RESEARCH
PAPER

Managed print – time for a better service

The need for more flexible, bespoke, Managed Print Services to better meet business needs in a world of increasingly complex and diverse print technologies

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Executive summary

Print technology continues to evolve and change at a rapid pace, making printing more accessible but, at the same time, much harder for companies to manage, plan and budget for.

A common solution is to outsource these functions as part of a Managed Print Service (MPS). However, such contracts vary in what they actually deliver, especially when it comes to requirements beyond basic printer hardware and consumable management. These rapidly evolving requirements include supporting multifunction print/scan/copy/fax platforms; securing the print platform against IP theft and other threats and providing easy access to printers for remote and mobile users.

In this *Computing* research paper, we look at what IT managers are worried about when it comes to planning, buying and managing their printers and the fault-lines between what they really want from a MPS compared with what they typically receive.

Introduction

Printing is one of those technologies that tend to be taken for granted, not least because the technology of printing has come on in leaps and bounds in recent years, making it possible to produce high quality mono and colour documents on demand, at phenomenal speeds and at minimal cost. More than that, multifunction (all-in-one) printers are now commonplace, enabling users to scan, copy, fax and email documents at will. You can even send documents to print over the Internet these days, and wirelessly from a smartphone, tablet or notebook for those needing to print on the move.

The latest technologies really have made printing and copying accessible, but some things never change and printer provisioning and management remain stubbornly high on the list of projects likely to keep IT managers awake at night.

This paper investigates a few reasons why printing remains problematic and includes a discussion of how to use MPS to best advantage using information from a poll of organisations with large printer/copier fleets.

Plus ça change...

Far from making life easier, the latest print technologies can, paradoxically, make deciding what printers to buy and where to locate them an increasingly complex task and one that throws up all manner of questions. These include: How many users can each printer reasonably be expected to handle? Should they have Wi-Fi or be cabled into the network? Will they be fast enough? Is the quality sufficient? Should we be looking at multifunction printers? And so on.

Add in the need for regular servicing and dealing with the breakdowns inevitable where moving parts are involved, plus sorting software issues and having to keep printers and copiers replenished with paper, ink, toner, developer and other consumables and printer planning and management can, for many, turn out to be a full time job. Hence why so many companies no longer buy or manage their own but opt instead for a MPS of some kind where most of the hard work is done by specialists, usually from a printer vendor, reseller or specialist provider.

It's not rocket science – in return for a simple cost per page invoicing model, companies signing up to a MPS agreement can avoid some or all of the hassle of planning, installing and maintaining printers and copiers themselves. Instead it's all done by the service provider, from deciding what

printers to install and where, through to monitoring usage, servicing and making sure ink and toner levels are topped up before they get too low.
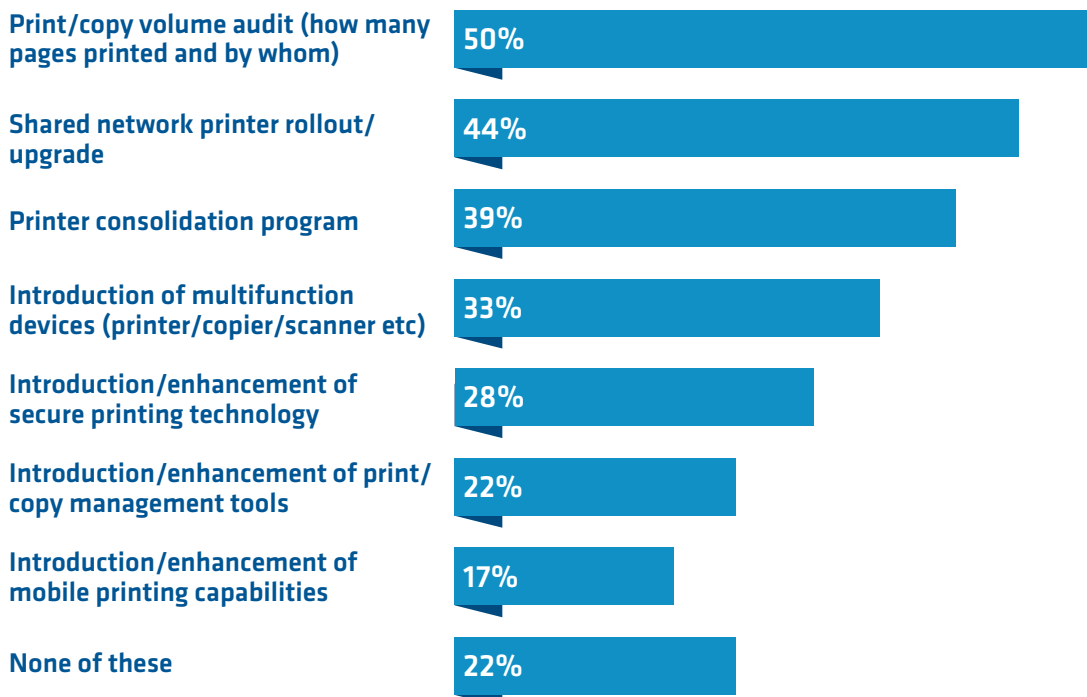
The results of the *Computing* survey, however, suggest that there can be wide variations in what managed print services provide, many concentrating mostly on the day-to-day issues. Making sure that any problems are flagged and resolved as quickly as possible, for example, and that fresh consumables are available when needed. This is all very well but it only addresses the operational issues of printing when, in reality, companies increasingly need help with planning and deployment as well as getting the right mix of new security and mobile printing technologies to suit their way of working.

