

ELIMINATING THE WEIGHT OF GOVERNMENT PAPERWORK

The Big Issue

As the private sector pushes full steam ahead with digitized forms and contracts, some government agencies are not far behind, excelling at paperless workstreams. However, other agencies lag in efficiency and cost, weighed down by the heavy strain of physical paperwork.

Why It Matters

In all industries, physical paperwork is costly and burdensome, and the consequences can be serious. Emergency hospital responses to the COVID-19 health crisis in New York City, for example, were slowed by a glut of paper-based documents that bottlenecked operations and decreased agility.^{1,2} However, the quantity of paperwork involved in government operations is often more egregious than in other industries, causing bureaucratic redundancies, inefficient citizen services, and monetary waste.

An Old Problem with **New Solutions**



Record retention for the aerospace industry costs the American taxpayers more than \$50 million per year for the retention of records that many aero-space companies feel could be destroyed.³


- J. Clark, The American Archivist, 1964

[The] paperwork burden [was] up by 441 million hours last year.

- Jenny Mandel, Government Executive, 2006.⁴



When Did This Become an Issue?

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- 1942** Congress passes the Federal Reports Act (FRA), aiming to reduce the paperwork that federal agencies required of citizens and businesses.⁵
 - 1970s** Momentum of frustration grows about excessive paperwork, giving rise to the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) of 1980.
 - 1980s** The PRA creates the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to oversee information requests, including paperwork, hoping to maximize the quality of information and reduce administrative burden.⁶
 - 1995** The PRA is amended to expand regulations to nonprofit organizations, tribal governments, and federal contractors.
 - 1998** The Government Paperwork Elimination Act pushes agencies to view electronic documents and signatures as equally legitimate to physical documentation.⁷
 - 2000** The E-SIGN Act allows government agencies and businesses to treat electronic signatures as an equally valid alternative to pen and paper signatures.⁸
 - 2018** Under the Trump administration, reducing paperwork takes on a new moniker under the Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) Goal, “Shifting from Low-Value to High-Value Work.”⁹
 - 2019** A Memorandum from OMB includes a proposal to transition Federal agencies into maintaining exclusively electronic records by 2023.¹⁰

What Are the Opportunity Costs of Physical Paper?



Citizen time, money, and energy

Currently, Americans spend about 11.6B hours on paperwork for the government, costing the public around \$150B each year.¹¹ On top of the resources and time that citizens spend on paperwork itself, many government services involve in-person visits or mail, requiring even more citizen time and labor.



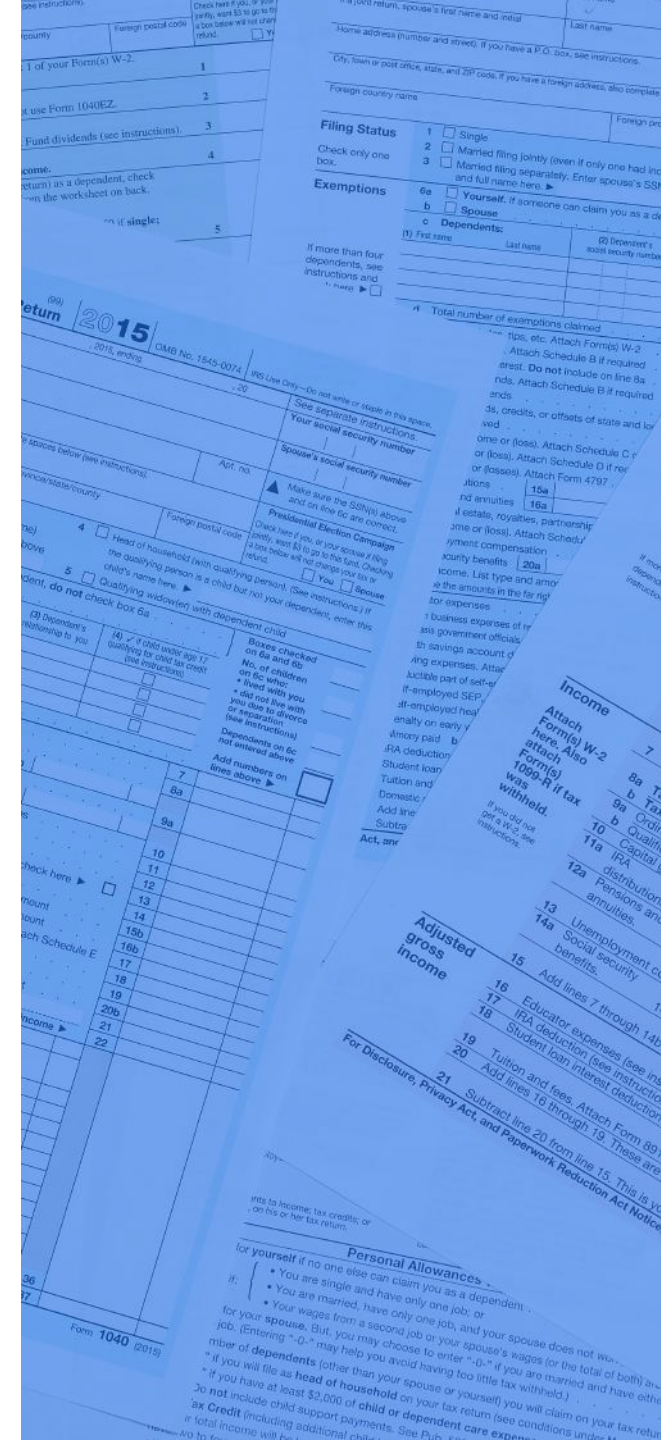
Cost of government labor and record management

