So, the paperless office will save trees, will it? Don't make me laugh, says Brian Clegg.

Not out of the woods yet

I was wandering down the glass-covered street at the heart of a high-tech modern headquarters building the other day when I saw someone I recognised. I asked "Dave", as I shall call him (because it's his name) what he was up to. He replied: "Electronic document management", to which I said, "Oh yes, the paperless office". The outcome of this witty exchange was hollow laughter on both sides. This wasn't brought on by sunstroke. Ask anyone involved in what used to be called Office Automation about the paperless office, and you'll probably get the same reaction.

The paperless office is a sensible concept — do away with the paper flying around the office. No more post to open, just electronic documents, whizzing around the net. It's fast, it's efficient, and best of all in this eco-friendly world, it gives trees a break. The trouble is, the paperless office is like one of those po-faced black-and-white television programmes that imagined life in the 1990s. You know, when we'd have robots doing the housework and we'd all fly helicopters and read newspapers printed on metal foil. It wasn't just the earnest science presenters getting things wrong. You only have to look at that classic film *2001* — set just three years from now — to see a PanAm (remember PanAm?) shuttle en route to the space station and big-screen videophones as the norm.

Business computing has been dogged by chimera like the paperless office. In the 1940s, Thomas Watson Sr, the man behind IBM, commissioned a report into the business potential of the new electronic computer. It concluded that the demand from the entire US market would amount to little more than a handful of machines. The paperless office was based on a similarly dubious prediction. As two key technologies began to emerge — scanning to reproduce a paper document in electronic form, and email to move electronic documents around a company — the cry went up that paper was dead. We should have known better.

In fact, the electronic office proved exceedingly proficient at generating paper. Laser printers and fast photocopiers could push more onto the printed page in less time. Improved layout capabilities meant that documents were drafted several times to get them looking right. Lengthy dumps were made to paper, "just in case". As email grew in popularity, some people began to print their mail to read it in comfort. The ability to produce pretty graphs meant that every report had to have half-a-dozen more pages. And, of course, the flow of paper from outside the company showed no sign of slowing down. Like many failed predictions, the error was mostly in timing. New technology initially generates more work, not less. And the changes rarely happen all at once. The trouble with the "paperless" label is that it's all or nothing. Reality is more incremental. Now, as aspects of the electronic office become more common, some of the benefits are appearing. Take external post. The grand vision pushed this through a central facility which would open it, scan it and send it on to the recipient in electronic form. Not surprisingly, this didn't catch on: it's expensive and difficult. Imagine being the poor scanner operative who had to deal with Reader's Digest prize draw applications. Yet fail to scan *everything,* and the scanner becomes a censor.

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That picture of the world is unreal, but incoming mail has changed. When the paperless office was first envisaged, email was purely in-house. Now internet mail gives worldwide reach. Half the press releases I get come by email, and the proportion is rising all the time.

The same goes for internal documents. We are increasingly seeing simple administration — expense claims or overtime forms — performed electronically. Intranets and other internal information networks are reducing the need to churn out thousand-page reports. We've ended up with the semi-skimmed milk of the paperless world. It might be reduced paper rather than paper-free, but it's a step in the right direction.

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