

Creating the (Almost) Paperless Office

By Jeffrey Noethe, PhD

When I set up my private practice, I wanted to keep the business simple and efficient. I also wanted to minimize paper waste and avoid the long-term hassles of managing and storing old files. So, I decided to go with a paperless client record system.

I looked into commercial software, but these packages seemed too bloated, complicated, and expensive for my liking. I knew there had to be a better way, so I did a little homework and pulled together the pieces on my own. Now, after some refinement, I have a record system that is easy, secure, and HIPAA compliant.

As the title suggests, my business is not entirely paperless. I still keep some paper business and financial records, but only where scanning would be more bother than benefit. In the end, the paper files for my practice will never fill more than two drawers of a file cabinet, and that's "paperless enough" for me.

The essential components of my paperless record system are described here, along with the costs incurred along the way. All I started with was a Toshiba laptop PC, a color inkjet printer, and various pieces of free software found on-line (download.com).

My antivirus software is AVG (grisoft.com), my firewall is ZoneAlarm (zonealarm.com), and my office productivity suite is OpenOffice (openoffice.org), an open-source alternative to Microsoft Office. All of these programs have free versions, and all of them work exceedingly well.

Now let's check out the various components of my system...

Secure Storage (\$0)

When you delete a file on your PC, that file continues to exist and remains retrievable even after you empty the trash. This simple knowledge is the key to file security, and I use two free pieces of software to insure that confidential files stay secure.

TrueCrypt (truecrypt.org) is an open-source program that creates a heavily encrypted storage space on my hard drive. At first glance, this storage space looks like a file, but when in use, it behaves exactly like a hard drive. Even if someone locates this file, their only hope of accessing my records is to guess the password, which is very little hope indeed (far less than 1 in a trillion trillion). For ideas on selecting good passwords, search for "password advice" on Google or Yahoo.

If TrueCrypt seems intimidating, try Cryptainer (cypherix.com/cryptainerpe), which basically does the same thing and is a bit more user-friendly (\$30).

The other program I use is Eraser (heidi.ie/eraser), which securely deletes files so they can never be retrieved. This program can also securely erase all the unused space on a hard drive, so old deleted files cannot be retrieved.

As a result of these two simple security measures, my client files are more secure than any double-locked paper filing system, even when I carry my laptop around town. After all, far more people know how to use a crow bar than can hack a heavily protected computer file.

Filing System (\$0)

Inside the secure storage space, I keep all of my active and recently-closed client files, as well as a simple database for tracking client contacts and payments. Each client is given a folder as well as an ID number, which is used in every file name to avoid confusion or data loss.

For example, each progress note has a file name like "10056-2007-08-24 Progress Notes", indicating the client ID number and the date of the session. These file names have the added benefit of keeping the files in chronological order, no matter when they were created or modified.

I also use the ID numbers to schedule clients in my paper day planner, which is not secure at all. The end result is that my clients' names never appear anywhere outside the secure storage space.

Creating Documents (\$0)

To make life easier, I have created templates in OpenOffice Writer (my word processing program) for intake summaries, progress notes, closing summaries, and business letterhead. After each session, I fill out a progress note and save it to the client folder in Portable Document Format (PDF).

PDF is the standard for electronic documents, because it is akin to digital paper. It is highly compatible, maintains document formatting and appearance, is not likely to become outdated, and most importantly, is a "read only" format that cannot easily be altered. PDF has even been adopted as the official electronic document format for the U.S. Federal Courts.

If your word processor cannot save or export to PDF, the problem is easily resolved with PrimoPDF (primopdf.com), a free piece of software that creates a PDF "printer" for use with any program. I use it to create PDF's of client e-mail

communications, which then get saved into the client folders with everything else. Once saved, I delete the original e-mail messages, thereby eliminating another potential security threat.

Other PDF options include Acrobat (adobe.com), the original and most complete PDF maker (\$300), and GreenPrint (printgreener.com), a great little program that prints PDF's and also helps reduce paper and ink waste when you absolutely must print hard copies (\$35-\$70).

Scanning Documents (\$284)

Even though my initial assessments and progress notes are all electronic, I still receive some paper documents, especially during the intake process. Fortunately, according to the *2006 OPA Conference Defensive Recordkeeping Handouts* (opa.org), "Scanned documents are as good as originals." So, I use a simple flatbed scanner (\$80-\$180) to transform paper documents into PDF files. I save these files into the appropriate client folders and shred the originals with a cross-cut shredder (\$60-\$120).

My practice involves primarily therapy work, so this system works very well for me. On average, I scan about 8 pages for each new client, which only takes about 10 minutes. A clinician who also does assessments might need a faster scanner with a duplex sheet feeder (\$400+) to handle the higher volume of paper.

Reliable Backups (\$0)

Backing up electronic files is one of the easiest, most important, and most neglected steps in maintaining any computer. In my experience, most people do not take backups seriously until they experience data loss, at which point it is too late. This might be merely frustrating for the average computer user, but the stakes are much higher with a paperless office.

Hard drives do sometimes fail, just like buildings do sometimes catch fire. Fortunately, backing up your electronic files is far easier than duplicating your paper files.

Remember when I said that the secure storage space looks like a file? Well, like a file, it can also be saved to a flash drive or burned to a CD or DVD, and it remains completely secure at all times. It takes me about 90 seconds per week to backup my client files, and no special software is required.

The best part is that, even after decades in private practice, all of my files will still fit inside a DVD case no bigger than a text book. No row of filing cabinets. No banker boxes. No storage unit. I can even keep a second set of backups at another location,

so I'll be safe from fires. And if I ever need an old file, I have instant access.

The Savings Continues

As you can see, a paperless record system requires little expense, and in the long run, it saves money on paper, ink, printers, filing cabinets, and storage space. A scanner and shredder were my only significant expenses, and those could have been purchased for less than the 4-drawer HON filing cabinet... that I will never need!

I also save money and paper by doing my insurance billing electronically (officeally.com), by signing up for paperless bank and utility statements whenever possible, by using my website as my brochure (DrNoethe.com), by having my intake forms available on my website, and by printing other documents double-sided and only as needed.

Maintaining the (almost) paperless office is not terribly difficult once it is in place, but a system like this does require comfort with computers and a little discipline. Even if you plan to keep paper records and only use your computer to type reports or progress notes, my comments on secure storage and reliable backups can still help you avoid problems and vulnerabilities down the road, and that's good enough for me.

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