Each year, the federal government spends \$38.7B in taxpayer dollars just creating and managing paperwork.¹² Maintaining large volumes of physical records requires significant management resources and security protocols, including the expensive manual extraction of data by government employees.



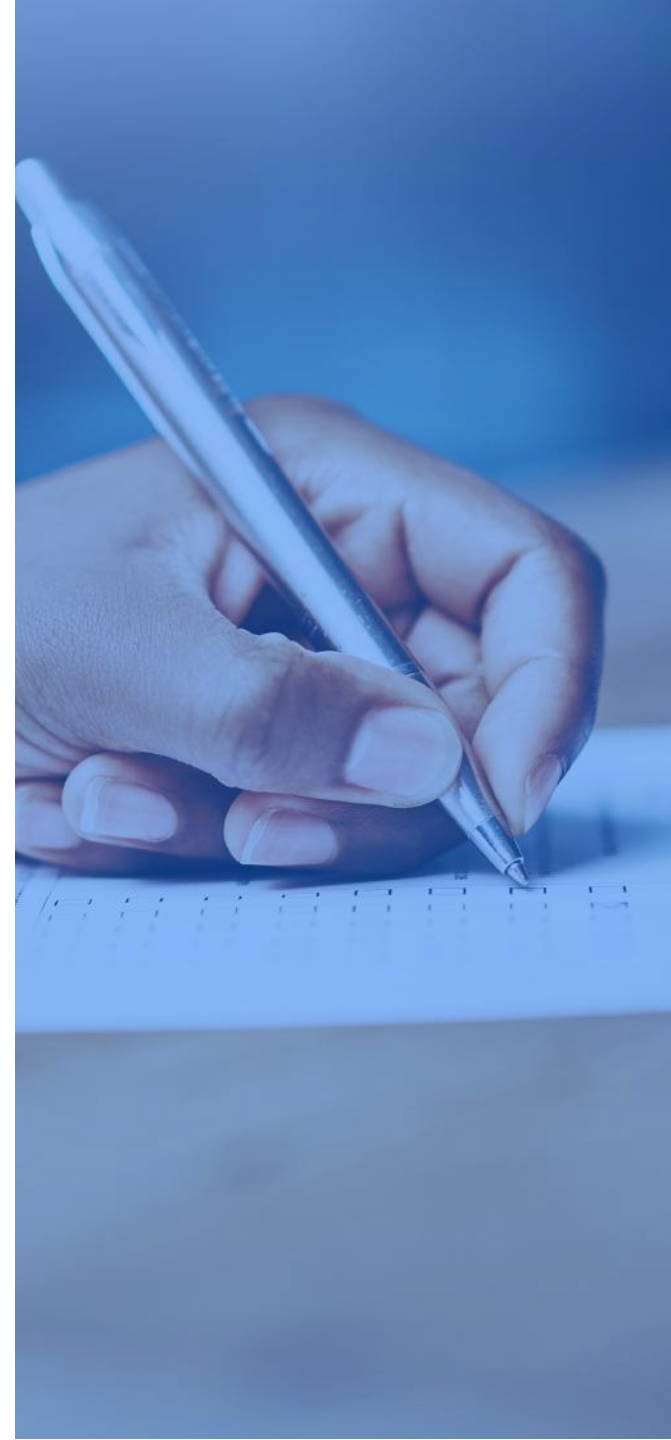
7 weeks per year, per employee of low-value work

