

En Route To The 'Paperless' Office



Latest scanners broaden usage of document input

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With a web of 35,000 gas stations worldwide, the promise of a paperless office remains far down the road for petroleum behemoth Exxon Mobil. But with the help of systems integrator Cutting Edge Solutions, selective use of distributed scanning is fueling new efficiencies in corporate bill handling and document sharing.

The effort is paying off by expediting the way Exxon Mobil handles property tax bills and assessments for its properties. In the past, accountants at the oil giant's Houston headquarters were inundated with paper tax notices, all of which had to be processed immediately to avoid missing appeals deadlines. Now one tax assistant can scan tax bills and assessments, route the data to tax and financial officials across the company's global network, and quickly collect decisions on whether to appeal an assessment or simply pay the bill.

"They are talking about rolling it out to all 200 employees in the tax department," says Jack Roberts, a vice president at Cutting Edge in Kansas City, Mo. "Not just to handle tax bills and assessments but any document they get in and to hopefully get in as close as they can get to a paperless environment."

Cutting Edge rolled out the solution for Exxon Mobil earlier this year. The system is based on a new Fujitsu scanner and upgraded document-capture software called Taskmaster from DataCap. While Exxon Mobil, which just topped the Fortune 500 last month may still be far from a paperless office, the project is an example of a growing trend among enterprises of all sizes that are finding new uses for distributed scanning. Many, like Exxon Mobil, are leaning toward more widespread use of data-capture hardware and software among workgroups, rather than just in central organizations, where typically large volumes of documents are scanned.

Documents increasingly need to be scanned to comply with the growing wave of regulations such as HIPAA and Sarbanes-Oxley. That, as well as a desire to lower costs, is helping to push document scanning toward a distributed model, analysts note.

And thanks to a new crop of desktop and workgroup scanners, it's easier and more affordable than ever for companies to distribute workloads where documents must be scanned and processed. Canon, Fujitsu, Hewlett-Packard, Kodak, Ricoh and Visioneer have rolled out new scanners recently with many more on the way, officials at those companies say.

Workgroup and departmental scanners are the fastest-growing segment of the market, according to market researcher InfoTrends. Based on its most recent assessment, revenue for workgroup scanners is forecast to be \$354 million this year, an increase of more than 60 percent from \$257 million in 2004.

"Distributed scanning is becoming more popular, as organizations can now justify moving away from the centralized model," InfoTrends analyst Jon Franke says. Helping to drive that trend is the availability of higher functionality at less cost. A full-duplex production scanner that just five years ago may have cost \$10,000 now costs less than \$2,000, says Scott Francis, director of product marketing at Fujitsu's scanner unit. "As scanners have come down in price, it's more viable to put a scanner at the point of paper creation," Francis says.