Restore
Information Management

Show **Physical Data** Some Respect

Yes, digital is exciting but physical storage is part of the mix — and doesn't deserve the sneers. It's time to change the rhetoric.

Executive Summary

It is about time someone stood up for physical data storage; and this white paper aims to fight its corner.

There's an out-dated view of the sector as somehow living in the past, overtaken by digital and no longer relevant.

But the reality is very different.

Large numbers of businesses across the UK still store paper records, and what's more the industry has benefitted from technological advances which make a hybrid system a viable option for businesses of all sizes. In fact, it is often the most affordable and sensible way to optimise a data inventory, making digital transformation easier and cheaper to tackle in future.

In the real world, digital and physical live side by side, and learn from each other. But you'd struggle to find that message amongst the millions of words written about the industry.

The focus instead is on digital solutions and new software launches. That's what makes headlines.

Now, we aren't saying that digital transformation is a bad thing, far from it. For many businesses it is absolutely the best solution. But physical data isn't going away any time soon – and ignoring it is both a risk and a missed opportunity.

Show Physical Data Some Respect aims to:

› **Bust** the biggest myths around physical storage.

› **Unveil** some of the hidden benefits of storing information on paper.

› **Reveal** how technological advances have changed the industry, providing solutions that allow faster retrieval through scan-on-demand.

› **Analyse** why physical data hasn't gone away, despite a 'paperless' dream - and why some information must still be kept in physical form, by law.

› **Explain** how a hybrid system that brings physical and digital together is the way forward.

› **Look** ahead to what the future holds.

So, open your mind, hold back the sneers, and find out what physical storage really looks like.

You may be surprised...

By Nigel Dews

Managing Director
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Chapter One:
Why physical data storage still matters

Records have a long and illustrious history – they have been stored on paper since Chinese Imperial court official Cai Lun discovered a way to make it from scraps of old rags, tree bark and fishing nets somewhere between 25-220 AD.

In fact, they were kept on papyrus long before that, including the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, believed to be written around 200 BC.

With that kind of heritage – more than 2200 years in all – it's little surprise that, despite the advance of digital technology, many businesses still prefer and need to keep physical copies of documents.

But what we've noticed is that physical storage doesn't always get the respect or attention it deserves.

Digital storage has delivered some outstanding benefits for global business, providing quick access, fast and efficient sharing - and seamless records management systems – all without the need for paper files, folders and warehouse storage.

So, it's understandable online blogs, websites and webinars focus on the benefits of going digital and look ahead to the next big software launch, often forgetting that physical storage is still here.

Doing so, however, ignores the fact that physical data has the same inherent risks as digital if not managed properly – and much of the same potential, which cannot be unlocked without proper attention.

Even when it comes to legislation, such as GDPR, it's rare to hear people talking about what the implications are for businesses whose records are on paper rather than stored in the Cloud or on a server. You'd be forgiven for thinking that data protection rules don't apply to physical data – but they do.

This white paper is about taking the first step to put that right and to correct some of the misconceptions that have attached themselves to paper record storage – and even more importantly to explain the benefits of optimising physical storage.

Let's deal with the first misconception immediately, because it's a common one...

MYTH 1:
The physical storage industry is living in the past

As soon as you talk about physical data there will be someone somewhere dismissing it as outdated and living in the past. The dinosaur of data.

But the reality is different.

Millions of businesses around the world still store their records on paper and it isn't going away any time soon.

What many people have missed, is that physical records storage has grown up. Technology has allowed the industry to scan documents on demand, to assign secure destruction dates to data and to tag, index and label every single file so that customers know what they are keeping in every box they store.

It has also allowed physical records to be managed online so they can be accessed 24/7, and provided safety controls to protect documents – from CCTV to humidity controls.

In short, businesses which outsource records storage can become more compliant by understanding what information they are storing. And it's only once you understand what you have that it's possible consider what could or should be digitised. Finally ready to join the road to digital.

So, far from being 'digital deniers' standing against the tide of technology like a modern-day King Canute, records management experts understand the direction of travel – but also understand there are different ways to get there.

MYTH 2:
It's really easy for businesses to go digital

A Deloitte report once revealed that 70% of all digital transformation projects in organisations fail – and there's a long list of reasons why.

One of the biggest is finance, because it requires a significant budget to achieve - and many businesses find that scanning every document simply isn't financially viable.

Other reasons include:

› **There's a lack of digital skills in the business.**
› **They have no strategy around how to do it.**
› **Tech issues derail the project.**
› **They aren't set up properly to handle the change.**
› **Poor management.**
› **A deep culture of using paper which proves hard to shift.**
› **The board didn't succeed in getting the buy-in of employees to make the new system work.**

All these reasons often lead businesses to make a completely viable decision not to go 'entirely' digital, and to keep physical storage as part of their records management mix.

A good records management partner is one that understands the needs and culture of the businesses it serves.

