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# Paperless Payoff

Discover how going digital can streamline your business.

by **Todd Clarke, CCIM**

**F**acing an overwhelming number of files and documents to scan, some commercial real estate professionals resist converting their brokerage from paper to digital, hoping for an easier solution. However, those looking to increase services while gaining a competitive advantage may find a solution in a modest technology investment coupled with a modified workflow process. With the right tools and patience, commercial real estate professionals will find that converting to a paperless office is a spring-cleaning shortcut to a long-term investment.

## **Beginning the Process**

While technology is a necessary component for paperless offices, adopting a process to integrate digital documents into the work flow also is integral.

The first step is to scan all documents in a timely manner. It is important to get scanners that can hold 30 pages, scan both sides of a page in a matter of seconds, automatically adjust for color or black-and-white documents, and save to a PDF through just one button. It also saves time to have a scanner on each desk. If large-format documents are involved, consider contacting a local architectural supply company to scan and convert building

plans to PDF or CD-ROM for a nominal fee.

While some brokerages scan documents right away, others wait until documents are ready to be transmitted, thinking they are saving time. Before beginning the scanning process, commercial real estate professionals should consider what will work best with the current work flow. For example, if documents are scanned upon receipt,

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this allows brokers access to them anytime anywhere.

Companies also should develop a file naming process that allows all appropriate staff members, brokers, and clients to easily access the information. For instance, a conventional naming process should include everything needed to decipher a file's content without having to open it. This includes property name, city, client name, type of document, status, version, and date.

For example, a purchase agreement signed by the seller of a property located at a specific address could be named: yourdatadirectory\listings\6101SequoiaNWABQ\PurchaseAgreement-BuyerAllied-SignedbySeller-12182007.pdf.

A naming system plus a Web-based tool that allows users to create a "virtual" closing room to upload files allows clients, employees, and other parties to check the status of transactions as well as access relevant files. Whether commercial real estate professionals set up their own online closing rooms or use a national company's electronic closing room platform, the always-open access these sites offer all parties in a transaction is unparalleled.

## **Organizing Storage**

Once files are named, an appropriate company-wide storage method also must be determined. For instance, files can be organized within the company directory in a most-accessed to least-accessed system. The most-active directories such as listings and clients can be at the top, while the bottom directories can be archived files such as past deals, closings, and client files.

Different directories should have practical names, such as day-to-day, listings, clients, and personal. Brokers

## Paperless Gains

- Quicker turnaround in document management
- Improved staff efficiency
- Brokers freed from office and paper files
- Reduced need for paper storage
- Better client service through faster response time

can use the day-to-day directory for e-mail, Palm files, QuickBooks, and other frequently accessed files. The listings directory, however, could consist of client properties, which could be further disaggregated by property type. Different from the day-to-day directory, these files usually are only accessed occasionally. All files can be archived after projects are completed or deals are closed.

It also is helpful to numerically label each directory. For instance, directories 1 and 5 could be transactions while 2 and 6 could include client files. In this case, directories 1 and 2 would be active deals and clients while directories 5 and 6 would be archives. Both new and old information is organized in way that is easily accessible for employees.

The directories also can be set up as shortcuts through the keyboard. Using Windows XP or Vista, users can right click on any data directory and create one compressed or zipped file to send to co-workers, clients, and qualifying brokers.

## Backing Up

By organizing data based on frequency of use, backing up files is an easy process. USB drives, DVDs, and Blu-ray discs work

best for storage, depending on the amount of data. Daily information can be backed up using a USB drive; weekly backups can be burned to DVDs, which can store up to 4.7 gigabytes in a matter of an hour; and monthly backups can be performed on Blu-ray discs, a new generation of optical discs that hold 25 GB to 50 GB of data and take about four hours to fill. Once this process is complete, storing the backup drives in a safe place can help maintain longevity of the information.

If a temporary backup is needed, external data drives, varying in capacity from 160 GB to 2 terabytes, can be connected through USB or Firewire ports. Keep in mind that these drives have a limited lifespan and are subject to the same safety and security issues that affect laptops and desktops. Therefore, they should only be used to move data from machine to machine or as a temporary backup solution.

Ideally, the creators/authors of the files should be responsible for their personal backups, with office managers coordinating a common off-site location. In doing so, the company and employees can organize information in a way that makes sense.

Commercial real estate professionals not only will benefit from eliminating paper and clutter by going digital, but important information also will be secure while improving efficiency and offering a competitive advantage to clients.



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on going paperless, see his blog at [www.nmapt.com/tech](http://www.nmapt.com/tech).

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