

Paper Doesn't Grow on Trees

FROM NEWSPAPERS TO WATER BOTTLES, my friend is a compulsive recycler. When we go hiking, rather than toss her empty water bottle in a nearby trash receptacle, she carries it for the entire hike so she can put it in the recycling bin when she gets home. Not until she took me to see *An Inconvenient Truth* this summer (at which she saved yet another water bottle) did I begin to consider the impact my law firm has on the environment. Like most law firms, we churn through a shocking amount of paper. Then I started noticing articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and *U.S. News & World Report* about how large corporations—like Dupont, IBM, Boeing, and British Petroleum—have been saving billions of dollars through their conservation efforts. Evidently, environmentally responsible business practices can result in massive cost savings, increased profits, greater efficiency, and increased morale among the staff. I was intrigued. If there was nothing to lose and everything to gain, why couldn't our firm do something like this? We could, and we did.

Ungerlaw, PC, forms hundreds of corporations and LLCs and maintains the corporate records for thousands of entities, representing nearly every jurisdiction. Several years ago, in an effort to improve efficiency, our firm became "paperless" internally by creating a paperless infrastructure. Most of our staff have two monitors for easy viewing of multiple documents. We stopped creating physical files, and our fee agreements have clients acknowledge that we keep their records only in a digital format. These digital files are safeguarded through a complex backup system, including a nightly backup to a remote server called eVault. But, even with our internal efforts to minimize paper, we were still organizing each client's corporate documents in binders, and our shredders were still working overtime.

In August 2006, I decided it was time to put conservation to the test and investigate a paperless delivery option, something we could not have accomplished without first having a paperless infrastructure. When a client selects paperless delivery, we deliver documents on a CD-ROM in lieu of a binder and post copies of the documents in the PDF format on a private access page of our firm's secure Web site. We also plant a tree in our client's name through American Forests. Founded in 1875 by citizens concerned about the waste and abuse of the nation's forest, American Forests is the oldest nonprofit citizens' conservation organization in the United States. It focuses on assisting communities in restoring and maintaining healthy ecosystems and practicing urban forestry.

Plenty of professional services firms are becoming "paperless," but our paperless delivery of documents takes being paperless to another level. I anticipated that only a fraction of our clients, say 10 to 15 percent, would opt for paperless. However, an astonishing 70 percent of our clients have gone paperless, and more than 80 percent of our new

business is opting for digital format. We have already planted hundreds of trees through American Forests, and we expect to save a significant amount of money in labor and production costs.

Before I started down this path, I did not fully understand the financial benefits of environmentally responsible business practices. I think most environmental groups pitch the wrong message to business owners. Instead of telling you, "Just do these things because they are good for the environment," they should emphasize that you can be environmentally responsible and benefit your business at the same time. Law firms should consider how much paper they use in delivering doc-

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Our rewarding experience with paperless delivery has sparked an internal crusade to seek out other opportunities to reduce our firm's impact on the environment. We have made environmentally responsible business practices a priority by forming a committee of interested staff volunteers to research and implement other eco-friendly business practices. One exceptional opportunity has already come from this. After consulting an employment attorney, and following a legally required vote by the staff, we initiated a 9/80 work week in January 2007. Here's how it breaks down: The employees work nine-hour days Monday through Thursday. Every Friday the staff members alternate, with one half working an eight-hour day, while the other half enjoys a day off. Our employees are incredibly excited about this. They truly value having more time off. Not only does the 9/80 work week boost productivity and morale, it also reduces our commuter emissions by 50 percent on Fridays. We are also expanding the hours that we are open, from 7 A.M. to 6 P.M., as some staff members want to avoid peak traffic hours and get home to their families at a reasonable hour.

We are looking forward to implementing more programs that benefit our firm, our employees, and the environment. Our success with paperless delivery is proof that business can be environmentally friendly and benefit financially from doing so. So next time the din of paper shredders causes you to lose your train of thought, think about going paperless. ■

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