

Realising the full benefits of MFP integration with network fax

A Lane Telecommunications White Paper



There is little doubt that Multi Function Peripherals (MFP) offer businesses of all sizes significant benefits: they combine printing, scanning, copying and fax functions in one machine and deliver considerable cost and space savings. They also address some very important business process, management and legal issues faced by virtually every business. Within this discussion document we concentrate on the fax element and look specifically at the integration of MFPs with network fax run through a fax server such as Lane's Passport Fax Server. We consider the reasons why a business would switch to MFPs in the first place and then look at the additional steps that should be taken to ensure that the potential benefits are realised.

Potential benefits of MFP integration include:

Cost reduction through consolidation of infrastructure

Clearly, a single MFP combines a number of technologies (printing, faxing, copying and scanning) into one device resulting in a reduction in the amount of machines, consumables, power and space needed. From a fax perspective, linking into the network fax environment reduces costs further by eliminating the support overhead for individual modems and the need for individual phone lines as a networked fax server can support hundreds of MFPs on each port. Further savings can be achieved through least cost routing, email and internet delivery leading to a dramatic reduction in long-distance phone charges compared to stand alone fax devices.

Better productivity and efficiency

Printing out and faxing documents is an extremely time consuming operation which results in a significant hidden overhead for many businesses. By streamlining and speeding up this process, MFPs can improve business efficiency, speed up communications and increase employee productivity dramatically. Providing a simple to operate interface that allows employees to quickly and easily access the capabilities of the MFP and fax documents in the required format is the key to optimising this device.

Compliance

It seems that the world is increasingly regulated and organisations now have many more legal obligations to safeguard the security and accuracy of information they hold and use. The plethora of regulation includes Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX), the Freedom of Information Act, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Basel II and many more. Compliance with these regulations for large organisations with many hundreds of fax machines or smaller ones with just a few is extremely difficult given the need, with fax machines for example, to know who is using them and how they are using them.

Compliance requires structure, repeatable processes, security, archiving and the ability to audit records. An MFP integrated effectively into a network fax environment can provide all these

elements and allow full compliance as well as delivering real business benefits.

Fully connect and utilise network resources

Integrating MFPs into your network fax environment allows you to optimise the use of document output devices and maximise the use of network resources. Operating a networked fax server allows organisations to extend the value of MFPs by integrating them into a variety of business process, management and communications systems including e-mail, document management, workflow and broader ERP applications.

Simplified administration

The reduction in the complexity of the document management and communications infrastructure brought about by the introduction of MFPs and their integration with the central control functions of the fax server greatly reduce the management overhead typically associated with multiple systems deployment. Documents can be developed, duplicated and distributed centrally and the systems administrator does not have to manage a fragmented infrastructure consisting of multiple fax modems, fax machines, phone lines and MFPs.

Will an off-the-shelf MFP deliver all these benefits?

Unfortunately not. The argument for deploying MFPs and integrating them into a network fax environment, as opposed to operating them as stand alone devices with modems and dedicated phone lines, is extremely convincing and many organisations have gone down this route. The benefits outlined above are not, however, automatically delivered by MFPs. Simply connecting an MFP with its existing interface into a network risks missing out on the full potential benefits, particularly if faxes are sent over the network using SMTP.

There are a number of issues that can hinder the efficiency of the fax delivery process, reduce the cost benefits or undermine an organisation's ability to meet its regulatory compliance responsibilities.

The following issues should be considered:

Fragmented Audit Trail

Many MFPs include a control system that requires authentication of the user before they can send a fax document. This allows access rights to be controlled to a certain extent and provides a record of what has been sent from the machine. This does not, however, provide a complete audit trail if the fax is sent via an SMTP application such as MS Exchange or Lotus Notes then on to the fax server for distribution. In order to complete the audit trail it would be necessary to track the document through various stages. In theory this is possible but in practice it creates a significant administrative overhead if compliance obligations are to be met.

Is the standard interface good enough?

While most MFP interfaces are adequate for controlling the passage of documents through the device and will allow users to send faxes over the network, they don't always do this in the most user friendly way. Sometimes they can be complicated, particularly when SMTP rules dictate how documents can be sent. One of the primary cost benefits to a business of deploying fax from the MFP via their networked fax server is the ease of operation for employees and the consequential productivity improvements. If the interface is difficult, complicated or limiting then these benefits are wiped out.

Another issue relates to the lack of value-added services; functions that could be incorporated into the interface but which typically aren't present in a standard interface. Examples would be reducing user time commitments by providing cover sheet options or supplementing document processing procedures by adding billing codes.

