

From Paper and Ink to DIGITAL SIGNATURES

In our two previous articles, we explained how digital signature technology protects the data integrity of electronic documents and how the way it is managed determines the level of trust in proving their authorship. We now turn to the practical use of digital signatures and why you should consider changing over from handwritten signatures.

PRESERVING DOCUMENT INTEGRITY

Legal requirements are often the driving force behind a switch to digital signatures. Generally, provincial legislation grants electronic documents the same value as paper documents provided that document data integrity is reasonably dependable. However, some provincial laws also stipulate that proof of document authorship be reasonably reliable as well. Nevertheless, there is very little jurisprudence to define these concepts as regards the use of electronic documents, so the laws are often not concurrent with what is fast becoming common practice. Therefore, a simple copy and paste of your signature's image on your electronic documents could be enough to hold you accountable for everything that you sign in that manner. Still, in light of the technological advances made in the area of identity theft, the copy/paste method fails to assure that you are indeed the author of that document or that the content has not been changed since you last signed it.

PRESERVING TREES

Another great reason to make the switch over to digital signatures is to save on the high cost of paper management. When you consider the price of printing, which can range from 6¢ per page for a standard print out to as much as \$5 per page for large scale color documents, then you factor in the expense of paper handling, which includes page binding, scanning (to create electronic copies), shipping time and handling, and finally you add the actual cost of shipping, which can reach well over 10¢ per shipment, the end price can be shocking.

Also, with the use of paper documents comes the need for paper archives. These are typically cumbersome as they gobble up office space. Over time, there is the added danger of misplacing or losing documents. As a result, traceability becomes extremely difficult.

A growing number of people and companies are looking for more ways to reduce their ecological footprint. Since printing massive amounts of paper and shipping in carbon-dioxide-emitting vehicles are fast becoming less attractive, using digital signatures is now a viable, greener option.

So in comparison with the cost of creating paper documents, going digital is less expensive, easier to manage, and more environmentally friendly. These advantages have led companies to invest great efforts in computerizing their workflows. But the changeover comes with one caveat: it cannot be done at the expense of user-friendliness. In other words, if moving from paper-based to electronic-based processes is too complicated for the end user, they cannot be expected to change their habits.

What it all comes down to is one simple precept: digital signatures outperform paper. They save money and time for the end user. They are greener, and, when managed in a trusted manner, they meet legal requirements to ensure the safety of your electronic documents better than paper documents ever could. Yet the question of how digitally signing documents is easier than using a pen still remains. The answer is in our next article.



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