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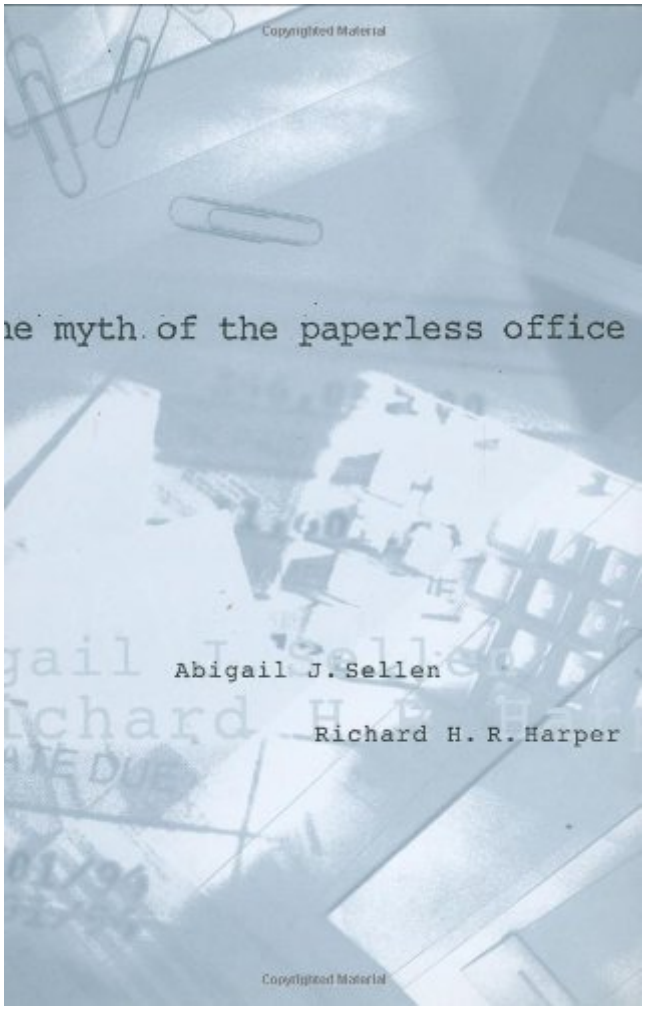
The Myth Of The Paperless Office (MIT Press)



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Synopsis

Over the past thirty years, many people have proclaimed the imminent arrival of the paperless office. Yet even the World Wide Web, which allows almost any computer to read and display another computer's documents, has increased the amount of printing done. The use of e-mail in an organization causes an average 40 percent increase in paper consumption. In The Myth of the Paperless Office, Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper use the study of paper as a way to understand the work that people do and the reasons they do it the way they do. Using the tools of ethnography and cognitive psychology, they look at paper use from the level of the individual up to that of organizational culture.Central to Sellen and Harper's investigation is the concept of "affordances" -- the activities that an object allows, or affords. The physical properties of paper (its being thin, light, porous, opaque, and flexible) afford the human actions of grasping, carrying, folding, writing, and so on. The concept of affordance allows them to compare the affordances of paper with those of existing digital devices. They can then ask what kinds of devices or systems would make new kinds of activities possible or better support current activities. The authors argue that paper will continue to play an important role in office life. Rather than pursue the ideal of the paperless office, we should work toward a future in which paper and electronic document tools work in concert and organizational processes make optimal use of both.

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book from in 2005, and would recommend it to anyone with a professional or personal interest in the ways people use paper and other types of information display surfaces. It continues to provide a valuable perspective on the uses of paper in the workplace and personal life. I especially appreciate the authors' approach to studying the way office workers (in their case studies) were interacting with paper documents, in ways that were not readily supported by available computers, screens and software.As another excellent reviewer said, in 2010: "What a difference 8 years makes. ... Selen and Harper's argument does remain relevant and thought-provoking in one important respect. They explain the unique functionalities of paper to argue why paper is better for certain tasks. In the last 8 years, some technologies have started to compete with the functionalities of paper. But [paper] remains more useful than screens for some tasks. Selen and Harper's arguments at least give us the analytical tools to think about whether certain tasks are better suited to paper or computers today."Today, more than a dozen years since the book was published, many office workers have had computers since childhood.â ¢ Some have very large screens, and some use two or three screens at a time.â ¢ Some office workers (and many travelers) get by with a tablet or smartphone, for many tasks â " including reading books as well as email.â ¢ People are indeed using computers more, and printing paper less.â ¢ So we could call it the â œpaper-lessâ • office â |However, paper still provides useful functionality, e.g.

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