Printing for all

One of the first findings thrown up by the online survey of *Computing* subscribers, was just how much is actually going on when it comes to printing in most businesses.

Despite the increasing availability and use of portable and handheld devices, printers are still in big demand and companies across the board are working hard to rise to the challenges involved. Just under a half of those polled (44%), for example, were planning major network printer rollouts or upgrades over the next 24 months (Fig. 1). Moreover, almost as many (39%) were looking to consolidate their existing fleets, typically, replacing desktop and older shared network printers with faster, more capable, hardware. It was also noticeable that none at all had plans to rollout new desktop printers in large numbers.

Fig. 1 : Which of the following projects do you have planned for the next 24 months?

Print/copy volume audit (how many pages printed and by whom)	50%
Shared network printer rollout/ upgrade	44%
Printer consolidation program	39%
Introduction of multifunction devices (printer/copier/scanner etc)	33%
Introduction/enhancement of secure printing technology	28%
Introduction/enhancement of print/ copy management tools	22%
Introduction/enhancement of mobile printing capabilities	17%
None of these	22%

* Respondents could select multiple options.

Multi-function printer use is also on the rise with a third of companies reporting projects in hand to increase the number of MFPs with built-in scanners and copying facilities. Add that to the increasing use of shared network printers and it comes as no surprise to find some 28 percent also looking to introduce secure printing technology or further enhancing this facility.

Many were, similarly, looking at better support for mobile printing, although only 17 percent said they were actively planning for this reflecting, perhaps, a lack of demand or (more likely) confusion as to how best provide for this option given the variety of mobile platforms currently in use, each with its own ways of printing..

Interestingly too, companies still appear to be in the dark when it comes to understanding their exact printing needs. A half of all respondents said they were planning to carry out audits to establish print volumes and how well they were meeting user print needs. Added to this, just under a quarter (22%) had plans to install or enhance print monitoring and management tools.

Managed print

Clearly, when it comes to planning and managing printing, businesses across the board are heavily occupied with a range of projects which, if nothing else, will add to the workload of hard-pressed IT teams. Hence there is an understandable predilection towards MPS agreements amongst the organisations in the *Computing* survey.

As can be seen from the results in Fig. 2, less than a third (30%) of those asked had chosen to manage their printer fleets themselves, the majority of respondents opting for a managed service either negotiated directly or included as part of a wider outsourcing agreement.

## Fig. 2 : In general, how does your organisation pay for printing and copying?

We have a fully managed print service with printing/copying paid for according to the number of pages printed/copied	51%
We have a fully managed print service included as part of wider IT outsourcing agreement	19%
We buy and manage our own printers and copiers	19%
We buy and manage our own printers but copiers are rented and paid for on a per-page basis	11%
We have another kind of managed print service (please specify)	0%

When asked why they chose the DIY route, those without an MPS agreement mostly said they had too few printers to justify the cost. One or two had never heard of the concept, and others said they feared being locked into a single print vendor.

More illuminating than all that, however, was the result when respondents with MPS were asked which was more important – the technical excellence of their printers and copiers or the technical expertise and support available from their MPS provider (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 : Which of these is most important?

