Putting Ink (or Toner) On Paper

"Take thy pen and write quickly... Take more ink!" Kipling, *Kim*

Computers were supposed to bring us the "paperless office", but the paper seems to pile up as fast as ever. Including consumables, over its life a printer will cost more than a computer, so it pays to understand your needs.

Like choosing a copier or a computer, choosing an office printer starts with analyzing needs. Major considerations are volume (pages per month), paper-handling features, speed and color. Do users need their own printers or can a few heavy-duty printers at well-chosen locations serve everyone? Is color needed often or occasionally? Do you use multiple paper sizes or letterhead? Do you print many envelopes?

Many offices find that having a few large printers in convenient locations and small "convenience" printers for those who need them works well. For example, law firms often use letter-size letterhead, letter-size plain, legal-sized letterhead and legal-size plain, requiring four trays plus an envelope feeder. This printer will be shared by several users and usually be centrally located. However, except in a very small office, a printer used for printing checks should not be centrally located or shared by multiple users.

One factor easily overlooked is the cost of consumables (toner or ink cartridges). As a rule of thumb, the cheaper the printer, the higher the per-page cost. In March, 2002, *Computer Shopper* tested laser monochrome printers under $300 and reported per-page costs of 1.2 to 4.0 cents, a wide range. (Larger lasers run about 1 cent.) In May, 2002, *PC World* reported 4 to 6 cents per page for inkjets, with two at 2-3 cents. (*Computer Shopper* reported higher costs.) Most inkjets under $100 cost 10 cents and up.

Color is much more expensive: 6 to 10 cents for color laser printers and $.15 to $1.50 for inkjets. (Photo-quality requires glossy paper, adding $.50 to $1.00 per page.)

For the small office, a combination fax / printer /scanner / copier may be the answer, but check print quality and per-page costs. (*PC World* tested inkjet and laser all-in-ones in October, 2004; check the web site for details.)

And don't forget backup! What will you do if your main printer breaks? Keep an extra laser or inkjet around, so you're not completely down if the main printer fails.

(This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help businesses maximize the value of information technology.)