Color is Not a Bridge Too Far: The Case for Inkjet in the Office

Imagine that you are a biology teacher, and you want to print handouts for tomorrow's lesson on the human circulatory system. You want to use color to differentiate between the three independent systems that make up the circulatory system: systemic (arteries, veins, coronary and portal vessels) cardiovascular (the heart), and pulmonary (the lungs). Color is key here, as these systems run throughout the body, with plenty of overlap and intersections at various locations, so black and white images with labels won't make for an effective teaching tool. However, when you go to print, you're greeted with a message on the device's control panel that says color printing is disabled.

When you contact the district's business manager to explain your situation, you're told that color is a luxury that the district can't afford, even if it did improve the quality of education. Ultimately, it's the students who have to sacrifice so the district can save a few dollars.

Now imagine that you leave your teaching job to run the billing department at a large corporation. You're excited about a new idea to make sure the customer knows that his or her payment is overdue — you want to highlight the overdue amount in yellow to grab their attention. But when you try to put your plan in place, there isn't a color printer in sight. Then you remember that company policy prohibits color printing. When you ask the IT manager to make an exception, he or she reminds you that color is expensive, and monochrome is your only option.

You don't have to imagine either of these scenarios — they play out every day in schools and businesses all over the globe. And even though we know that color can command attention, influence decision making, change perceptions and enhance learning, tight budgets prevent organizations from harnessing the power of color.

Color is in demand

If we step out of the hypothetical world and take a look at current printing trends in the wild, color seems more like a requirement than a nice thing to have around the office. InfoTrends released some data revealing that nearly 60 percent of all office workers surveyed expected "no change or decrease" in their required color printing of work-related documents. And while only 33 percent of those surveyed predict an increase of those volumes in the future, nearly half of all workers in the 18 to 29 demographic and 40 percent of the 30 to 39 demographic believe that their required printing for color documents will increase. The research also found that 40 percent of office workers printed optional work-related documents with color, which is on the rise. Again, 18- to 29-year-olds lead the pack, predicting an increase in optional color printing to the tune

of 55 percent. In other words, a lot of the people who will be in the workforce for the long-term dig color.

The survey also found that companies with fewer than 100 employees "showed a greater increase in their required color printing overall. Think about that for a second. SMBs — the biggest piece of the pie — want to use color more than anyone else. Rising demand for color in SMB offices represents an enormous opportunity for dealers.

Given the way the use of color is optional and required print is trending, as millennials and Gen Z replace boomers (and eventually Gen X) in the workplace, it's reasonable to assume that color print volumes will only go up. Mind you, this comes at a time when monochrome office output is shrinking at a slow and steady clip.

It's not like your customers don't want to print in color. They do, of course; they just think they can't afford it. And it doesn't matter if the technology exists if IT and business managers don't know about it. That's why it's up to all of us to educate them.

The inkjet advantage

Advances in inkjet technology are changing how businesses think about color printing when it comes to costs. Inkjet devices have incorporated a lot of the amenities that you'd typically find on toner-based machines, like a large color touchscreen, support for their own onboard applications, and tight integration with existing business software and workflows. Modern inkjets are highly reliable, low maintenance and are just as fast, if not faster, than their laser counterparts.

Overall, inkjet printers cost less at the point of purchase and across their lifetimes compared to their toner-based counterparts. Better yet, inkjet MFPs can provide businesses with color printing for about the same price that they already pay for monochrome on their laser machines. This seems counterintuitive, given that some have pegged ink as the eighth most expensive liquid by volume on the planet. But if you compare that to the cost of color toner cartridges, it actually makes a lot of sense.

Part of the reason inkjets are so cost-effective is because of their design. Unlike laser devices, inkjets don't require a lot of costly consumables like toner cartridges, developers, drums, waste containers and fusers. Additionally, inkjets aren't engineered with a lot of the moving parts that make laser devices more vulnerable to jams and misfeeds, extended periods of downtime, higher service costs and shorter device life spans.

Another advantage of inkjet has to do with temperature. Many of the problems experienced with laser devices are related to the fusing process, when toner is fused to the surface of the substrate using heat. The heat from the fusing process can cause pages to curl, which contributes to more jams and misfeeds and reduces image quality. Additionally, the fusing process prevents printing on plastic or heat-sensitive media like

envelopes, requiring such work to be outsourced. And laser-printed pages need time to cool down before they can be processed any further and may be susceptible to cracking or flaking when folded or fed through a finishing device.

Output from inkjets, by contrast, can stand up to the stress of being fed through a finisher. And unlike the inkjets of yesterday, which relied on a single print head that made several lateral passes across the page, today's machines use a much more efficient system. Now, pages pass under an array of stationary page-wide print heads powered by piezo drop-on-demand technology. Not only is this much faster than traditional inkjet printing methods, but it also enables inkjet devices to match and even beat the speeds offered by laser machines — some inkjet devices can reach speeds of up to 160 pages per minute. Many devices utilize fade- and water-resistant, instant-drying ink, and are intelligent enough to know when to spray more or less ink, or when to slow down paper feeding speeds to ensure optimal image quality. Some devices can even take into account the type of media being printed on to make adjustments.

New revenue opportunities

Given the ultracompetitive nature of the document imaging space and how heavily commodified it has become, dealers already have a lot on their plates. When you throw in the effects of digital transformation — shrinking page volumes, revenue streams and profit margins — the future looks even more challenging. Without a new direction to take their business, growth seems like it's virtually impossible.

Many dealers have turned to selling solutions or managed services to make up for lost revenue. But these kinds of offerings are an entirely different ballgame that requires dealing with vastly different technology. Managed services and solutions are costly undertakings that require a lot of resources up front and can cause dealers to spend money and time getting up to speed while they try to get these operations off the ground.

With color inkjet, however, dealers don't need to learn the rules to a new game — they understand printers and they know how to sell them. Color inkjet MFPs represent an opportunity for dealers to pick up the lost revenue that came from a decline in the demand for monochrome.

Disruptive or complementary? Why not both?

Some see inkjet MFPs as a disruptive force, poised to change the way we print in the office forever. Others see it as an excellent addition to their portfolio; one that can help attract a broader range of customers, increase the spend in existing accounts as an add-on product, protect existing customers from competitors, and maybe even steal some of their competitors' accounts for themselves. No matter which way you see it, though, one thing cannot be denied: inkjet technology provides businesses with an affordable color printing option.

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