

LIFESTYLE

PAPER CUTS STILL PAINFUL

Behaviour, not technology is the reason the 'paperless' office hasn't yet arrived. **Report: Michael Bleby**

● Do you remember the *Six Million Dollar Man*? It was a 1970s US TV hit show about a crippled test pilot rebuilt with bionic implants that gave him superhuman strength, pace and vision.

"We have the technology," was one of the opening catch-phrases, while an electronic music background played.

Steve Austin wasn't real. Neither is the paperless office, another concept of the '70s that we now have the technology to realise and yet remains as much of a myth as Steve Austin's bionic man.

Australians are using more paper than ever, as a glance at most office desks will confirm.

"The technology is there. It is going to take some time for people to start using it," the chief executive of QA Software, Russell Mortimer, says.

The problem is that even as software has improved to make the digital reproduction of documents easier and cheaper and hardware has improved to make screens and displays clearer and easier to use than ever before, technology has also changed to make physical printing of paper easier.

This has hindered the uptake of new technologies that have been promised ever since Xerox first outlined its ambition to create the paperless office when it opened its Palo Alto Research Centre in Silicon Valley in 1970.

In 2006, Xerox declared it had created "erasable paper", a medium that could be printed on repeatedly as the images on it would disappear after 16 to 24 hours. The experimental technology, Xerox declared, "blurs the line between paper documents and digital displays".

Last year, Taiwan's Industrial Technology Research Institute's i2R e-paper won a *Wall Street Journal* Technology Innovation Award for being the first electronic paper technology that was a "re-writable, re-usable and environmentally friendly print medium"



Reflective: Russell Mortimer knows that it may take a generational change



The technology's been there for a decade but so many people still want to download and print the document

Rob Bryant, QA Software

that could be printed on up to 260 times.

QA's Team Binder software, which allows different people to work on and alter documents that are stored virtually, had to be built with inefficiencies to reflect the fact that behaviour hasn't changed.

The software allows engineers to review, alter and comment on documents stored virtually. They can do it all without touching a piece of paper. But they don't want to, it seems.

"That can all be done electronically today," says QA sales manager Rob Bryant. "[The technology's] been there [for] a decade but so many people still want to download that document. We've had to build an inefficiency into that technology to allow people to download the document, print it, mark it up, scan it and then send it back on to the next person."

There are signs, however, that the global financial crisis, which cut business activity, has also hastened changes in behaviour. Australian consumption of cut reams of A4 paper grew from 228,000 tonnes in 2002 to 251,000 tonnes in 2007 before dropping. It recovered after the crisis but in the 12 months to June this year, fell back again.

"The global financial crisis was really a circuit breaker in people's minds and the days of almost avid consumption of

paper then came to an end," a director of paper consultancy IndustryEdge, Robert Eastment, says.

The increasing use of computer tablets is also pushing behavioural change. Manipulating documents, enlarging and scrolling by hand on a tablet screen is making people more willing to skip paper and work solely on a virtual document, Bryant says.

Different professions show a different willingness to adopt new technology, Mortimer says. The former mechanical engineering student who founded QA in 1994 says construction-related industries are the fastest, in part because of the collaboration needed between different parties in the design and construction processes. He wants to branch out into the insurance and banking industries next. Law, by contrast, is the slowest profession to adapt.

"Legal is a bit [resistant]," he says. "It's a generational issue. Let's say the technology arrives today but the people who are [case] managers or judges or the lead lawyers, are in their 40s or 50s. They are resistant to change. There's going to be a lead time. It's going to take 15 to 20 years. A new generation comes up who have learnt that technology and will get into those managerial roles and some of them will have the guts to say 'This is crap. We need a change.'" **BRW**