Additional overheads to consider

There are significant cost advantages to integrating MFPs with fax servers as outlined above but these can be reduced somewhat by issues arising out of the method that standard MFP interfaces use to communicate with fax servers. If the standard MFP interface sends faxes via SMTP through the corporate email system to the fax server then additional costs can be incurred. Corporate email policies often set a limit on the size of attachments; typically this would be 5MB. A large fax could easily be more than this which would prevent delivery of the document. This can add to the administrative overhead. Even where faxes are below the maximum permitted level they can cause storage issues at a corporate level and quickly exceed mailbox space allocations.

Latency

The issue here is that of replicating the experience a user would get when sending a fax from a stand-alone machine. Once the fax is sent the user would expect to get confirmation of delivery as part of the process. When sending a fax from an MFP via SMTP there are a number of potentially quite long delays before the fax is actually delivered. Among other things, delays can result from restrictions on the passage of large attachments or the presence of corporate security procedures which monitor traffic and check for viruses, SPAM, etc. The result can be a considerable delay for the user and sometimes doubt as to whether the fax will ever get to its intended destination. Either way, the effect of this latency will be to lower productivity, raise costs and restrict efficient communications.

Limited functionality of SMTP

Sending files by SMTP is not always a simple matter. Mistakes are easily made as certain rules need to be followed to achieve a successful transmission. Infrequent users are likely to encounter more difficulties as they are less likely to be familiar with SMTP rules.

Potentially insecure

SMTP forms the backbone for most e-mail transfer. Because of its popularity, it is also the source of many security problems. There is an area of potential risk where faxes pass through SMTP mail servers on their way to the fax server. This increases the management overhead in mitigating these risks as part of the broader corporate IT security policy.

Optimum MFP benefits are realised with a Lane MFP Interface

The various issues highlighted above are largely the result of two characteristics inherent in MFPs on the market today. The interface itself is limited in functionality and is not designed specifically to optimise the delivery of faxes over a network environment. The second is the option to use SMTP as the delivery mechanism which is limiting, insecure and subject to delay.

The Lane MFP Interface has been developed to provide a solution to these issues. Working with the Lane Passport Fax Server, the interface provides the following benefits:

Comprehensive audit trail

The Lane interface works seamlessly with the Passport Fax Server to provide a comprehensive audit trail that lets you track fax history, assign access permissions, provide delivery confirmation, etc. The Passport Fax Server acts as a central hub on the network which distributes information as secure image documents directly from MFPs and other business applications. This level of accountability, available from the MFP interface, provides the management control and comprehensive audit trail that make compliance an automatic background task.

A rich interface

Ease of use is the key to improving productivity. The purpose designed Lane MFP Interface is intuitive, easy to follow and rich in functions designed to aid document delivery. Cover sheets can be stored and attached to documents quickly and easily, delivery confirmations are received quickly from the Passport Fax Server and can be delivered back to the user's desktop PC so staff time at the MFP is minimised and other functionality such as billing code appending can be built into the interface to improve business efficiency and staff productivity.

Direct access to the Passport Fax Server

The Lane MFP Interface builds additional functionality into the MFP and provides direct access to the Passport Fax Server. Although some MFPs also allow direct access to the fax server these will not have the rich functionality provided by the Lane MFP Interface.

Connecting directly to the fax server avoids the limitations of SMTP. Fax sending of even the largest documents becomes a simple operation as the MFP is not limited by the capabilities

and rules dictated by SMTP. Latency is reduced considerably as the fax bypasses potential bottlenecks on the network and passes straight through the fax server to its destination. Similarly, delivery confirmations are returned quickly ensuring that the certainty of delivery inherent in stand-alone fax machines is maintained.

Secure messaging

As messages do not go through the organisation's mail servers there is a greatly reduced chance of message interception or tampering. Encryption can be built into the interface to ensure message integrity even further.

Conclusion

MFPs linked into a network fax environment have the potential to deliver very significant financial and operational benefits. Administration and management can be simplified, hardware, consumable and infrastructure costs reduced, and management controls can be strengthened so standards required for regulatory compliance can be met with ease. While the majority of these benefits can be achieved, at least in part, using the standard MFP interface, many more benefits can be realised if a purpose designed fax interface is added to the MFP and linked into a network fax server such as Lane's Passport Fax Server.

About Lane Telecommunications

Since its formation in 1976 Lane has been at the forefront of messaging communications and is now recognised internationally as a leader in fax integration, across the financial, healthcare, manufacturing and transport industries. Based in the UK, US and Singapore, Lane has implemented systems across 50 countries and provided professional services in all time zones.

Lane offers the very best solutions for integrating fax servers as a part of wider communications networks. As specialists in messaging solutions for over 30 years, Lane delivers seamlessly integrated fax and messaging systems across entire organisations and into consolidated data networks, across one site, many sites or across borders.



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