The President's Management Agenda CAP goal action plan shows that in the 2020 Customer Satisfaction Survey, federal employees spent an estimated 275 hours per year on work they consider low-value. This amounts to almost 7 weeks per year that each government employee performs low-value, largely redundant paperwork.¹³ This low-value work can reduce employee morale and impede productivity in mission goals.



What Is **Different** Now?

- 1** Technology digitization improves accessibility and citizen-facing services, removing physical and financial barriers and opening up further opportunities for engagement.
- 2** Security compliance is easier than ever before, ensuring that digital files can be kept safe and organized.
- 3** Telework and COVID-19 have ushered in a low-touch economy, prioritizing and streamlining the use of electronic signatures, digitized forms, and hassle-free online agreements online.



Solutions for a Paperless World



Phasing out wet-ink signatures

In 2000, the Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce Act (E-SIGN) gave the green light for governments, private entities, and citizens to treat electronic signatures as if they were physical signatures.¹⁴ Additionally, in light of the pandemic, e-signatures are authorized to be used for notarization by many states looking to limit person-to-person exposure.¹⁵

While some organizations were previously hesitant to switch, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many to incorporate e-signatures into daily operations. Electronic signature use is expanding even in fields hesitant to utilize electronic signatures in the past. For example, the Federal Reserve Bank (FRB) announced that it will now accept some documents with electronic signatures.¹⁶



Digitize forms

Digitizing previously paper-only forms that are critical for citizen-facing services increases accessibility for government employees and citizens, by making forms fillable, signable, and searchable from laptops, cellphones, and tablets. This is not only helpful during the period of social distancing but will continue to make citizen services more accessible to people living in remote areas, and to those with disabilities.

In addition, even forms that appear to be accessible online often must be downloaded, printed, and signed, then scanned and submitted. Digitizing forms reduces the time, cost, and administrative frustration in the signing process for government employees and citizens.



Take the hassle out of agreements

A signature is the cornerstone of a finalized contract, but the agreement process begins many steps earlier. Value can be added in a multitude of ways to this process: revitalizing the form-review and approval process, pre-filling forms with the correct personal information, or automatically submitting data to other systems from submitted forms

What Are the **Benefits** of Going Paperless?

Going paperless elevates the process of government business.

Time Saving

The complete digitization of forms reduces time spent printing, filling, and scanning documents for both government employees and citizens. This shift would also wipe out redundancies and reduce errors related to handwriting and incomplete forms.¹⁷

Cost Saving

Reducing the cost of physical paper, streamlining and automating some administrative work, and modernizing the way that government agreement systems work has the potential to save taxpayers billions of dollars each year.¹⁷

Security and Trust

The layers of security and authentication built into key signatures make them inherently safer than easily-forged pen and paper.¹⁸

Environmentally Friendly

Online forms eliminate the need to purchase paper, print contracts, and maintain hard records, saving trees and preserving natural resources.¹⁹

Convenience

Citizen-facing services are often constrained by 9 - 5 working hours. Digitized business forms that can be completed, signed, and submitted online allow the government to remain open for business 24/7. Citizens can fill out forms at any time, from any device.²⁰

Automation

Harnessing automation to expedite business processes would reduce errors, hassles, and paperwork delays.²¹

Happiness

Employees can focus on why they joined the government – agency mission, rather than bureaucratic records. This would boost productivity and employee morale.

Modernization

Everything else is online. Your government services should be too.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/view/whats-ruining-medicine-physicians-paperwork-and-administrative-burdens>
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/nyregion/coronavirus-hospital-usta-queens.html>
3. <https://americanarchivist.org/doi/pdf/10.17723/aarc.27.3.63xmmql7135032uk>
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