

The paperless principle

Six practical tips for using less paper at work



The debate about a paperless office is not really new, but the advent of digital technology in everyday life gives it a fresh boost. Interestingly, in spite of all the smartphones, tablets, and notebooks, you'll hardly find an office building that's truly paperless. Why is it so difficult to say goodbye to paper? We have asked the people at Connox Ltd. – a medium-sized company located in Hannover, Germany, which actually manages to operate widely without paper. We wanted to know just how this was accomplished. Managing Director Thilo Haas gave us a little background information.

The idea to start Connox Ltd. originated when Kristian Lenz and Thilo Haas were reunited at a class reunion in 2005. Eleven years later, the Hannover-based online retailer of designer furniture employs more than 90 people. Thilo Haas recalls how he started an initiative to lower paper consumption to a minimum – that was six years ago. He did it for two reasons: “Firstly, high ecological and eco-friendly standards are part of our corporate culture. And yes, we also felt it would have an economic effect.” To effectively reduce paper consumption, Connox followed three basic steps.

Tip No 1: Take time to analyze

Converting any processes takes time – even in the preparatory phase. For Connox, analyzing the existing paper-based document processes played a major role: “You have to critically question which printing processes are unavoidable. You’d be surprised at how many single work steps are involved in processing an incoming invoice. But this knowledge is necessary to understand which steps in the process can be accomplished without paper,” Haas explains.

Tip No 2: Don't make it complicated

“Before you begin with the technical adjustments,” Haas continues, “You have to provide the technical prerequisites to the employees, which allow them to minimize paper consumption. To this end, you have to digitalize all processes that used to be paper-based – without making

the work procedures more complicated.” Connox has entirely shifted to a digital billing system, the standard printer for everybody is a PDF printer, and incoming faxes are automatically saved electronically for further processing.

Tip No 3: Raise awareness

According to Haas, raising awareness is the biggest hurdle. “The most important issue is more of a psychological one. It’s imperative to heighten employee awareness. They have to critically reflect and decide if a certain document really has to be printed. The message has to click in the mind of each colleague.” To enhance awareness, Connox has used a few simple and effective tricks: The entire office building has only two printing machines and two waste paper baskets. Whoever wants to print something or throw away paper, has to cover a great distance.

Tip No 4: Make clean desks a principle

Furthermore, the online retailer has introduced the “clean desk principle. “At the end of the work day, nothing shall be left on the desks. In support of this target, we have banned traditional storage trays from the entire building.” These methods serve to raise awareness about paper consumption, and they are explained in detail to every new employee. Haas does not think that age plays a role. “We do have a rather young team, but the attitude towards paper consumption has nothing to do with age.”

Tip No 5: Accept that paper can’t be entirely abolished

Even though at Connox everybody has now internalized the necessity of reducing paper, an office that functions entirely without paper is still inconceivable. Haas holds mainly external reasons responsible for that: “Our customers still expect to find a delivery note or a return slip in their package, and we can’t cooperate with all our partners on a paper-free basis because not all of them are prepared for it.” German legal regulations also have to be taken into account. For instance, many contracts or reminders must exist in paper form to be legally valid.

Tip No 6: Archive everything in digital form ... and be avant-garde!

The sustained relevance of paper is also confirmed by the study “Working Digitally” conducted by the Fraunhofer Institute of Labor Economics and Organization (IAO). According to the study, the vast majority of respondents (70%) work digitally. But in spite of the digital exchange, almost a quarter of those participants still have very high print volumes – paper is still clearly at the center of the working environment. Small and mid-sized businesses primarily use printed documents for archiving. Only one participant in five stores documents solely in digital form. Nonetheless, Haas is sure a paperless working world is possible. “I truly believe it’s merely a matter of time. Even today we can practically solve everything digitally if we want to.”

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