

# Plugged In

## Ending paper trail

New wave of programs brings better document management to home, office / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**R**EMEMBER THE PAPERLESS OFFICE? It was a common vision of computer pundits in the 1970s and early '80s. The idea was that computers would liberate us from the tyranny of ink and paper, collapse file cabinets into floppy disks, and unclutter our offices forever.

Today we know better. I know of a few large insurance companies and some hospitals that have built sophisticated systems that can scan documents, store them as computer files, and allow them to be shared, edited, printed, e-mailed, or faxed. But the technology is generally unavailable to small and midsize businesses.

Most of us are still keeping our files on paper. But this is changing, slowly, with a new generation of easier-to-use document management programs for the home and office.

One new program is Pagis Pro 2.0 (\$99) from Xerox, which can scan pages, perform high-quality optical character recognition, let you edit images, and store the results in a number of different file formats.

Visioneer, meanwhile, is releasing a new program called Visual Explorer (\$49), an enhancement to its popular PaperPort Desktop software that lets you manage graphic files and Web pages as you would any other PaperPort-scanned document.

Unfortunately, while both of these programs offer new features, neither of them offer quite the right mix of features for my day-to-day needs.

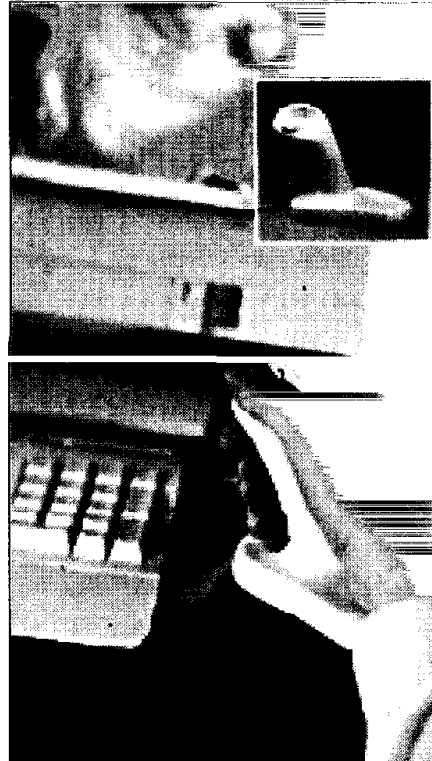
notice.

Which program you use depends, in part, on what kind of scanner you have. To use Pagis, you'll need a scanner that supports TWAIN, the computer industry's scanner interface standard. You can now buy TWAIN-compliant flat bed and sheet scanners for less than \$100. For example, Storm Technologies ([www.stormtech.com/](http://www.stormtech.com/)) sells its sheet-fed EasyPhoto SmartPage Pro for just \$79.

But if you have a Visioneer PaperPort scanner, you're pretty much stuck using Visioneer's software; PaperPort doesn't support TWAIN, but instead uses a proprietary standard of the company's own design. (Believe it or not, TWAIN stands for Technology Without An Interesting Name.)

Another thing that's proprietary about Visioneer is the way that the company's PaperPort Desktop and Visual Explorer programs store pages after they are scanned. While the rest of the computer industry has pretty much standardized on multipart TIFF files to store faxes and scanned pages, Visioneer continues to use its own proprietary MAX file format.

Even worse, Visioneer is in the habit of changing its file format with every release of its software. When I installed Visual Explorer, the program informed me that it would be upgrading the file format of all of my scanned pages from Version 5 to Version 6 — and that others using Version 5 software would be unable to read my files.



With a standard mouse, you twist the wrist to put your hand in the right position, and to slide the mouse around. It's a slight effort, but hours of mousing around can take a toll on your arm.

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of the two programs, with advanced technology that can actually understand what it scans. For example, you can scan a magazine page and then have the software automatically detect the columns of text, the photographs, and the captions, handling each differently. Pagis comes with Xerox's TextBridge Pro optical character recognition software, probably the best OCR software on the market.

Pagis integrates with the Windows 95 Explorer, putting a Pagis InBox on your desktop. Once there, you can easily drag-and-drop in documents from any application and have Pagis manage them. You can then search the index for all of the documents that contain a given word or phrase – it's sort of like searching the Web. Or you can simply disregard the in-box, and instead have Pagis index your entire hard drive.

Finally, Pagis comes with a sophisticated image-editing program. Pagis Editor can read 40 different graphics file formats, including oddball ones like GEM Raster and SGI Image File Format. You can annotate the images, change colors, or cut-and-paste pixels. And you can use the editor on any file that's on your computer.

Compared with Pagis, Visioneer's Visual Explorer is a much more modest endeavor. The program, which includes Version 6 of Visioneer's PaperPort software, simply extends Visioneer's desktop metaphor to the computer's entire hard drive.

Like Pagis, Visual Explorer can index the files on your computer and let you quickly search through them. The program will also show you image files with little thumbnails of their contents. The program will also let you store the contents of Web pages – a good idea if you find something that you want to keep on the Web, since Web pages frequently change or are removed without

With inferior OCR and proprietary file formats and interfaces, why go with Visioneer at all? One reason is simplicity. With all of its bells and whistles, the Pagis software is complicated to use.

Visioneer, on the other hand, is the height of simplicity – something that even a power-user like me appreciates. Fewer buttons to click also makes Visioneer's software faster to use: You can just sit down and feed a whole stack of pages into your scanner. In my experience, I can scan documents twice as fast with Visioneer's software than with Pagis.

Another big advantage of Visioneer is cost. Many of the company's resellers offer money-back guarantees, which means that many perfectly good PaperPort scanners end up back at Visioneer's headquarters. The company is legally prohibited from selling these devices as new, so it checks them out, repackages them, and resells them as refurbished.

Egghead ([www.egghead.com](http://www.egghead.com)) sells Visioneer's PaperPort Strobe color scanner for \$180 new; you can buy the same scanner refurbished from MicroWarehouse ([www.warehouse.com](http://www.warehouse.com)) for \$99.

Meanwhile, if all you want to do is index the files on your own computer, you might want to take a look at AltaVista Discovery, a search program that brings the power of Digital's – er, Compaq's – AltaVista search engine to your computer's hard drive. You can download it from [discovery.altavista.digital.com](http://discovery.altavista.digital.com).

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