

Paperless

Creating a Paperless Public Utility Commission The Wisconsin Experience

When the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin transitioned to a paperless office, they didn't just save themselves a lot of time and labor. They shrank their need for office space, freed up staff for more important duties, reduced their environmental impact, prompted savings at utilities estimated at over a million dollars and most importantly, began hearing rave reviews from customers in response to a better, broader range of services.

Meanwhile, commissioners gained access to virtually all PSCW records delivered to them directly on a tablet.



Paul C. Newman, CIO at the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSCW), published a report this year describing the process his organization took in going paperless. It's called *Creating a Paperless Public Utility Commission: The Wisconsin Experience*.

We'd recommend reading it.

In his report, Newman describes the budgetary landscape his organization navigated, the climate within his agency's staff, the setbacks they faced, the strategic decisions they made that proved instrumental to their success, and ultimately, the results they achieved. His report is rich with details on what exactly they did, lessons they gleaned along the way, and recommendations for other organizations considering a similar move.

What's to be gained from going paperless? What difficulties can you expect to face? What steps did PSCW take in their journey, and what benefits did they realize? We've compiled some of the highlights for you here. We hope this summary piques your interest to read the full report.

Read the report online at: www.DocumentLocator.com/PSCPaper

It's not a new idea, the paperless office. Newman opens with a recap of the idea's history, tracing its first mention to a 1975 Business Week article called "The Office of the Future."

A good forty years later, one has to ask when that future is likely to start.

The strange truth is that paper consumption has risen over past decades, not fallen. From 1990 to 2000, it climbed by over 50%. Between 1980 and 2000, it actually doubled.

⁽¹⁾ Yet while some organizations may balk at the prospect of going paperless, for State commissions, utilities and government agencies of all types, it's a move that makes a lot of sense.

What's to be gained from going paperless?

A paperless office can run on a smaller team, to begin with. That's important "in an era of shrinking budgets and reduced staff."⁽⁴⁾ In the Records Management Unit at PSCW, tasks that used to require nine people now rest in the hands of three.

If you pause to consider why going paperless makes that possible, you find gain number two: a much less-laborious process. It used to be, at PSCW, that the sub-processes involved in a single utility application were enough to fill several binders.⁽⁷⁾ Bear in mind, an office that runs on paper also has to store it. By switching to an electronic document management (EDM) system, PSCW reduced the steps involved in getting records into their system; they also shrank their need for space. Today, their "entire database of over 800,000 documents" fits on a one-terabyte hard drive.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The speed, ease of use and remote access⁽⁵⁷⁾ that this move brought speak for themselves.

There are other gains: fewer mistakes, more consistency, tangible ROI. "IDC estimates that organizations that implement EDM systems save \$21,555 per 100 users,"⁽⁴⁸⁾ Newman said. In fact, after taking the first steps toward a paperless commission, PSCW found that Wisconsin's utilities "had already saved over a million dollars simply from a reduction in the amount of paper use and handling."⁽⁴⁷⁾

Which brings us to the "paperless" part of going paperless. In 2002, before beginning this journey, PSCW had consumed a total of 15 pallets of paper (3,000,000 sheets) in the year. As of 2014, the year's pallet count is under two. **(See page 48 for the costs you can cut by reducing paper.)**

There are intangibles as well, benefits that "are not captured in purely quantitative calculations," Newman said, such as "increased customer satisfaction, quicker response times, higher flexibility, and improved work morale."⁽⁴³⁾

"Given the advantages of a paperless office, why is society not yet there?"⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

Why aren't more State commissions and agencies eager to make the move? One deterrent is the fear that it won't be affordable. Even just a decade ago, "going paperless was far more expensive... than it is today."⁽⁵⁹⁾ Since that time, however, infrastructure costs have come down. "One of the key factors in our selection of [Document Locator]," Newman said, "was that it was much more affordable than the earlier systems we had considered back in 2001."⁽¹¹⁾ In his words, the paperless transition "is now cheaper and easier than ever before."⁽⁶⁰⁾ If not downright "cheap," it's certainly not as costly as one might think.

