

Pulp fiction...and fact

One degree's long-term aim is an elimination of the vast extent of paper that clutter up the workplace. There are a number of ways they can help this to happen – through extensive consultancy services and their product suite, Workfile. This will be an advantage for the everyday efficiency and organisation of the office environment. After all, imagine searching for a keyword in a stack of printed papers. So, Electronic documents are the stuff of the future, and Xerox has been an advocator of such methods for as long as 30 years. Just who was the first to predict a paperless office is hard to say, but many fingers point towards, George Pake, who ran the Xerox research centre in 1975. This idea is becoming increasingly important as the total amount of information being stored is increasing at such a dramatic rate.

However, there is still a natural human need for the old-fashioned pen and paper. And despite the predictions people are still using paper; Xerox thinks it is well placed to cash in on the trend, in the not-too-distant future. Xerox plan is to bridge the gap between electronic documents and their paper cousins and to make paper just as interactive and flexible as digital. After all, is it possible to scribble on the margin of a 'PDF'? But such a task may not be so impossible in the future with advances in the technological field, the development of electronic paper by Xerox. Herve Gallaire, the company's chief technology officer, at a conference at the Xerox research centre in the Alps, pointed to prototype software, written by Xerox that searches the internet or network for the original digital version of a paper printout. The idea is that you will scan the printout and then the software will look for the digital original, and place a copy in your personal files, perhaps along with other versions of the document, such as translations into other languages. The company is working on software that will do the same thing for images.

This new way of handling paper documents is an embodiment of a larger idea: that information should flow on and off printed pages, as easily as it can be added to electronic documents or extracted from them. If you are looking for a document among a sheaf of papers, the quickest way to find it will be to scan them all electronically and then skim through them all electronically through a set of summaries compiled by a computer. For this to happen paper documents will have to change. Data about a document will be stored in tiny barcode-like 'glyphs' printed discreetly at the bottom of each page that a scanner will be able to pick up and interpret. These glyphs will contain information about a document's history, its owners and how the data it contains is related to other documents: how cells on a spreadsheet are linked for example. Gallaire sees advanced photocopiers capable of carrying out all these tasks on large numbers of documents, playing a central role in future offices, and this is where Xerox will take the lead.

Whether Xerox can make this a reality remains to be seen. Xerox has fallen on hard times of late. It has dropped behind rival document companies such as Adobe, whose PDF format has become a de facto standard for electronic documents. The company, however, is responsible for window-based computing, drop-down menus, scroll bars and the whole notion of cutting and pasting – all of which were dreamed up at their research laboratories, Xerox Park, Palo Alto, California. But while Xerox

concentrated on photocopying, other companies turned these ideas into some of the biggest business success stories in history (I am sure you can all think of one company at least, name starts with 'M'.....). Gallaire admits Xerox was a hardware company, but they recognise the need to explore new spaces, and this may be its last chance.

As these future developments become present, One Degree will be one of the first to hop on board, as an enhancement of their own 'paperless office' ideas. In the meantime we will keep you posted about further developments in the field.