

**RFID can take the "work" out of paperwork.**

By Kevin Ashton

Nov. 9, 2009—Remember the paperless office? Back in the early days of personal computing, futurists predicted that one day all information would be electronic, and that notes, forms and brochures would all be conveniently digital. Even if you do remember this concept, I'm fairly sure you don't work in such an office and you've never been to one, either.

Ironically, because digital technology has made it easier to produce, print and duplicate documents, we now have more paper in our offices, not less. People like paper. Many of us still receive important information on paper—invoices, credit card statements and news. We print e-mail and attachments to read at our convenience. We even print PowerPoint slides, so we can follow along and scribble notes during presentations. And then there are the countless paper forms, contracts and agreements that lawyers and other officials require us to sign and copy for our records.



Paper may be convenient to read, annotate and sign, but putting it where you can find it when you need it again is another matter entirely. Filing systems are laborious and onerous. Not only do you have to put documents in the right place, you have to remember where that place is. And often, you need another system to record who removed a document and when, so you can chase that person down if he or she doesn't put it back.

This is where RFID comes in. RFID has long been a great technology for making physical objects searchable. It enables us to easily and accurately locate inventory in an RFID-enabled warehouse. And given that a filing cabinet is essentially just a warehouse for paper, the concept extends to the documents it contains. [3M](#) and other companies have created systems to help government agencies, law firms, research libraries and universities keep track of huge volumes of files. But smaller professional offices—even home offices—need an easier way to manage files, too.

Imagine an RFID-enabled office. It houses a laser printer that scans and RFID-tags a document before printing, and retains a record of that document, including its tag number, in a networked database. It also has an RFID-enabled file cabinet with numbered storage slots. You simply put the document in whichever slot is most convenient, and the next time you need it, ask the networked database where it is—or ask the filing cabinet, which takes you straight to it. If the system is in a professional office, you'll need your RFID-enabled employee badge to use it. The system will know who took out what, and can send an e-mail reminding that person to put it back. Papers won't pile up because filing won't be such a chore.

Steelcase and other office furniture companies have been thinking about this kind of system for a while

now. Given the rising number of paper documents we produce every year, it's time to stop thinking and start doing. The paperless office is never coming. But the searchable, nothing's-ever-lost, file-it-under-"whatever" office? That could—and should—be just around the corner.

*Kevin Ashton was cofounder and executive director of the Auto-ID Center.*