THE PATH TO A
PAPERLESS
OFFICE

SSS offices are document-laden departments. Is it possible to be paperless—or even use less paper?

Converting paper documents to electronic ones can be a daunting and difficult task. But the end result is worth it for many International Student and Scholar Services offices. Going paperless can ultimately save you time and money, create more efficient processes and free up office space that previously stored files.

Consider the transformation of just one form on one university campus—the CPT authorization form at the University of Oklahoma (OU). The form is a prerequisite for F-1 international students who want to participate in paid, off-campus academic internships. Emilie Gordon, an international student advisor and SEVIS analyst at the public university, spearheaded a project to create online CPT authorization forms. She and her peers began by road mapping the authorization process. They considered issues such as how long it took students to put together the accompanying documents and what it cost to print them out.

One of the biggest wastes uncovered by Gordon was duplicate copies of documents, such as copies of passports. "We were making copies of things we already had on file," she says. "Depending on how many applications international students submit during their time here, we could have four, six, even nine copies of the same passport!"

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So the Office of International Student Services at OU created an online form for students to complete. It clearly lists conditions for CPT authorization and requires students to upload documents such as the completed academic advisor recommendation form and an internship offer letter from the employer on company letterhead. "If a document is missing, the system will not accept the application," says Gordon.

OU's Office of International Student Services has 20 forms available online for students to complete, ranging from a change of major request to an OPT employment and address report. The office, which has approximately 2,500 active SEVIS records, is "very close to being paperless," says Gordon.

Not all universities are so far along on the path to being paperless. Schools run the spectrum from dreaming about a paper free office to shredding the last piece of obsolete paper. *Here are two of their stories.*

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

International students from over 70 countries comprise 14 percent of the 9,000-plus students at this private Catholic university. About three-and-a-half years ago, the front-end of the international admissions process instituted a supplementary paperless system.

"All of the documents that students submit for admissions are scanned into a shared drive that people in the registrar's office and other advising offices can access when pre-registering incoming students," says Sheena Connell, assistant director of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW). Documents that are uploaded and housed in the international admissions office include previous university transcripts, proof of English proficiency and the university application. The ISSS office, however, is still in the early planning stages of going paperless.

One of the challenges is manpower. But with the recent hiring of an additional advisor, Connell hopes the workload will ease up enough for her to begin work on reducing paper in the office. "Until now, my day was completely booked," she says. "Even adding an extra 10 minutes a day to talk about going paperless—let alone plan it—was out of our ability." Asking the school's IT department to take on an additional project is tricky as well.

The overall culture at UIW also presents some hurdles. The school believes strongly in developing relationships with its students. "Anytime you say 'paperless' people associate that with less in-person advising," says Connell. "That's a big red flag. We want to have access to students and know all their names."

One of the challenges is manpower.

But Connell acknowledges that many forms and processes can transition to electronic ones without sacrificing personal relationships. In fact, by reducing paper UIW advisors will free up time to meet with international students. So she's doing what she can to reduce paperwork. Ironically, that may mean adding more paper at the outset.

When Connell joined UIW a few years ago, she created forms to better document several student requests. "When you add more documentation to the process of student requests and granting those requests, it sets a better platform for going paperless," says Connell. "In some ways, adding more paper will, in the end, make things more accessible online."

Connell hopes to place simple forms, such as letter requests, online. "We don't want to lose that in-person approach," she says. "But at the same time, we want to make sure that students can access basic forms online without having to come into our office."

Connell envisions a paperless ISSS office at UIW, but admits the university at large must lead the charge. "I don't think our office is going to be the leader," she says. "It has to be a priority for main campus—for domestic students—before it becomes a priority for departments serving international students."

"We don't want to lose that in-person approach"

Sheena Connell, assistant director of International Student and Scholar Services

THE UNIVERSITY
OF OKLAHOMA

OU had already begun its paperless transition when Gordon joined its Office of International Student Services in 2012. Rather than tackle documents that affect all 2,000-plus international students on campus, the office started with smaller requests and cohorts that are in their program for only a semester or two, including exchange students and English language training students.

