

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

Crowing about Paper

I recently read how Sir Walter Scott, stymied by writer's block, went bird hunting. As Sir Walter strolled along on his hunt the key transitional phrase he had been looking for suddenly came to him. Afraid that he would forget the precise wording he shot a crow. Sir Walter then pulled a wing feather, dipped it in the crow's blood, and wrote down the elusive sentence.

For me it would have been easier to remember the phrase without the intervening steps of kill, pluck, and dip, but it seemed to work for Sir Walter. Still, there is a simple elegance to the story. I have already deleted, cut and paste, and otherwise electronically gummed over the opening to this column numerous times without otherwise progressing. Following in Sir Walter's steps, I am beginning to entertain thoughts of bludgeoning some critter to death with my laptop. Technology, in this case word processing, can be a distraction as well as a boon.

And yet the apparent simplicity of Sir Walter's world of writing instruments masked its own rather complex technology. Quill writing required a quill holder, a penknife for sharpening, an inkwell, and a pounce box (to hold the required desiccant powder). The quill itself had to be pulled from the second or third feather of the left wing so it was not only of sufficient size to write with, but also so the curve of the feather accommodated right-handed writing. Okay, I don't know if Sir Walter was right-handed, which is sloppy research, but on the plus side I made it through that whole bird hunting episode without mentioning Vice President Cheney, for which I want some credit.

Next to my desktop computer at work there is a quill holder and inkwell, a treasured gift from the late Henry Bissex who used to do performances illustrating education in 18th century Vermont. Also on my desk, lapping at the base of my computer, are piles of paper.

This begs the question, why? Wasn't paper supposed to go the way of the quill pen thanks to new information technologies? Whatever happened to the long-promised "paperless office?" Or am I mulishly holding on to an office technology—paper—that I grew up with?

It turns out that the last thirty years of new technologies have actually led to an increase in the use of paper in offices (which represent 30 to 40% of total paper consumption). A survey of 150 U.S. companies found that the introduction of new technologies led to an increase in their use of paper. Another study found that e-mail alone can bring a 40% increase in office paper consumption. Since the widespread deployment of information technologies in offices there has been a steady and linear increase in the production of office paper.

Why are new technologies increasing, rather than eliminating, our use of paper? Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H.R. Harper address this question in *the myth of the paperless office* (MIT Press, 2003). While their research cannot be adequately summarized in a single column, they make numerous points that apply to Vermont record keeping.

For years there have been initiatives within Vermont's State and municipal governments to create

efficiencies through the implementation of new information technologies. Paper often becomes the poster child of the old, inefficient office. More precisely the cost of *storing* paper records becomes the impetus for creating an efficient, and paperless, office. Sellen and Harper note that to store 2 million documents would cost \$40,000 to \$60,000 in filing cabinets alone, not to mention floor space, retrieval and other costs. Conversely, those 2 million documents could be put on ten or fewer CDs.

The State's central scanning service echoes this argument by noting how many boxes of paper records can be held by a single CD. Indeed, for years the State has approached the management of records as a storage problem. One of the statutory penalties for not having an agency records program remains the denial of filing cabinet requests. Periodically the legislature weighs in, calling for studies on paper reduction or, in one notable case, simply proposing to throw all records out after seven years (this was known as the "seven year pitch" bill).

Of course the goal should be to manage records and information, not paper or space. To do that requires understanding the functions of each agency, the activities and work flows established to perform those functions, the legal requirements governing the records and information generated by those activities, etc.

Which leads us back to the persistence of paper in offices. Too often paper is seen as the source, not a symptom, of the problems with an office's records management system. Sellen and Harper cite a number of case studies illustrating why projects whose primary goal is the paperless office failed. Such projects, for example, rarely understood how staff actually performed their tasks or how work flowed within the office. Without that understanding the projects failed to grasp points within office work where the positive attributes of paper outweighed the promised efficiencies of IT.

Let's go back to my paper-strewn desk. One activity I am routinely involved with is writing or editing reports. I compose these reports on my computer. The information from which a report is drawn may be in staff memos, professional research available online, e-mail from project partners, etc. I find it too intrusive to my thought processes to be constantly jumping out of my electronic draft to consult multiple other electronic documents (I find this the equivalent of Sir Walter's decision to kill, pluck, and dip in order to hold onto his own train of thought). I need to print out these records and spread the paper out on my desk for ease of access.

Similarly, while I have editing software, I find it more effective to edit a paper printout rather than electronically track editorial changes and suggestions being offered by multiple reviewers. And I find it more effective at staff meetings if we jointly review print outs of reports (even if I distributed the draft report electronically).

I use the marked up paper drafts to alter the electronic document. When the report is done I get rid of the majority of the paper copies and desk surface reappears. I preserve key records electronically as well as the report, which can be printed on demand or provided online.

This approach is not unique to me and Sellen and Harper found similar practices in a variety of business settings, including high tech offices. Understanding why and how things are done is essential before committing to technologies that promise a paperless office. Without understanding where—and when—paper can be eliminated or reduced, and where it remains integral to productivity, no information technology system will succeed.

To learn more about the approach the Archives is taking for managing records go to:

<http://vermont-archives.org/publications/legislative/pdf/LegReport06.pdf>