

HOW BIG ARE YOUR PAPER PILES?

Any day is a good day to clear the mess on your office desk. And time, also, to wonder what ever happened to the idea that computers would cut down on paper use. It's a question canvassed by two social scientists, Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper, in a new book called "**The Myth of the Paperless Office**" (MIT).

They begin with an account of a study they conducted at the International Monetary Fund, in Washington, D.C. Economists at the IMF. spend most of their time writing reports on complicated economic questions, work that would seem to be perfectly suited to sitting in front of a computer. Nonetheless, the IMF is awash in paper, and Sellen and Harper wanted to find out why.

They concluded that paper enables a certain kind of thinking. Picture, for instance, the top of your desk. Chances are that you have a keyboard and a computer screen off to one side, and a clear space roughly eighteen inches square in front of your chair. What covers the rest of the desktop is probably piles — piles of papers, journals, magazines, binders, postcards, videotapes, and all the other artifacts of the knowledge economy. The piles look like a mess, but they aren't. When a group at Apple Computer studied piling behavior several years ago, they found that even the most disorderly piles usually make perfect sense to the piler, and that office workers could hold forth in great detail about the precise history and meaning of their piles.

The pile closest to the cleared, eighteen-inch-square working area, for example, generally represents the most urgent business, and within that pile the most important document of all is likely to be at the top. Piles are living, breathing archives. Over time, they get broken down and resorted, sometimes chronologically and sometimes thematically and sometimes chronologically and thematically; clues about certain documents may be physically embedded in the file by, say, stacking a certain piece of paper at an angle or inserting dividers into the stack. But why do we pile documents instead of filing them? Because piles represent the process of active, ongoing thinking. The psychologist Alison Kidd, whose research Sellen and Harper refer to extensively, argues that "knowledge workers" use the physical space of the desktop to hold "ideas which they cannot yet categorize or even decide how they might use." The messy desk is not necessarily a sign of disorganization. It may be a sign of complexity: those who deal with many unresolved ideas simultaneously cannot sort and file the papers on their desks, because they haven't yet sorted and filed the ideas in their head. Kidd writes that many of the people she talked to use the papers on their desks as contextual cues to "recover a complex set of threads without difficulty and delay" when they come in on a Monday morning, or after their work has been interrupted by a phone call. What we see when we look at the piles on our desks is, in a sense, the contents of our brains.