

Why the fax still lives (and how to kill it)



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The year 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the modern fax machine, a device developed by Xerox that became as much a staple of offices worldwide as the coffee machine. But in the last decade its reputation has shifted from that of utter necessity to one of the most loathed pieces of equipment in the building. Supplanted by the combination of email, e-signature services, and scanners, [fax machines should have been killed off](#) years ago. And yet they're still here.

But why? Who, in an era that boasts eyeglasses that record your every move and watches that can display your text messages, is still sending faxes? On paper!

We decided to find out. Meet the culprits, and hear their defense of their crimes.

Doctors: A fax a day keeps the lawsuits away

If you want to start pointing fingers, you can start with your physician. Thanks to the HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), documents transmitted between various doctors, labs, and insurers have to be “secure.” The parlance of HIPAA is complex and poorly understood, but it requires only that doctors engage in “[reasonable safeguards](#)” when sending messages, regardless of the medium. Over time, this has been interpreted by most doctors to mean that faxes are okay, while email generally isn't.

The reasons for this common perception are unclear. Fax machines are rarely kept in a secure environment, and a printed fax message can be picked up by just about anyone passing by. Email, on the other hand, is password-protected and can be encrypted. Nevertheless, says Lee Kim, Director of the [Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society](#), “a document which is being sent via fax is difficult to intercept if sent over an analog telephone line, as this requires special equipment. On the other hand, an unencrypted email may be easier to intercept in transit by eavesdropping on the network.” So doctors have stuck with faxing.

Ask your doctor to take this office relic off life support.

While some doctors have started to move toward electronic messaging—notably those at Kaiser Permanente, which actively encourages it—many remain stuck in the past. A physician a few years from retirement likely has no interest in converting his office to an (expensive) secure messaging system when the (cheap) fax machine works as well as it always has. As a result, health care providers across the board need to keep a fax machine installed, if only so they can communicate with an “old-timer” once in a while.

Lawyers: in defense of paper

Leave it to an attorney to offer up numerous justifications for a fax machine. Attorney A. Paul Genato of Princeton, New Jersey-based [Archer and Griener, P.C.](#), puts it this way: “I usually send letters out via regular mail and fax. I still use a fax machine because I don’t have everyone’s email address. Directories will generally list phone and fax numbers, but not email addresses. With fax, I also get confirmation that the letter was sent and received, whereas, with email, the person may choose not to send a read-receipt when they open the message. Also, some court rules accept fax signatures in lieu of original signatures and have not been updated to include signature copies sent via email.”

Having to sift through literal reams of paper doesn’t seem to concern most attorneys. After all, they’re billing by the hour.

This lattermost issue is perhaps the most critical. You’ll find precious few municipalities where judges are interested in communicating with lawyers via email, and by and large such communication is strictly disallowed. Messages from attorneys have to go through clerks, be given to the opposing counsel, and be archived in the official case record. Any deviation from the process could result in a mistrial. In most jurisdictions, mail or personal service is still preferred, with fax (with its convenient time stamp right on the sheet of paper) coming in second.

Doesn’t that create a crushing amount of correspondence? You bet, but having to sift through literal reams of paper doesn’t seem to concern most attorneys. After all, they’re billing by the hour.

Sales and PR: I won't be ignored

Believe it or not, some professionals say that fax can be an effective way to stand out in an increasingly digital crowd. An emailed sales pitch or press release is

easily deleted with a single keystroke, but faxes require more effort to discard and may actually receive a glance en route to the garbage can.

Publicist Brian Chandler of [Commonwealth PR](#) says that in an age of email, faxes stand out. “We’ll fax a press release to a certain reporter knowing that they will probably actually get it in their hands, versus having to sort through hundreds of emails. It’s an awesome trick that often works.” Sadly, those spammy junk faxes remain popular, too, for the exact same reason.

Fax fans: ...from my cold, dead landline

Lastly, there’s a certain segment of the population that still uses the fax machine because they actually *like* it.

Hear them out—there’s some logic here. Author and publisher [Mike Arman](#) puts it bluntly: “If you can dial a phone and press one button, you can send a fax.” That’s a far cry from the more convoluted method of printing, signing, scanning, and then emailing a document to someone as an attachment. Overall, says Arman, faxing is often simpler, faster, and—those infamous paper jams aside—less prone to technical problems. “Your computer doesn’t have to be on to send or receive a fax; faxes can arrive at 3 A.M. (and frequently do) and you’ll have them in the morning. Also, many places (domestic and overseas) may not have reliable power or internet service, but you can almost always find a working phone line.”

How to kill your fax machine

Like it or not, maybe you *do* still need fax technology in some capacity. But do you still need a fax *machine*?

If you still have occasional faxing needs due to an old-school client or the need to communicate with your attorney, professionals looking to get rid of that hunk of plastic and metal can do so relatively easily now, especially if the need is primarily to send faxes, not to receive them. That solution is electronic or Internet faxing, where you send and receive documents in scanned format, generally PDFs, instead of on paper.

E-faxing gives you your fax fix without the antiquated hardware.

E-faxing services are legion, but unless you’re a regular user, the cost can be substantial. For example, [SmartFax](#) runs about \$7 a month for 250 total inbound or

outbound pages. [MyFax](#) gives you 100 outgoing and 200 incoming faxes for \$10 per month. At [eFax](#), 150 incoming and 150 outgoing faxes run about \$17 monthly, plus a \$10 setup fee. (All of these services include a dedicated inbound fax number.) If you're sending or receiving only a couple of faxes a month, it probably makes more sense to use your local copy shop.

Free e-faxing services exist but are loaded with limits and restrictions. [FaxZero](#)'s free option covers only outgoing faxes, while [K7](#) offers both incoming and outgoing service. But if you don't use K7's service at least once every 30 days, your account is deleted. As well, only 20 messages can be stored on the service at any time, and they're deleted every seven days regardless of use.

If you need to deal only with incoming faxes, the best deal going is one that [eFax offers for free](#): You get a dedicated incoming number that can accept 10 pages each month, and that's it. For that lonely signature page that you just can't get any other way, eFax Free is worth signing up for.

It's easy to predict that someday faxing will go away altogether, but a timeline for that blessed event is impossible to say. Once established, major technologies like this just have a tough time letting go. After all, AOL still offers dial-up modem services—and has [2.6 million people](#) paying \$20 a month for the privilege.

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