At Restore Information Management, many of our staff in the health sector, for instance, worked inside the NHS in the past and understand the cultural challenges around records inside hospitals. They are aware of, and appreciate, the benefits of digital transformation but also see the complications – and realise that a hybrid system of physical and digital is often the real hero, and a good first step on the digital ladder.

MYTH 3:
There are no barriers to going fully digital

Not true. There are still laws in some sectors – which require businesses to generate and keep documents on paper.

And there are still some significant reasons – cultural, financial and legal – why many businesses have not yet gone digital.

This is why physical and digital living side by side can be so effective, and we should acknowledge that for many businesses (perhaps even a majority of them) this is the system best suited to them right now.

One NHS Trust scanned all their documents with the idea of going digital but culturally still use paper records. They still haven't overcome that barrier.

After covid with people working from home there was a rise in demand for digital delivery of files. Now our experience is those same clients all want a physical delivery again. We've over 6,000 customers and only a handful have fully embraced digital rather than physical delivery.

MYTH 5:
Physical storage is on its way out very soon

The 'paperless' dream has been a long time coming and most industries are nowhere near it.

In the NHS, for instance, we estimate there are still 100 million records stored in physical form in the UK alone.

Of course, all these businesses would benefit from digital transformation but equally they are limited by legislation and culture.

This is one of the reasons that 'paperlite' has emerged as a serious alternative to 'paperless'. Organisations have started to talk about progress rather than focusing on being fully digital. And this can often mean keeping paper as part of the mix. We are seeing examples of this all the time, including in government departments such as the Land Registry. So, it's time we talked more openly about how to optimise hybrid records management systems and give physical data a voice.

MYTH 4:
Physical storage is always second best

Nobody is suggesting that going digital isn't a good thing. For those who can achieve it, there are some significant benefits from doing so.

But it's now possible to have many of those same benefits when documents are stored physically.

These documents are still easily accessible, still safe and still secure. But this often gets lost in the narrative that digital is always king.

The debate should be about organisations finding the balance and working out what suits them best – and making sure that the solution meets their requirements, including legal requirements. There is more than one solution – and businesses which currently store their information on paper should know there are ways of optimising that inventory which are affordable and achievable.

MYTH 6:
Digitisation will lead to savings

Once again, this one doesn't ring true. If businesses digitise all their data and keep nothing on paper, then they can save on physical storage – but they may also have to keep the original for a period of time, for legal reasons.

In addition, the cost of scanning in the first place means it will take a long time to feel that benefit. And if you plan to keep a paper 'back-up' then that adds another twist to the story. Significant cost savings can, however, be made by reducing the amount of boxes you store, securely destroying anything that is past its retention date - and scanning files which are required most often.

Are you suffering from boxbarrassment? Then lift the lid.

When Restore Information Management undertook customer research, many customers admitted they didn't always know what was in the boxes they were storing and felt too embarrassed to do something about it.

It's not an uncommon picture. Often boxes were put into storage years ago and the administrator who knew what was in them, and why they were being stored, is long gone.

That's especially common when companies are involved in a merger or acquisition. The lead business inherits boxes and systems which it knows nothing about and opts to 'play safe' by just keeping it all – often in a variety of locations.

That, of course, makes no sense. How can you understand the value or the risk of what you are storing if you don't even know what data you have?

The first step on the road to digital for many businesses is simply braving up to boxbarrassment and starting the journey with a 'lift the lid' operation which finds out what information they are storing and begins to map it, including developing a retention policy and giving each piece of data a secure destruction date.

In fact, secure destruction is a vital stop on the digital roadmap. Because why would you spend money on scanning data which you don't need to keep?

Not knowing what you are storing is one of the biggest blockers to going digital, but keeping everything is also a problem. Having fully data managed solution with a records management partner can help you decide when to scan, when to shred and when to keep heritage files in physical storage.

Keeping BBC archive assets safe for the nation

It's worth remembering that not all physical records are stored on paper.

For example, we look after 74,000 linear metres of Archive Assets for the BBC, consisting of audio, moving images, photographic stills, vinyl, and sheet music collected over the last century.

This storage and archive contract is a strong example that physical storage goes way beyond paper.

Our solution included enhancing an existing Restore Information Management facility with dedicated temperature-controlled vaults to help maintain strict environmental conditions.

Working closely with our sister brand, Restore Harrow Green, the project also included a fully integrated package to plan, manage and migrate the Archive Collections from the BBC's existing facility to their new home.

Chapter 2:
Why hybrid is the real hero

Examples of physical and digital storage working hand in hand.

Finding a data storage solution which optimises and protects the information held within an organisation should be end goal for any business.

That's important, because when you ask businesses want they are hoping to achieve, the answer is often 'digital transformation'.

That's understandable, because it's clear that going digital is becoming increasingly attractive as technology improves and the world moves in that direction. But digital transformation is a way to an end goal – not the goal itself.

