The Paperless Office Is Here

Thirty years ago, they said these dandy new machines called computers were going to dispense with paperwork altogether. Well, not quite, but this Missouri lawmaker is coming close.

By Paul Sloca

Missouri Representative Rob Schaaf (seated) and his legislative assistant Ray Griggs coordinate their PDAs. The pair uses electronics to stay in touch at the Statehouse—personal digital assistants, walkie-talkies and cell phones.

PHOTO: TIM BOMMEL

S tepping into Representative Rob Schaaf's small, out-of-the way office in the stately old Missouri Capitol is like crossing a threshold into the future.

There are none of the trappings of most legislative offices—no secretary to greet visitors and handle the typing, no filing cabinet overflowing with documents. But if Schaaf, a freshman Republican from St. Joseph, has stepped out, his legislative assistant invites visitors to have a seat in front of a digital camera—and leave a message on videodisc.

Paul Sloca is an Associated Press reporter in Missouri. This article is reprinted with permission from The Associated Press.

Business cards, meeting notices and other documents delivered to the office are promptly scanned into a computer. And wherever he may be, Schaaf checks messages and committee schedules by tapping his personal digital assistant—a wireless hand-held computer.

In a building where thousands of pounds of documents are generated weekly during the legislative session and lawmakers lug oversized binders from meeting to meeting, Schaaf and his office are virtually paperless.

And that's exactly how Schaaf, a physician with a fondness for digital technology, prefers it.

PALM-SIZED LEGISLATURES

When legislatures are in session, the schedules are hectic and the demands many. Legislators are on the run between their offices, committee meetings, floor debates and votes, and they need to stay in touch with family, staff and constituents. Personal digital assistants (PDAs)—touted as one of the fastest selling consumer devices in history—are becoming hot items in legislatures.

Many legislators are using them to manage schedules, organize information, and keep in touch while staying mobile.

Personal digital assistants are small, fully functional computers that combine all the jobs of bulky organizers and daily planners, address books, to-do lists in the palm of your hand. Depending on the model, some can be used to take notes, do calculations, keep track of expenses, send and receive e-mail, do word processing, and integrate with digital cameras and global positioning systems, as well as get information from the Internet.

Web sites are adapting to PDAs by providing information like stock quotes, weather, news and entertainment, travel guides and other information in a small-sized format. Now, legislatures also are creating special Internet Web pages with legislative information made to fit on the small screen of a PDA. For example, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia have created specially formatted Web pages with House and Senate schedules, committee meeting notices, and committee and member contact information that can be downloaded and viewed on a PDA screen. Virginia also offers bill tracking for mobile devices as part of its "Lobbyist-in-a-Box" fee-based service.

In Texas and Virginia, the information is also available to those who own wireless PDAs and Internet-enabled cell phones. These wireless Web phones have a built-in browser that allows the user to view the specially created Web pages.

Managing handheld devices, especially wireless devices, however, can create considerable extra work for support staff, including security challenges. IT staff in almost half the states already support members' use of PDAs, either purchased by individual legislators or a standard model purchased by the state.

As wireless phones, pagers, and PDAs converge and proliferate, legislators will be among the millions of Americans using them.

WEB SITES FOR PERSONAL DIGITAL ASSISTANTS

Louisiana House
house.legis.state.la.us/WebRepresentatives/schedules_pda_instructions.htm
South Carolina's Palm-Sized Statehouse
www.scstatehouse.net/html-pages/palmpilot.htm
Virginia's Mobile LIS
legis.state.va.us/SiteInformation/MobileDevices.htm
Texas Legislature Online
www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlo/pda/pda.htm

—*Pam Greenberg, NCSL*

"My goal is to be a pioneer," said Schaaf, who also holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics. "My goal is to allow the people to see more deeply into the legislative process by making myself more available and trying to give them more opportunity to have input."

Schaaf, 46, created his virtual office with his own high-powered computer, his legislative assistant's video technology and some equipment provided by the state.

"My calendar is completely unmanageable without it," Schaaf said.

As a freshman lawmaker, Schaaf said, he has an advantage over colleagues because he can sift through information quickly on a computer and doesn't need to go mining in a mountain of paper.

"The thing is, there is too much work to do and not enough time to get it all done, so we had to figure out a way to be more efficient, and we are more efficient this way," Schaaf said. "And I think this brings me closer to people because they have greater access to me."

The Missouri Legislature has grappled for years with technology.

Members of the Missouri House have been allowed to use personal laptop computers in the chamber since 1997. But the tradition-conscious Senate has repeatedly rejected the idea—even though live debate in both chambers is available over the Internet.

Charlie Kreitzberg, chief executive officer of the Princeton, N.J.-based technology firm Cognetics, has spent the last 30 years studying the relationship between people and technology.

For efficiency's sake, Kreitzberg said, state governments must adopt the business view of computer and digital technology—as a tool to serve the public.

"It's important that people in the legislature have more than a superficial knowledge of technology, " he said. "They need a real working knowledge of what technology is."

Schaaf seems to be in the vanguard of a rising number of technology-savvy lawmakers around the country, Kreitzberg said.

"It absolutely is the wave of the future," Kreitzberg said. "Technology allows us to move ideas more rapidly. Lawmakers can communicate better with their constituents and their constituents with them."

One of the reasons for Schaaf's bold approach is his legislative assistant Ray Griggs, who runs a video production company when he's not working in Jefferson City. Griggs also created several of Schaaf's campaign advertisements using computer graphics.

In the Statehouse, Griggs and Schaaf are electronically linked through their personal digital assistants, walkie-talkies and cell phones. Griggs said he is responsible for making the videodiscs and scanning paperwork.

"When Rob gets back here late at night he can sit there and watch these lobbyists and constituents talk about their problems, and he can turn around and call them back at his own leisure," Griggs said.

Schaaf, who had not previously held elective office, said Missouri lawmakers should embrace technology to better serve the public.

"Ultimately, my colleagues will realize that they waste a tremendous amount of time, that they waste a tremendous amount of paper and that there will be a great cost saving by doing things digitally," Schaaf said.

"The law will be digital, all of the bills will be digital, instead of all this volume of paper. It's just going to take many years."