

Restore  
Records Management

PROTECTING WHAT MATTERS THE MOST



# Paperlite not paperless

Eleven reasons why paper hasn't gone away



**When you consider that the first email was sent in 1971 and the first photograph uploaded to the web in 1992, businesses have had a long time to start their digital journey and join a paperless revolution.**

## **So, why is paper still with us?**

There are a lot more answers to that question than you might realise – and that's why the word 'paperlite' rather than 'paperless' is starting to be used more often in records management.

That's not to downgrade 'going digital', which creates significant benefits and advantages for many businesses and is a highly positive target. We work with businesses all the time to help them start that journey or to prepare them for it – and nobody in records management is a 'digital denier'.

But although a lot of progress has been made over a period of more than 50 years around digital transformation, the needle hasn't moved as far as you may think. So why is that?

Google Trends suggest the number of people typing in 'how to go digital' globally hit a peak in April 2004 and dipped over time. But by May 2023 it had risen again to almost 75% of that peak figure. If businesses are still asking, then you have to conclude that we are not as far along the journey as some suggest.

There are many reasons for that, and although some are hurdles along the way, others can be put down to the fact that physical storage still has some inherent benefits that we should not ignore.



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# Here are our top 11 reasons why paper storage is still going strong...

...and why organisations often face a battle with legal over what to destroy, not wanting to risk losing information they may need in future...



## 1 The cost of digital transformation

Scanning records is an effective tactic on the road to digital transformation and ensures that documents are easily accessible online and can be quickly retrieved by those given permission to access them.

But there is also a huge cost implication. Scanning every single document in an inventory can be a daunting task for businesses which store millions of documents but do not have a big budget for a digital transformation project.

If you take the cost of storing a physical box versus the cost of digitising the content, it will take about 16 years before there is a return on the investment of going digital.





**2 So many files that you want to keep – but never need**

Businesses are especially reluctant to scan everything if the documents they keep are not regularly required or retrieved. It's a big consideration. If you have documents stored for posterity which you know need to be kept, but you don't know when they will (if ever) need to be retrieved, that's a big issue to consider.

If you only need them once every few years, then where is the value in scanning every single document? Some businesses keep documents which may never be needed, or which, like a will, often sit in storage for decades before access is required. It makes good sense to keep heritage documents on paper and scan those you require most often.



**3 Wet signatures are still legally required for some documents**

There are still documents which require a 'wet' signature by law in case they need to be produced at some point in the future. Digitising doesn't provide a solution in this case because the wet signature needs to be there.

**Some examples include:**

- Wills and power of attorney
- Documents related to setting up Trusts
- Bank accounts, including ISAs
- Mortgage documents
- Adoptions
- Divorce proceedings
- Court orders
- Evictions

Things are slowly changing with the rise of digital signatures which can legally be completed online, but we are a long way off this being accepted in every sector and certainly not in every country. Regulations vary dramatically across the globe.





**4 Not all items are suitable for digital format**

The format in which some documents have been historically made doesn't always lend itself to scanning.

For instance, the size of a document or how it is put together can add complications. When documents are born digitally, for instance within businesses which are relatively young, then digital can feel like it is the best possible solution (and it is).

But for many businesses with documents which pre-date the digital era it can sometimes be impossible to retrospectively change the way they were designed.



**5 Some documents still need to be stored on paper – by law**

There are still examples of documents which, by law, must be kept in physical form. In fact, in the UK, the very laws themselves, the Acts of Parliament, are printed on vellum, a type of parchment made from animal hide, before being archived.

In 2016 it seemed like this ancient practice was ready to end, following an announcement in the House of Lords that paper would be used instead, but it was overturned by the then Cabinet Office Minister Matthew Hancock.

If we can't yet agree to move Acts of Parliament to paper, it's difficult to imagine the system going digital any time soon! The Catholic Church still issues its decrees and diplomas, so Parliament is not alone.