With a few successes under its belt, the ISS office realized it needed to examine its processes rather than simply eliminate individual documents. Some of the electronic forms created for students to fill out online and upload documents were still being printed out on the back end. "It didn't make sense to scan a bunch of files that still have paper-based processes," says Gordon. "If we're going to make the students' part of the application process paperless, then we need to work on making our part paperless as well." That's when ISS took on transformation of complicated processes, such as transfer-in documents and the CPT authorization form, carefully considering all the steps involved in the process for each particular form.

The ISS office is fortunate to have the backing of the university. A few years ago, OU acquired enterprise document management software and the admissions office went paperless. But installing the software system in all the university's departments is time-consuming and costly, so the

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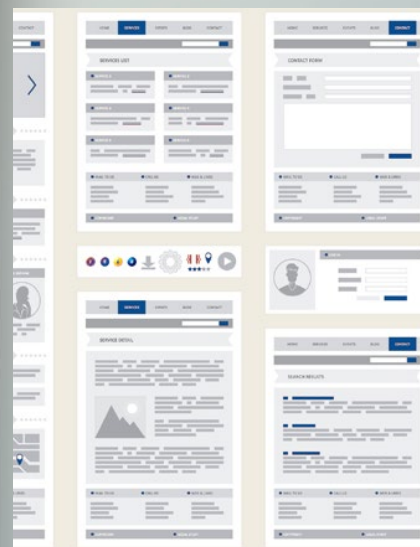
ISS—like other departments—was placed on a waiting list for conversion. The office got the software this summer and began the tedious task of scanning all its active international student files, then shredding the paper ones.

This has presented some challenges. First, staff must be trained on all the technologies. ISS relies on multiple software packages for various processes, such as batching software for SEVIS records and third-party software for online forms. Making sure everyone is up to speed on all the technologies takes time.

In addition, Gordon and her peers ran into an unanticipated glitch related to reporting. "This summer, we went into a frenzy scanning everything and did not necessarily think of everything we had scheduled that relied on physical forms," says Gordon. "So now we're going to have to rely on a lot of reports." Still, she says, that's much better than going across the hall to a filing cabinet and spending 10 minutes searching for the right files.

OU has more work to do before International Student Services is completely paperless. For instance, it's unsure how to handle reduced course load requests because those require a certain amount of advising. It's also investigating how to handle documents that require electronic signatures.

Despite the challenges, which can seem quite overwhelming some days, both Gordon and Connell agree that a paperless office— or at least one with much less paper— is on the horizon.

9 TIPS
FOR TRANSITIONING TO A
PAPERLESS OFFICE
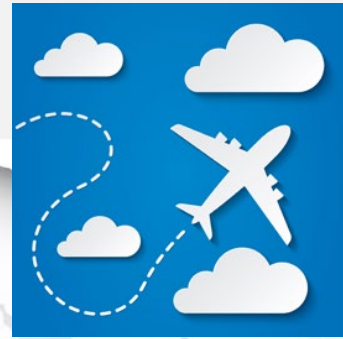
1. **Network with peers.** Talk to colleagues from NAFSA, the Association of International Educators, to see how they've handled the transition and what advice they can offer.

2. **Research the topic.** A quick Google search for "paperless ISSS offices" turns up lots of information. You can find presentations from many universities on their journey to become paperless.

3. **Designate a project champion.** Someone within your office needs to lead the charge and generate buy-in from key stakeholders.

4. **Start small.** If you're just starting out, pick a simple document to move online, such as letter requests or concurrent enrollment forms. Avoid processes that require a lot of paperwork, such as employment authorizations.

5. **Be flexible.** You may redesign your forms and processes before going live online, but the odds are good you'll have to tweak some things on the fly afterward. So be prepared for the unexpected!

6. **Hire extra helpers.** Unless you send the documents to a third-party vendor for scanning, then the task of scanning thousands of paper documents in-house will take lots of time. Be sure to employ extra students for the tedious task. Similarly, make sure you have enough scanners.

7. **Be prepared to live in limbo.** There's sure to be some "in between" time when you have some scanned files and some paper-based ones. Plan how to handle this half-paper, half-electronic period.

8. **Keep partner departments in the loop.** Academic and administrative departments that use ISSS forms need to stay abreast of any changes and be constantly reassured that a paperless system will ultimately make their jobs easier. The same advice holds true for the student population.

9. **Make plans for the obsolete paper.** What do you have to store and for how long? What can you shred and when?

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