18 months. This means that in the vast majority of situations, going paperless is literally an experience that pays for itself — and sooner rather than later, too.

Not only that, but you also have to remember that going paperless can improve staff productivity [by nearly 30% in a lot of cases](#). So not only are you capitalizing on an opportunity to make it easier than ever for people to do their jobs, they're actually getting more work done at the exact same time.

But maybe the most critical statistic of all is the following: another recent study estimates that printing alone accounts for [about 10% of all IT-related energy use](#). So even if you're not convinced by all of the above examples, the sheer amount of money you'll save on your utility bills alone make a compelling argument in favor of a paperless future.

IN THE END

When you close your eyes and think of your typical office environment, you probably call to mind images of rooms filled with filing cabinets, stacks of papers, loose documents — you name it.

For decades, that impression wasn't too far from the truth because we lived in a paper-based world. Everything was printed and everything needed to be stored — which meant that all of the hassles that came along with these hard copy documents were simply a necessary evil. A "cost of doing business" in the most literal sense of the term. Thankfully, things don't have to be like this any longer. Not only has digital technology advanced enormously to the point where going paperless is easier than ever, but it's a move that also brings with it a host of unique advantages that you won't be able to match through any other means.

Even if you remain unconvinced by the productivity and collaboration gains that you'll make, the sheer amount of money you'll also save should be enough to convince you that going paperless is the way of the future. If there was a single decision that you could make that would make your employees happier and more productive, all while improving communication and collaboration, while ALSO saving you an enormous amount of money, you would obviously take it, right?

Of course, you would — and going paperless with a powerful information management solution like M-Files by your side is the literal equivalent of that decision. No, it's not going to happen overnight. But make no mistake about it — once you have moved fully into the paperless world, you'll wonder why you resisted the urge to do so for so long.

MultiFile

ABOUT M-FILES

M-Files provides a next-generation intelligent information management platform that improves business performance by helping people find and use information more effectively. Unlike traditional enterprise content management (ECM) systems or content services platforms, M-Files unifies systems, data and content across the organization without disturbing existing systems and processes or requiring data migration. Using artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in its unique Intelligent Metadata Layer, M-Files breaks down silos by delivering an in-context experience for accessing and leveraging information that resides in any system and repository, including network folders, SharePoint, file sharing services, ECM systems, CRM, ERP and other business systems and repositories. Thousands of organizations in more than 100 countries use M-Files for managing their business information and processes, including NBC Universal, OMV, Rovio, SAS Institute and thyssenkrupp.

For more information, visit www.m-files.com.

M-Files has offices in eight countries. To contact one of our regional offices, click here: www.m-files.com/en/contact-us.

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