Birth certificates, adoption papers, marriage and civil partnership certificates, decree absolute divorce papers, wills and power of attorney documents are all still kept on paper.





## 6 A fear of tackling historic culture

When you store documents in physical form over many years, a culture develops within a business around how they are used, how they are retrieved and how they are valued – and that’s a very difficult culture to change quickly.

Businesses often fear that a digital solution won’t fit with the culture of the organisation and are anxious about taking the step.

We’ve seen this first hand in the NHS, where Trusts have opted to go digital but then found that clinicians still want and prefer paper patient records and notes. The answer is often to take digital transformation one step at a time, beginning with scan on demand and growing into a hybrid system first.



## 7 Authenticity is higher for paper records

There’s something about a paper document that still makes people feel it is more authentic and more trustworthy. A physical record with a wet signature, for instance, provides assurance.

The rise of cybercrime and security breaches online also adds to the feeling that keeping your documents on paper in a secure building provides fewer risks.

There have always been breaches, of course – we’ve all heard stories about confidential paper documents being left on trains. Or even in the toilet of a Wetherspoon pub in the case of nuclear submarine secret papers found in Cumbria in April 2023!

But the size of cyberattacks is something else. Yahoo revealed in 2016 that it had suffered a major attack in which personal data linked to 500m accounts was stolen. And the global cost of cybercrime is expected to reach 10.5 trillion US Dollars by 2025, according to a Cybersecurity Ventures report in 2020.\*

\* <https://cybersecurityventures.com/hackerpocalypse-cybercrime-report-2016/#:~:text=Cybersecurity%20Ventures%20expects%20global%20cybercrime,%243%20trillion%20USD%20in%202015>





**8** **Heritage documents need to be kept for the nation**

Some documents are of national interest - which means they will always be kept on paper, even if they are also digitised. Being able to have the original document is vital.

If you want a big example, it's the Magna Carta which was issued in 1215 but is still with us, stored at the British Museum. It has no wet signature and no seal, and although you can browse it on the British Museum website, seeing it in real life is a very different experience from seeing a digital version. That same principle can be applied to many documents which are assigned cultural and historical significance.



**9** **The gap between digital and physical retrieval time is closing**

It's obvious that digital data can be more quickly accessed than a physical copy, but the difference is not as much as you might imagine. Advances in the way physical archives are managed, together with the use of technology, mean that the gap is closing all the time. OCR (Optical Character Recognition) and scan on demand services mean it is faster than ever before to retrieve your physical data.

In our NHS services, for instance, scan on demand can comfortably be delivered within three hours and our shortest emergency delivery is within an hour. It's very rare that clinicians need records quicker than that, because nobody waits for paperwork before dealing with an emergency.

Restore Records Management also offers same-day delivery options for physical files. The time taken depends on the destination, of course, but with over 50 facilities across the country, you are never more than 2 hours away.





**10** People still see paper records as being 'more readable'

Readability is still an issue for records stored in digital format, certainly according to clinicians in the NHS. We often hear anecdotal evidence of a preference for physical copies of patient records inside hospitals.

Paper can be quicker to flick through and less demanding on the eyes, especially in a world where we spend so much of our time looking at screens.



**11** People trust a paper record

There's something about holding a paper record in your hands and knowing it is real that makes people trust it more. And trust is important in modern business.

If you think about the records most famously stored in physical form, they are important documents. Birth certificates, passports, property deeds, wills. This strengthens a public perception that when it really matters, paper is the most trusted.

Of course, we are biased at Restore Records Management, we hold over 22 million physical records on behalf of our clients and are passionate about helping them optimise their inventory.

New technology plays a big part in achieving that, including online portals that provide quick access to files – and digitisation of the records that are needed most often.





## Do we see a time when paper records no longer exist? Not anytime soon.

If you want to talk about the future of records, think 'paperlite' rather than 'paperless.' There are some very good reasons why physical deserves its place alongside the digital.

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