35%

65%

The technical excellence of your printer/ copier hardware

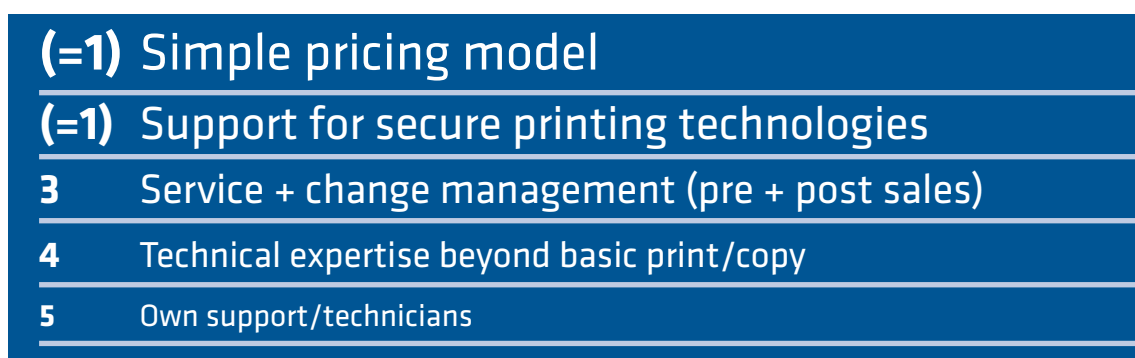The technical expertise and support of your managed print service provider
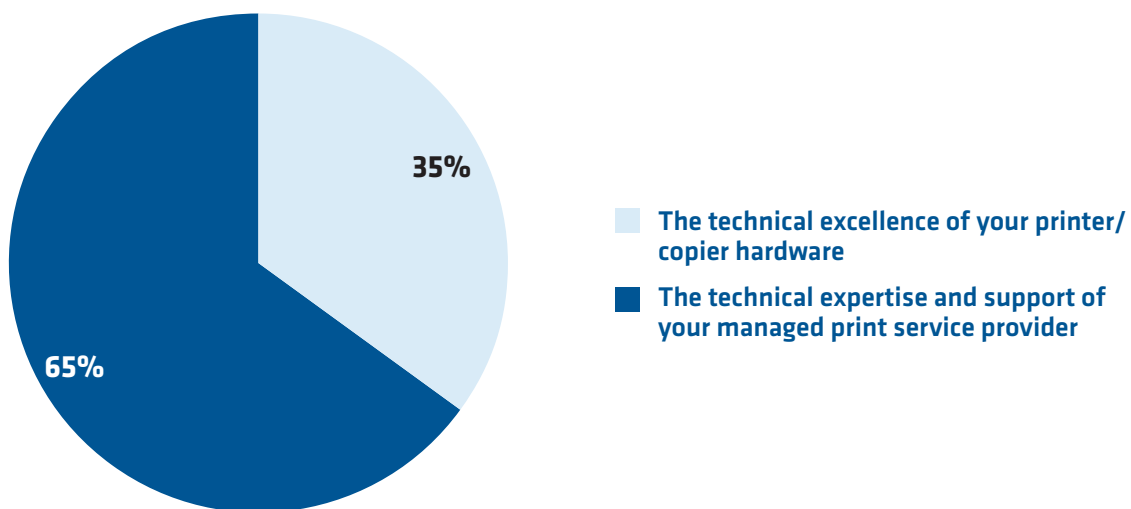
Remember that this is a large number, so it was significant that two thirds (65%) said it was the latter – the technical expertise and support available from their MPS provider/s. A response reflecting the importance of printing to those businesses and the need for a good relationship between customers and their MPS provider.

Which begs the questions – just how good is that relationship?

An MPS by any other name

Naturally the companies involved had varying expectations, but when it came to what companies said they looked for in their MPS providers and service agreements, a simple pricing model, unsurprisingly came out on top of the list of necessary attributes (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 : Please rank the following characteristics when evaluating providers of managed print services

(=1)	Simple pricing model
(=1)	Support for secure printing technologies
3	Service + change management (pre + post sales)
4	Technical expertise beyond basic print/copy
5	Own support/technicians

Less predictable a need, however, was the ability of the provider to deliver and support secure printing technologies. And yet, given a background of growing use of both shared printers and multi-function devices with access to the Internet, concerns over security are understandable. After all you may have the best firewall in the world and rock solid password controls but, if sensitive information is left in the print output tray, possibly, in a printer with a scanner and direct email access, you're leaving the door wide open to all kinds of abuse.

As the *Computing* survey highlights, knowledge and expertise in secure printing technologies is fast becoming a major requirement when evaluating MPS providers, but it's not the only such prerequisite. Equally customers are looking for the ability to stay on top of servicing and change management.

Too many, it seems, consider the job done once the initial planning is over, whereas customers would like service providers to continually review their print requirements and offer advice as to how to both improve availability, performance and quality and, hopefully, reduce printing costs.

