

Information Technology

Scanning for Fun & Profit

Are scanners just for putting funny noses on pictures, or can they be useful business tools?

Let's imagine that you're responsible for approving real estate loans. Each loan application involves lots of paperwork: applications, credit reports, surveys, well tests, engineers' inspections, title searches, photos, etc. Of course you keep all the papers together in a folder, but some of the items need to be routed to other departments for evaluation. Not wishing to lose vital originals, you route copies, which come back with notations. The annotated copies have to be kept, so the folder swells rapidly. Meanwhile, some of the evaluators need to see each others' notations, so you make copies of the annotated copies and route them... Isn't there another way to do this?

Suppose you could capture all the documents in an electronic folder and have the reviewers access the folder. If the reviewers could annotate their electronic copies, seeing each others' notations, and return them to you when finished, would that speed up the process? Might it reduce redundant work?

With a scanner and some simple software, you can capture the documents, gather them in an electronic folder and annotate them. Routing and approving (workflow management) is more complicated.

Scanner prices range from about \$50 to \$6000. Even the least expensive will do an acceptable job with typical business documents. A modestly priced multi-function machine (\$100-150) will serve a small office quite well. \$150 buys better color fidelity, convenience features and more powerful software. If you need to scan more than a few dozen pages a day, \$350 buys a scanner with an automatic page feeder. An office scanning dozens of pages per hour will need a robust machine costing \$2000 - \$5000, plus comprehensive document management software.

A scanner is dumb - it sees dots of color and sends them to the computer. Software and the user assign meaning to the image by putting it in the right folder and assigning a name and possibly keywords ("LoanApp 12345 survey report", for example) to it.

With optical character recognition (OCR) software, you can extract text from scanned images. This can be a tremendous cost saver, if you often have to retype documents. The cleaner the document, the more accurate text recognition will be; unfortunately, OCR usually doesn't work well on scanned faxes.

Filling out forms by hand driving you crazy? If your scanner software has *forms* capability, you can scan the form, type information into the fields and print a neatly filled-in form.

A tip on software - many low-priced scanners come with limited software, having weak or no OCR and forms support. If you like a particular scanner, but its software doesn't have the functions you want, you can buy better software separately. Paperport is a good value at about \$80.

Just about any scanner software will let you put funny noses on pictures. Have fun!

(Denis Williamson is a partner with MacLamor Computer Consulting, which provides design, installation, training and support for PCs, networks, Windows and NT. Denis can be reached at 914-357-1877, fax: 357-8719, e-mail: denis@maclamor.com.)