

Digital Repositories: Fact or Fiction?

by
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Last week an attorney asked me how to integrate his client's e-mail with his paper based client-filing system. He needed all of his client's information – digital or paper - in one central location to properly review, analyze and then provide advice to his client. This question will be repeatedly asked as we increase our use of e-mail and electronic information in our cases alongside our use of paper filing systems. In reply I suggested three options. One, print out the e-mail and file them in your paper-based system. Two, have a combined paper based and electronic filing system. This is more difficult since you will have two filing locations for client information - one digital and one paper based. Three, have a complete digital or "paperless" based filing system. This will require converting paper into digital electronic documents for a central "digital repository" filing system.

The third alternative is inevitable for all law firms because of the amount and cost of handling, storing and retrieving paper and as we increase our use of the Internet, electronic filing, e-mail, Extranets, Intranets and other digital based information systems.

It is astounding that business, government agencies and law offices generate about 900 million pages of information each day, including 76,000,000 letters and 21,000,000 other documents. The amount of digital information such as e-mail in offices is doubling every three years. Given that reality, the only viable way to manage this information is to have a digital repository for your documents. That means converting paper and other analog information into a digital format and using computers to store the "paper" information alongside the digital data for later access, retrieval and printing if necessary.

However, to move to a digital filing system or digital repository requires a certain level of technical sophistication and know-how. As with all technical advancements what is needed is a turnkey easy to use system for the consumer or legal practitioner where your documents can be securely stored and retrieved without having to invest in the hardware and software repository infrastructure essential to a successful digital filing system. The commercial sector is well aware of this and a number of companies have been working on digital storage systems for years. We have all heard discussion of these digital repositories that will store digital documents but the reality has not kept pace with the sales claims. However, now fiction has been turned to fact.

In February I had the opportunity to visit one of the first digital repositories in the nation built by the Xerox Corporation. I was in a nondescript building in Toledo, Ohio watching retrieval of documents requested from computers in Brussels from a server in Toledo for digital delivery to Brussels in 2-4 seconds.

The Xerox digital repository is comprised of a Sun Enterprise 5000 computer, 6 terabytes of storage, and multiple T1 connection lines into the building. It is one of the 50 global Xerox Document Technology Centers (DTC) that will be connected by the world's largest private network owned by Xerox, but accessible through the Internet. This substantial commitment by one of the world's most respected companies is affirmed by Michael Gaudean, Manager of Business Development for Xerox Business Services who said, "The Digital Repository is a cornerstone component to Xerox's evolving solutions-driven organization.

They are offering a system for storing, retrieving, printing, and faxing your documents and data for approximately 2 to 4 cents per page per year depending on the medium (RAID, optical or tape). Besides storage they will provide a transactional audit for each time a document is viewed, printed or faxed and by whom. 7 X 24 support is included wherever you are located.

Much has been written of moving from a "paper" to a "paperless" organization but many managers have found the transition slow and painful. Digital repositories will now enable anyone small or large to migrate to this "paperless" office. All that is needed is a connection into the repository and document or record management software or any litigation application software that points to the depository pathway for document or data retrieval.

Users will be positioned in the office or at any remote location with a multifunctional device – printer, fax, copier and scanner - that will be their paper gateway into and out of the "digital" repository. If you need paper copies, merely print them, if you wish to scan/fax a document into the digital repository just insert the document and the document will be sent to the digital center to be available for all.

Digital repositories will change organizations from a paper based system to a "digital" centered system that will translate into information and then into knowledge as companies collaborate online using the digital center as their true central filing system. Nowadays we see department or practice areas of automation but rarely the true sharing of work since paper file centers are not generally central for all to use and information is difficult to access. However, digital centers are centralized and easily accessible to all. Instead of optimizing the status quo it will force us to reprocess our work around the "digital file cabinet". Redundancy will end as the same "document" and information is used over and over again.

Yes, digital repositories are fact and just as the Iron Mountain was noted for paper storage, Xerox's Document Technology Centers and other digital depositories will be the noted for easily accessible digital storage for archived and more importantly current everyday documents.