Technical expertise beyond the basics of printing and copying were also valued highly by those who answered this question. Again, an understandable concern given the growing complexity of the technologies involved in printing and the need for close integration with other parts of the IT infrastructure. Likewise, a consistently high performing and accountable service is much sought after, with a strong preference here for MPS providers with their own in-house support staff and technicians.
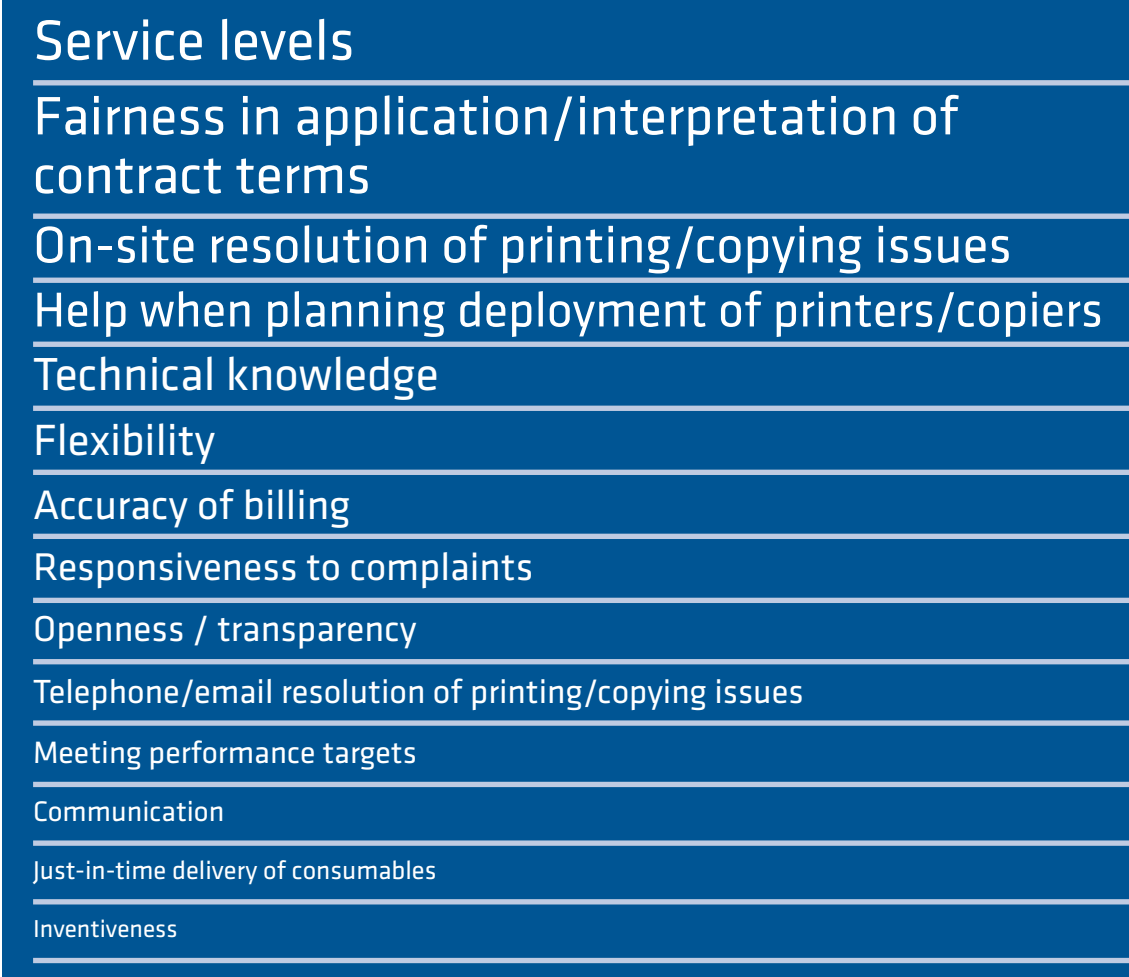
A need for change

Turning next to how well MPS delivery matches customer needs and expectations it seems that, in general, providers of such services are judged to be doing a reasonable job. When asked to rate their providers, for example, those companies polled indicated that they experienced high levels of service, especially when it came to fixing printing/copying issues (Fig. 5, *see next page*).

The availability of help with planning for printer deployment was marked a little lower but, overall, technical expertise levels were viewed as pretty good. The majority of providers fell down badly, however, when it came to some of the basics like communication skills and the just-in-time delivery of print consumables, which is surprising given that this last item is now so very much a fundamental part of every MPS agreement and automation software widely available.

Service providers were also rated low in terms of inventiveness, reflecting a tendency to simply get on and do what was asked rather than advising customers and steering them towards more effective and affordable solutions. An unfortunate shortcoming given that those delivering MPS contracts are ideally placed to act as centres of excellence for all things to do with printing, scanning and copying, with the staff and expertise to really make a difference.

