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Digital snail mail

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By Shelley Widhalm - There is nothing slow about snail mail in a digital mailroom. The mail starts off in paper form, but with the help of technology, the paper can be trashed, recycled or filed while an electronic version is transmitted in a method similar to e-mail.

A digital mailroom — an offshoot of the paperless office — acts as a gateway for mail coming in and out of an organization, says Mark Evanoff, group operational marketing manager for Neopost Group Marketing, part of Neopost S.A., a Shelton, Conn., company that designs, develops and manufactures office equipment and mail-handling products.

"The more impersonal the correspondence, the more likely the use of a digital mailroom," Mr. Evanoff says.

Digital mailrooms, which have been around for about five years, can reduce mail-handling and storage costs, reduce the staff needed, improve efficiency and cut paper use, according to digital mailroom providers.

As futuristic as they may sound, digital mailrooms are not likely going to replace the mailroom of today, Mr. Evanoff says.

"The concept of an Orwellian world that is totally digital will never happen, just as the digital office isn't solely digital," he says. "The reason is simple: Mail matters. There is an emotional appeal to the tangible letter. There is intrinsic value to mail that may be personal, urgent or important."

A digital mailroom uses automated and electronic equipment to sort, open and distribute mail.

Frequently, the first step is to sort the mail manually or with a high-speed sorter to divide the mail into types or categories for processing, says David Jenness, spokesman for Datacap Inc., a digital mailroom software company based in Tarrytown, N.Y.

Any staples and paper clips must be removed before the mail can be processed, Mr. Jenness says.

High-speed sorters can help identify an envelope's contents before it is opened, including checks, staples and paper clips, along with the mail's size and weight, says Mark Smith, director of product planning for Opex Corp., a private company in Moorestown, N.J., that provides digital and automated mailroom products.

To open the mail, companies can use envelope slitters or openers that cut the envelopes for easy removal of the contents, Mr. Smith says. Or companies can use extractors that slit the envelopes and use suction cups to open and present the contents to an operator, he says.

Mail that is harder to handle, such as packages, large envelopes sealed with flaps, magazines and interoffice mail, can be handled by a specialized mailroom sorter that identifies where to physically deliver the mail, he says.

The sorted and extracted mail is scanned by a high-speed production scanner that takes an image of the contents, Mr. Smith says. Optical character recognition (OCR) technology in the scanner reads the numbers and letters on each page, he says. To further reduce costs and improve

efficiency, the opening, extraction and scanning all can take place on a single piece of equipment, he says.

The OCR captures information that is essential to each organization, such as the sender and recipient names, subject and specific content of the mail into a database, says Jon Love, president of Pitney Bowes Government Solutions, a mail-stream solutions integrator in Lanham that designs, engineers and manages secured government communications.

If the information is unreadable, the data must be typed manually into the database and checked for accuracy by specialists in the mailroom, Mr. Love says.

When the mail is scanned, it is classified according to type of form or document, Mr. Jenness says. Software is used to recognize the document type from key-word searches or an analysis of the contents of each page, he says.

The mail also can be indexed by searching for and extracting data, such as name, date, account number and Social Security number, Mr. Jenness says. The index can be attached to each document for archiving and retrieval, he says.

The image of each piece of mail is routed electronically over a secured network to the appropriate department or person and archived on a file server or other storage device, Mr. Smith says.

"Companies are worried about privacy," he says. "It's all under very secured systems, because all companies today are worried about anybody getting hold of information they

shouldn't see."

The scanning and routing of mail electronically at the business level has moved into the personal realm through personal mail services.

Earth Class Mail, an online mail service based in Seattle, scans and inventories mail for online viewing to enable travelers, frequent movers and others to view their mail online instead of having to retrieve it from the mailbox or a post-office box. The company is certified by the U.S. Postal Service to handle the mail of its clients.

Businesses and individuals must sign up for the service and change their address to one of the company's 19 locations across the country, as stated on the company's Web site, www.earthclassmail.com. The company scans the outside of each envelope and posts it in the client's online account or P.O. box, allowing the client to review each envelope and decide what to open, shred, archive, recycle or forward, the Web site says.

"What we're able to do is physically catch the mail until the recipient makes the choice of what they want done with it," says Ron Wiener, chief executive officer of Earth Class Mail.

The mail is opened in a secured environment by a trained, certified and screened staff that consists of veterans with Department of Defense clearances, Mr. Wiener says. The staff members wear a pocketless uniform and work at a work station that is free of any equipment and writing tools, he says.

"Everything they do is on video camera," Mr. Wiener says. "Everything is constantly accounted for. We always know where every piece of mail is."
