

Going electronic

Electronic papers trending

Ministers have been increasing their use of electronic papers in the last few years.

They have many benefits: it is easier and more efficient to compile papers into meeting agendas; and it makes distribution much easier. Ministers (and others) can access and read their papers wherever they are, so working outside of the office becomes easier.

- **CabNet** has been up and running for just over a year. According to DPMC's last annual report it has been rolled out to 46 agencies and has over 2000 users. This allows papers to be electronically uploaded, and meeting agendas and decisions to be managed. However, papers remain in a traditional format.
- **CabDocs** is a tablet application Ministers use to read their Cabinet papers. It can be used for reading papers anywhere, including outside of the office, and at meetings.
- Select Committees have had the **eCommittee** system for years. It is a web-based system allowing Committee members to read submissions electronically before, or during their meetings.
- **BoardBooks** – we've seen many Crown entity boards, and senior management teams moving to BoardBooks (or similar systems.) These compile meeting papers electronically and are accessed by tablet (for reading ahead of or within the meeting).

The use of electronic storage and access for Cabinet and internal decision-making papers, flows over into other types of papers. And some Ministers read and comment (using iAnnotate or similar programmes on their tablets) on their briefing papers electronically too.

Still in a transition phase from paper to electronic

Of course, not everyone uses these types of systems yet, even when they are available. Some still prefer to print out papers to read and comment on them in hard copy.

We'd expect to see that to change further as users become more comfortable with electronic presentation and systems, and as system functionality improves. This should escalate as more digital natives move into governance positions.

So, you will need to understand your Minister's preferences for electronic presentation versus paper and take that into account in your templates, and the general way you present papers.

The 'look and feel' of an electronic paper is quite different

A number of the systems mentioned above use a standard paper, but present it electronically e.g. CabNet.

Systems that are tablet-based tend to work better if papers are in a different form; one designed to be more easily readable via tablet. This is because tablets tend to be used in landscape profile, so a viewer can only see one page at a time. Of course this depends a bit on the size of the tablet – as well as the original iPad size they now come in full A4 size, and a smaller iPad mini.

Standard tablets don't all show a full A4 page (unless zoomed down, in which case the type face can become too small to be readable). A3s can be difficult to fit into tablet format!

Some agencies have been redeveloping their paper templates to make them easier to use in tablet-based systems.

The Cabinet Office has issued revised guidelines on formatting papers for CabNet. These can be found at: <https://www.psi.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Updated-Guidance-for-the-Style-and-Format-of-Cabinet-Papers.pdf>

However, we suspect that purely electronic papers and electronic meetings will become the norm. Therefore, the pressure for change to more digitally apt formats and have better designed templates will increase. The features within electronic paper systems will also improve, allowing for a full digital experience (rather than just a digitisation of physical papers).

Making electronic papers readable

All the general principles for producing papers that are a quick read for busy decision-makers still apply in the digital case.

But extra ideas come into play. Here are suggestions for ensuring electronic papers are easy to read:

- **Consider moving to landscape orientated papers** – standard tablets are generally used in landscape. This means a whole page of the paper is displayed on screen. It will probably involve re-designing your templates.
- **Simplify diagrams** – make sure they are stark enough for the key features to jump out, without slopping over one screen page (and bear in mind some users prefer the ‘mini’ tablets with smaller screens.)
- **Scale to the new situation** – check the size of type-faces. Are they large enough to be easily readable on a screen?
- **Ensure tables fit on one page if possible**, and if not, repeat the heading structure on the new page(s) so that they are easy to follow.
- **Consider using two columns for displaying graphs and charts** – a single chart often doesn’t look so great stretched across the page.
- **Avoid splitting paragraphs and dot point lists over a page**. This can be solved by more white space. Or perhaps even careful redrafting.
- **Re-work electronic A3s** – traditional A3s don’t work as they can’t be seen in their glory on a (smaller scale) screen. You will have to tailor them – think larger type-faces; less dense content; and relatively larger tables, charts and diagrams.
- **Use other innovative design tricks** e.g. pull out boxes for worked examples, case studies, and key pieces of data etc. Ministers are used to such design elements as used on

the internet. These can be built into electronic papers.

- **Use hyper-links** – to background information, appendices, previous papers, etc. This enhances the functionality of electronic papers.
- **Include a search function in the template** – this will allow the reader to easily find sections of the paper while reading it, or when referring to it in a meeting.
- **Include plenty of white space for comments/notes** – programmes which allow for handwritten comments on electronic documents are still pretty clumsy. Some even run the risk that any comments on the text itself over-writes the content underneath.

Security considerations are important

Make sure you pay attention to security issues. It’s much easier to accidentally distribute an electronic copy to many unauthorised readers (as some agencies have found) than leave a paper copy lying around.

You’ll still also need to follow any standard security rules.

All of the systems noted above have their own particular security features and policies which you’ll need to get familiar with.

If in doubt, innovate....

This is a developing area. No doubt software will continue to improve, and electronic papers will become much more of the norm. This will raise expectations.

But in the interim, we’d encourage you to try some different templates, and presentational styles. Flair is usually appreciated – even when it’s not totally successful.

But don’t forget to always follow up by checking with your Ministers (and other decision-makers) to see what works best for them. Of course, for Cabinet papers you’ll need to follow the Cabinet Office’s guidance.

Policy advice MASTERCLASS



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