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Since its introduction in the late 1920's, microfilm has consistently provided safe, long term storage at a reasonable cost, even in an age caught up with technology advances. It saves space and simplifies the retrieval of information.

While business processes have changes dramatically since the inception of microfilm, the need for safe, accurate storage has not. Archival storage still represents the longest segment of the document lifecycle.

Storage Options: Paper, Microfilm and Electronic.
Paper, Microfilm and electronic storage are the basic record storage options available to the industry. Microfilm is created by capturing a paper record on film. Computer output Microfilm (COM) eliminates the need for paper by capturing a computer generated image on film. Electronic storage includes both optical and magnetic storage.

Each has its own inherent weaknesses. For example, paper is less economical and occupies greater storage space. Computers can save space, but the reliability of electronic data is susceptible to manipulation by programmers or even sophisticated end users.

While microfilm and microfiche are among the oldest storage options, they have acquired an electronic character that places them on the leading edge of technology. A micrographic image can be scanned, converted to electronic format and become part of an electronic image management system.

Growth of Microfilm accelerated by Hybrid Systems
Until 1988, film and electronic mages never co-existed. But, today hybrid systems accelerate the growth of microfilm, enhancing its viability as a storage medium in a rapidly growing digital world. Hybrid imaging systems are necessary when users require quick retrieval and distribution of documents stored for long periods at a low cost. Microfilm information is moved and shared in real time through hybrid systems.

Hybrid scanners provide users with a digital image and an identical microfilm record of a document in an easy, one step capture process. The process also offers identical sequential document order for each medium. The microfilm roll and frame number can be attached to the digital image to ensure a permanent cross-index and reliable archival backup for both the digital and microfilm images. Users can derive the advantages of both digital imaging and microfilm, with a hybrid scanner, reducing document storage costs whilst retaining dependability.

In essence, hybrid systems allow users to store information electronically during the initial period when retrieval and usage is frequent, simultaneously capturing the image on microfilm for more economical long term archiving.

The Future of Microfilm

Microfilm has been available for nearly a century and is widely used in many industries, including insurance, government, hospitals, utilities, manufacturing, banks, preservation, private and public companies.

Microfilm continues to advance, proving itself as a reliable, sophisticated storage medium. It is also integrating itself with emerging computer technologies. New hybrid systems have grown out of the current generation of microfilm, combining image scanning and microfilm functions. New microfilm recorders with digital scanners digitise microfilm for electronic processing. Further, microfilm images can be transferred to optical disk storage allowing for retrieval of images through PCs and printed on laser printers.

Microfilm is an old and established technology for storing information. Its success is associated with the spread of electronic imaging at both the individual workstation and enterprise level. It is most likely to remain a viable product because many organizations need to distribute reports and reference material in a non-electronic format.

Efforts are underway to ensure that data processing, image processing, facsimile, e-mail and other technologies are integrated so that users can have all these capabilities on a single workstation. However, it is expected that only 20% of organizations will have only one workstation. Approximately 90% will incorporate the entire data and image processing into their work environments with the aid of a small number of discrete/separate products that can be easily linked together.

“Digital” dominates document management today, although large-scale migration to all electronic systems has not yet materialised. Why? Because the next generation of document management systems will not rely exclusively on one technology. Rather, hybrid systems adopting the greatest benefits from both electronic and film systems are likely to become increasingly popular in information management. The benefits of microfilm and the economies of cost make it a natural choice for long-term storage.

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