Another deterrent is the fear that it might not work. "In any implementation of an EDM system, users and management are going to want assurances that the system will be reliable and can be secured."⁽⁵⁶⁾ The key to this concern is a quality EDM solution, paired with attentive support from a reliable vendor.

State commissions and utilities face an "enormous task," as Newman put it, "to balance the interest of ratepayers and shareholders" while providing "reliable utility service... at rates that are fair, just and reasonable."⁽⁶⁾ It's a mission that hinges on quality of service. Service is where going paperless makes the difference, empowering State commissions to provide a wider range of better-quality services, not to mention "more open and accessible government."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Hence the "rave reviews from customers" that PSCW has heard "for the additional services and access to information we have provided"⁽⁴⁵⁾ since going paperless.

This is why the paperless office makes so much sense. This is why PSCW decided to take the leap.

How PSCW made the move to electronic document management

PSCW began the transition toward a paperless office shortly after the year 2000, "but our plans to purchase a top-of-the-line... EDM system fell far short,"⁽¹⁾ Newman said. Balancing EDM costs of the day against severe budget cutbacks, they chose to break the project into two phases.

Phase one was to develop an Electronic Regulatory Filing (ERF) system, which would allow them to receive documents electronically. Phase two was to expand this into a full-featured EDM, adding workflow processes, templates and extensive customizations.

Choosing a solution for their EDM took "a fair amount of research and some careful consideration;"⁽¹¹⁾ in the end, they selected Document Locator by ColumbiaSoft.⁽¹⁰⁾ **(For a list of qualities you should look for in an EDM system, see page 9 of the report.)**

They created folder structures and naming standards and standardized their templates for better speed and data quality. They also:

- Integrated existing systems to save processing time
- Set up rules for saving and cataloguing emails in the EDM to ensure that any information they receive via email is incorporated in the system consistently
- Implemented logs and audit trails to manage information, as well as to alert managers when there's a need among staff for additional training
- Established granular control over the security of files and folders (**details on page 38**)
- Defined document workflows, reducing the number of errors in processing
- Automated a document lifecycle system that notifies case managers when a case is due to be closed or a document deleted – making their database more efficient by eliminating obsolete records, while improving quality of service via built-in reminders to follow up on forgotten tasks
- Used Document Locator's web-based component that allowed staff to work remotely from any PC running Microsoft Office, at home or on the road

Ultimately, “virtually every document with which the Commission is involved” was delivered to them “at any time and from anywhere in the world,” on a tablet.⁽⁴⁵⁾

As a result, commissioners can access any record they need before or during meetings, read and mark up the documents electronically on a single lightweight device.

Not just a bed of roses: what difficulties did PSCW face?

The EDM system at PSCW “changed everything.”⁽⁴⁾ With a paradigm shift as big as this, some resistance is to be expected.

Newman observed that the “biggest unanticipated cost and challenge was users’ transition and acceptance of the new systems.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ Some staff members “weren’t as computer-literate as they should have been;”⁽⁵⁵⁾ others were actually just unwilling to work with electronic documents. Moving to the EDM required the team to “learn a whole new way of creating, storing, retrieving, saving and collaborating on documents.”⁽⁵⁵⁾

The transition also took a lot of work, and time. For example, moving documents from the file servers to the appropriate EDM folders took 18 months.⁽¹²⁾ It took another two to three years to bring both phases of the project to completion.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Yet despite the difficulties, Newman reflected that PSCW has “surpassed our wildest expectations in making the transition as quickly, thoroughly and efficiently as we have.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ The move to a paperless office can be done successfully: the outcome hinges on five strategic principles.

Recommendations for a successful implementation

1. Technical flexibility is invaluable. Choose a solution and a vendor that provide extensive customization. “Systems that depend on rigid rules... should be rejected,” Newman said.⁽⁵⁶⁾ It’s important to use a flexible application programming interface (API) or software development toolkit (SDK), which support customized workflows and add-ons to better-integrate your existing operations with the EDM system.