By starting on the road with an open mind, many companies find that information can be better optimised by a hybrid approach which sees digital and physical sit side by side.

The same goes for those who provide information management advice. If you begin the conversation by insisting digital is the only way, then you are closing off potential other solutions which may be more affordable and more suitable for certain businesses.

In our experience, you cannot force organisations down a digital route, because there are often so many blockers, as we've explored already – cultural blockers, financial blockers, heritage blockers.

Finding the right solution, and understanding the pros and cons off all options, is what matters.

Understanding the culture and history of how a business has done things in the past, has to be part of the mix, and often a hybrid model is what works best.

Signs of change for the future: Electronic Trade Documents Bill

Doing business abroad is one of the biggest generators of paper documents across any industry.

International trade is worth around £1.266 trillion to the UK and the Law Commission says that global container shipping generates billions of paper documents a year.

That's one of the reasons the Commission has been campaigning for digital version of documents such as a bill of exchange, promissory note, bill of lading, a ship's delivery order, a warehouse receipt, a mate's receipt, a marine insurance policy and a cargo insurance certificate.

All these documents are currently stored on paper, but a bill is currently going through the House of Commons to instigate change.

The Electronic Trade Documents Bill aims to instigate change by legally recognising digital versions of these documents.

It's worth noting the Bill has only had its first reading and has a long way to go – and that other countries in the world are a long way off following suit. But it will be interesting to follow its progress and to see how hard Britain is clinging to its paper history.

Interestingly, the bill includes a clause allowing businesses to change electronic documents into paper ones as well as the other way around. So, once again, news of the death of paper records may well be exaggerated.

Signs of change for the future: HM Land Registry

We often hear people asking if paper will eventually disappear and everything will be available digitally. But it's not as easy to answer as you might think.

What's clear is that there is certainly a continued move towards digitising data, not just in business but in government and national administration, too, and that increasingly society sees that as progress – especially when it speeds up access and processes.

But there is also value in thinking harder about how to optimise physical storage to both aid digital progress and to get the most from data stored.

A good example is the work Restore Information Management has been doing with HM Land Registry, a non-ministerial department which registers the ownership of land and property in England and Wales.

The most recent project has been to digitise historic files that include a property lease, helping to drive improved efficiencies in its service.

Due to the scale of the records held by HM Land Registry it was clear that scanning those which are most likely to be needed was the best way forward.

So, we researched which documents are needed most often and discovered leases were most in demand. Working with HM Land Registry we then identified all files which included a lease and recommended these be the focus of a digitisation programme.

The value of scanning these records is clear. It enables same-day retrieval of documents, creating a simpler, paperless process for buying and selling property which benefits homeowners across the country.

It's a project which demonstrates how digital and paper records can live together on the road to digital transformation.

Land Registry property documents have been digital since 2008 so they are ahead of the curve. But older files are all hard copies, stored and managed by Restore Information Management and our role was to optimise that storage.

The aim was to reduce ongoing handling costs and provide a quicker service for customers and HM Land Registry caseworkers when requesting documents – ultimately speeding up the process for prospective property buyers.

> **Restore helped us to identify the records which are most frequently requested. This helped us drive efficiencies in our service, provide long-term cost savings but most importantly to support our vision to deliver a more efficient, fully digital property market.**
>
> **Eve Foster at HM Land Registry**

Conclusion

It's time to change the rhetoric around physical data storage.

For too long it has been overlooked by businesses in the rush to go digital - and even by the information management sector as the courtship with new software launches and upgraded Cloud solutions take centre stage.

But the reality is that millions of businesses still have physical storage and large numbers have found even starting the road to digital transformation more challenging than they expected.

There are four big issues to consider here.

1 Firstly, there is absolutely no reason why physical and digital shouldn't sit side by side in an overall information management system – and often a hybrid solution is the most cost-effective and most appropriate, as well as being a positive first step on the road to digitisation.

2 Secondly, if businesses do opt to keep a level of physical storage, then it's time to wake up to the possibilities of how best to optimise that storage.

Data doesn't stop being valuable just because it isn't on a server or in the cloud, and technological advances in physical storage now make it possible to extract that value in a cost-effective way.

3 Thirdly, businesses need to consider that GDPR regulations DO apply to physical data as well as digital, even if it isn't widely publicised. So, if you have personal data stored in your records inventory then it's absolutely vital you know what's in the boxes and how long that data should be kept.

4 Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly for businesses which still primary store their data on paper, it is vital for all businesses to know and understand what data they store – and what is in their boxes. A 'lifting the lid' process may sound simple, but it is the start of a journey to optimising data in your business

The over-riding message here is that there is a place for both physical and digital as we move forward, and that a hybrid solution deserves its place at the information table.

In short, businesses which outsource physical records storage begin a process which enables them to take control of information they store and optimise their inventory.

A hybrid solution is a viable and cost-effective alternative to going fully digital but also leaves an organisation better placed for digital transformation in future.

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Contact

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