Part of the problem here could be the way in which MPS contracts are, in general, negotiated on a seemingly one-size-fits-all basis. Indeed, just under three-quarters of the companies taking part in the *Computing* survey said that contracts were negotiated company-wide either by the IT department (50%) or by the purchasing team (23%) responsible for more general office supplies. A further 18 percent said that contracts were negotiated on a country by country basis (presumably these were mainly large multinationals), but none allowed agreements to be made by line of business managers who, on the face of it would appear better placed to understand the print/copy needs of their part of the organisation. Needs which might be significantly different from those of others.

Fig. 5 : Rate your current managed print service provider/s against the following criteria

Service levels

Fairness in application/interpretation of contract terms

On-site resolution of printing/copying issues

Help when planning deployment of printers/copiers

Technical knowledge

Flexibility

Accuracy of billing

Responsiveness to complaints

Openness / transparency

Telephone/email resolution of printing/copying issues

Meeting performance targets

Communication

Just-in-time delivery of consumables

Inventiveness

Admittedly it's those same managers who would need the greatest help in terms of understanding and applying the latest print technology solutions, but excluding them from the process only compounds the problem and appears short-sighted to say the least.

That said, the market for MPS is very competitive and a wake-up call for providers has to come from the answers given to one last survey question – the frequency with which customers review their MPS agreements (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 : How often do you review and renew your MPS contracts?

- Annually
- Every 2 Years
- Every 3 Years
- Every 4 Years
- Every 5 Years
- Other
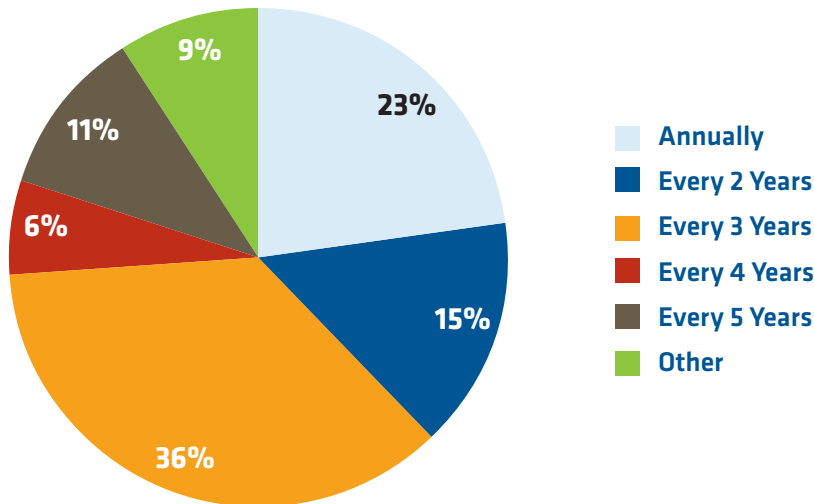
As shown by the chart, the majority of those polled (74%) said they reviewed their MPS contracts at least every three years with almost a quarter (23%) performing annual reviews. In theory that shows that companies aren't tying themselves into long contracts leaving them well placed to shop around for services that better fit their printing needs – assuming the management will to make that happen. By the same token, however, it serves to prompt providers to come up with the kind of flexible managed print services those customers clearly want and give themselves the competitive edge to succeed.

Conclusion

The *Computing* survey on which this research paper is based shows that Managed Print Services are widely employed by companies with large numbers of printers, to help with planning, deployment and the day to day management of those devices. It also reflects a reasonable level of satisfaction with those services and their providers, although there are areas where improvements could be made.

Communication and consumable management are two such concerns but, equally, the survey shows increasing demand for help with more complex new technologies such as multi-function devices, secure printing and support for mobile users. Requirements that companies themselves understand and which MPS providers need to address to better service the needs of their customers and stay ahead of the game in this highly competitive market.

About the sponsor

Brother have a well-established reputation for reliable, professional and cost-effective print solutions. But Brother look beyond simply the hardware and supplies your business needs, and are committed to helping businesses work smarter. Finding solutions to save you valuable time, money and resources are as important to Brother as the printers, scanners and labellers that make up their product portfolio.

It's time to do more than press 'print'. In today's competitive business environment, IT effectiveness and low cost-to-serve can give you an edge in your industry – while identifying your fleet costs and reducing your overall print bill can give you a unique advantage over your competitors.

Brother understands the critical nature of reliable and effective printing in business and their Managed Print Service means there is no need to stock additional supplies or deploy more printers than is necessary. Settling for a one size fits all solution appears to be the current industry standard, but with a tailored MPS solution from Brother you can take control and position your business ahead of the curve.

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