2. Be strategic from the first step. It’s a good idea to have someone on your team who’s always asking why. “Why do we do it that way? Can we stop doing that? Is there another, better way to do it, especially in an electronic world?”⁽¹³⁾ At PSCW, decisions made early in the process proved instrumental to the success of the project. For example:

- They decided the electronic version of the document would be the official version
- They decided not to capture old documents, but to start from where they were and, moving forward, to look for more and more ways to replace physical processes with electronic ones
- They decided the new system would not involve scanning, to remove any temptation for team-members to fall back on paper-dependent processes
- They decided to examine existing business processes at every step of the way, creatively re-engineering them as needed
- They decided to let some things go: eliminating steps when possible, getting rid of unnecessary documents, replacing physical signatures with electronic ones, etc.
- They decided to resist the impulse to reincorporate paper – as tempting as it often was

3. Plan a realistic timeframe. Implementation takes time. The good news is, you don’t have to tackle everything at once. Based on his experience at PSCW, Newman suggested breaking the project into logical steps: “Pick a component or sub-process where you can get the biggest ‘bang for the buck’ and prove to your staff that going paperless is not only possible, but an easier way to get their work done. Achieve the buy-in that you will need to take the next, more difficult steps. Rinse and repeat.”⁽⁶⁰⁾

4. Don't underestimate the power of the familiar.

The second phase of the paperless transition in Wisconsin involved "absolutely every staff person in the PSCW."⁽⁴⁾ It's important, Newman said, to find those team-members who "can embrace change,"⁽¹²⁾ who "keep pushing and teaching those around them."⁽⁵⁵⁾ He recommended selecting "as many staff as you can,"⁽¹²⁾ ideally with "representation from every business unit,"⁽¹²⁾ to participate in the planning. Their familiarity and support later in the process helped keep the project moving forward.

On the same note, invest in training. Newman observed that "companies who cut costs on training see increased costs for deployment time and take more time to realize benefits."⁽⁴³⁾ PSCW not only holds orientations for new employees, but provides periodic review and Q&A sessions as needed,⁽²⁵⁾ in addition to publishing workflow charts and collecting ongoing feedback.

5. Leadership is everything. The success of a paperless transition depends on its leaders: their commitment to seeing it through and their confidence in the ultimate goal. The top management must say it is a top priority. At PSCW, the Chairperson, and top executive staff, made the direction clear.⁽⁵²⁾

"They need to be forceful at times... but gentle and persuasive when the situation calls for it. Above all, they need to instill in the team the confidence that they're all doing the right thing."⁽⁵⁵⁾

Leadership is about setting the vision, listening to feedback, being sensitive to your team's needs and comfort zones – and having the tenacity to move on what you know is best, even if others don't see it the same way. It requires:

- Achieve buy-in from your team
- Addressing their legitimate concerns
- Looking for solutions that make their lives easier
- Respecting the limits to their tolerance for change
- Following through regardless

The PSCW paperless experience: read the full report

While the paperless revolution predicted back in 1975 took a long time to get moving, it's well on its way today. Since 2000, "the use of office paper in the U.S. has dropped 40%," Newman said, and "advances in digital storage, digital screens and an explosion of smart devices" are transforming the office environment.⁽¹⁾ Newman observed that 70% of State public utility commissions – nearly three in four – have some type of e-filing system in place.

By going paperless, PSCW didn't just save themselves a lot of time and labor. They shrank their need for office space, freed up staff for more important duties, reduced their environmental impact, reaped enormous savings and most importantly, improved the quality and range of services they provide their customers.

Today, PSCW customers can access online documents for public e-agendas in real time, while tuning in to a live audio broadcast of the commission's open meetings. Today, commissioners can access, read and mark up documents on the road, in a meeting, at home, on their tablets.

The first step in replicating their success is to choose a vendor who can bring you there. Newman said, "The selection of our EDM system was very important;"⁽²⁶⁾ more importantly, they "had selected a vendor who listens really well."⁽⁵³⁾

"Because we had 'experimented' with a number of different EDM packages, we were confident... when we selected the Document Locator software from ColumbiaSoft."⁽⁵³⁾

Newman's report is packed with valuable recommendations, detailed stories and many useful gems for State commissions, utilities and government agencies considering the transition to a paperless office. We encourage you to take the time to read it.

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