

## Slash printing costs

Keep tabs on your printing and reduce the overall bill with these tips

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It doesn't matter what kind of business you're in or how big your company is, printing costs you money, and lots of it.

As well as buying the printer, you're paying for inkjet refills, toner cartridges, maintenance kits, paper and power, not to mention all the setup, management and maintenance required.

However, there are ways to drive down those costs without affecting your business.

### **Know what you've got**

In even a tiny company, it can be surprising how many printers get 'acquired' over the years. The first thing you need to do is find out just what printers you have already, how much they're used and for what.

You can also get a rough idea of how much printing goes on by looking at the printer page counters, where available, and by finding out how much you spend on paper and other supplies each month.

In larger companies, it is less easy to get this information, but you can get more accurate, independent data by using specialist printer-auditing software. As we point out in our review, **Print Audit 5** for example, not only lets you build up a full picture of your printer resources and who's printing what, but you can also control the print process more effectively and charge for what's produced.

Once you have this information, you can decide whether the printers are providing value for money, or whether you need to rethink both the number and type involved.

### **Inkjets or lasers**

In terms of technology the main choice continues to be between inkjets and lasers, with inkjets often seen as a more affordable small-business solution. However, it's important to look at all the running costs rather than just the purchase price.

Starting at around £25 ex VAT, inkjets are hard to resist, but cartridges quickly run dry, leading to sky-high cost of ownership and constant, often fiddly maintenance.

Really cheap inkjets are designed primarily for home users printing high-resolution colour photos. Quality matters to business users, but most are more interested in

being able to print large numbers of mostly black and white documents cheaply and reliably.

Business users should look for inkjets designed to print large volumes at high speed, although don't expect them to be much cheaper than a laser to buy or any cheaper to run. The only exception is where you need to print in colour, where an inkjet is likely to be more cost effective than a colour laser, especially for small volumes.

For general business printing, it's hard to beat a laser. They tend to have much higher duty cycles (the number of pages that can be printed per month) and superior paper-handling facilities with multiple input trays, **duplexing** and document finishing options, often as standard.

There are differences, and to save on running costs look for lasers with separate toner and developer cartridges.

The developer cartridge in the **Brother HL-5280** (see review) only has to be changed every 25,000 pages compared to 5,000-7,000 for the toner. That means cartridges are a lot cheaper to buy – and it's more environmentally friendly not to throw away perfectly good components whenever the toner runs out.

Don't forget to include photocopiers or faxes in your plans; both produce printed output and cost money to run.

Multifunction devices (MFDs), incorporating a scanner and, optionally, a fax modem, can be used to replace both without compromising on functionality or convenience, with the added benefit of only having to buy, manage and maintain one piece of hardware.

### **Share and share alike**

One of the most effective ways of reducing printing costs is to do away with personal desktop devices and share printers on your network. You can do this in several ways, starting with software sharing in Windows.

Any printer attached to a Windows PC can be shared, no matter how it is connected. Open the printer properties, click on the Sharing tab and tick the option marked 'Share this printer'.

Other PCs will then be able to browse to the shared printer, although it will only be available when the host PC is switched on. The local user may also notice some slowing down when large or complex documents are being printed. On a larger network look at other ways of sharing printers.

You could, for example, attach the printers to a network file server that, by definition, should always be available. But that's probably locked away, so consider setting up a dedicated print server PC or, even better, a custom print server appliance.

Dedicated print servers only cost a few pounds and have several advantages. They're robust with no moving parts to go wrong and small enough to enable printers to be

located for maximum convenience – some even support wireless networking, allowing printers to go almost anywhere.

Two types of print server are available: external devices such as the **Netgear WGPS606** (see review), to which you can attach one or more printers using parallel, serial or USB cables; and internal adapters built into the printer itself.

They're all very easy to set up – typically from a browser – and in many cases will accept print jobs from a variety of clients, enabling Windows PCs, Apple Macs and Unix or Linux users to all share the same printers.

There are lots of other things you can do to drive down print costs, such as using pdf documents rather than paper wherever possible (see **PDF** above) and by outsourcing high-volume work to a professional print shop.

Whatever you do, it's hard not to save money, with surprising savings to be made if you really try.

### **Create your own pdfs**

You've probably had a pdf (Portable Document Format) file or two drop into your inbox and, no doubt, used Adobe's free Acrobat Reader to open them.

But did you know that you can easily and cheaply create pdfs of your own and take advantage of all this electronic document format has to offer?

That means being able to print to a pdf file from any Windows application, control who will be allowed to open and print the document and optionally encrypt the content.

Tools to update and manage pdf files are also available along with utilities to convert to and from other formats, build interactive forms, embed pdf tools into other applications and a whole lot more.

The portable document format may have been invented by Adobe, but it's actually an open standard. Although the Adobe Acrobat product line remains the yardstick by which others are judged, it's relatively expensive and there are plenty of affordable alternatives – and we regularly include such tools on our cover discs.

Note too that HM Revenue and Customs uses pdf files for many of its forms, and most accounting packages let you create pdf invoices and other documents rather than print them out.

### **Print, print, duplex, duplex**

Here's a very simple tip that can, literally, cut your printing bill in half: print on both sides of the paper!

OK, strictly speaking, it won't cut your printing bill in half, but it can make significant inroads into the amount of paper you have to buy. The documents will also be a lot more professional looking and, if you're producing long reports, easier to bind.

Manual duplexing isn't easy, and you don't really want to print double-sided on an inkjet, but it's now a common option on even quite cheap lasers. It's also very easy to use with, in most cases, duplexing implemented as a tickbox choice in the Windows printer driver.

Turn it on and the printer does all the hard work, grabbing back every other page as it comes out, turning it over and printing the next one on the back.

Why stop there? A lot of printer drivers let you print multiple pages on each sheet (known as 'n-up' printing), cleverly arranged to fold and make into a booklet.

Or check out **Fineprint** which sells software to enable this and other cost-saving options no matter what printer you're using.