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Best Practices for Print Service Management

Best Practices in Open Print Management



Best Practices for Print Service Management

Plan → Design → Measure → Analyze → Improve → Control

1. Develop and maintain a print strategy:

For businesses that wish to reduce costs by managing their printing, a document and print strategy is essential. Best practices conclude that fleet assessment and strategy development should be hardware manufacturer independent. Independence should deliver a high degree of objectivity. Without this independence, the risk is that the assessment will be focused on hardware technology, not business needs.

An advanced Print Strategy should be policy driven with the flexibility to encompass new policies quickly and efficiently to enable a high degree of business agility. It should include a clear definition of the infrastructure tools to support the implementation and management of the strategy, current and future functional requirements, design principles and policies, device retirement policies, service policies covering device and user service availability, baseline print costs, their drivers and cost targets, implementation recommendations which consider the rate of change your business can realistically manage, a solution scalable corporate-wide not just focused on proof of concept pilot sites, and methods for measuring results of post implementation.

A proposal from a supplier for more services and/or hardware does not constitute a strategy. Your strategy and infrastructure tools should be independent from the hardware vendor to ensure you have an objective view for both the short medium and long term. Relying on the manufacturer to decide which device is most cost effective for your corporation carries the risk that the hardware vendor, who is motivated to sell more devices and associated consumables, ink and toner, will recommend just that. The corporate print strategy should be revisited every 3 to 5 years and should include proper benchmarking.

2. Establish a service baseline:

The baseline assessment is used as the starting point for developing the corporate print strategy. During baseline assessment, best practices must incorporate all costs into the picture, not just consumables - the largest cost being human resources and their efficiency in using the service. The service baseline should consider device and printing behavior over a period of time, 30 to 60 days, and include how the service is delivered, what impacts it is having on business cost and productivity, the functional needs of the business, how much printing is being produced, and precisely what is being purchased at what cost.

Note: If the current Print Service Provider already has a printer fleet management tool that contains a database of device inventory, printing activity and printer events, his revenue could be increased by offering professional independent assessment services. In addition, the service provider should be able to prepare a competitive managed print services proposal based upon the current inventory and understanding of his client's printing history. A greater knowledge of the printer fleet than both their client and competitor is a significant strategic advantage. Many organizations now require an independent assessment to ensure greater objectivity and transparency to actual fleet performance.

3. Treat printing equipment as an IT asset:

Best practices recognize that the Printer Fleet is a corporate asset, and therefore should be managed as any other IT asset. Printer asset management should look at the fleet from the enterprise perspective analyzing each device through its lifecycle history. A printer lifecycle encompasses purchase decisions, upgrades, printer financials, maintenance, supplies management, moves and retirement. The enterprise perspective looks at the fleet using corporate metrics, comparisons and trends, making decisions from a global, rather than, unit, user or commodity basis.

Most suppliers look at a snapshot in time to track, optimize & identify cost savings. To do this, approximations for costs are used which are often highly inaccurate. Your print strategy infrastructure software suite should address inventory cost, location and its changes through time, including maintenance, supplies usage and support multi-vendor equipment. The information should allow you to decide when to retire printers and which model/manufacturer is most cost effective as a replacement.

4. Optimize:

Best practice focuses on optimizing the number of hardware manufacturers, the number of different device models, and the number of suppliers & service providers, according to your company's functional needs. In some cases this will result in reducing the number of devices but not necessarily so. The objective is to increase user productivity and device reliability throughput and yields and to reduce inventory and intervention costs due to assets, toner supplies, supplies replenishments and failures.

The general direction of managed print services is to reduce total costs, to reduce the amount of printing, to reduce the number of devices, to reduce the number of manufacturers and models, and to reduce the number of suppliers. However if these reductions drive up interventions due to device over use causing lower device reliability, reprints and waste from contention, productivity will be lost and user satisfaction will suffer.

5. Automate:

Managing print services in a cost effective manner requires automation of many of the processes involved. Automatic device discovery and meter reads are only the beginning. The printer fleet management tool should also automate asset management, location management, cost management, availability management, service requests in the event of a device alert (having intelligently eliminated irrelevant information and warnings at a device and fleet level) toner requests grouped to minimize transaction and shipping costs, scheduled maintenance requirements, device retirement and replacement scheduling, scheduled reports, printer supplies yield with comparisons, amongst others. The managed services should not add to the human resource burden rather relieve it to deliver an optimized service.

6. Manage Desktop Printers:

Desktop directly connected printers can often be the most expensive component of the printer fleet on a per page basis. Not only do they tend to be underutilized, supplies are expensive and the printers are complex to track and manage. Best practices recommend eliminating printing using direct attached printers except where absolutely necessary.

The typical reasons for eliminating these devices are as follows:

- The highest per page printing cost (TCO)
- Complex supplies management
- Greater supplies inventory costs
- Increased software management complexity
- Added complexity for asset management
- Regulatory and policy compliance issues.

Unfortunately, in some organizations there can be a proliferation of direct attached printers, resulting in challenges to manage these costs effectively. Lifecycle costs can mean it is actually much more cost effective to provide low cost network alternatives to direct connected devices even if the company strategy for good reasons allows certain employees to keep personal printers.

Where necessary, best practices recommend that the printers be restricted to a limited number of hardware model choices and should be network-attached, not USB-attached, to make them consistently visible to the network and to the management tools.

7. Governance for suppliers:

Best practices require that suppliers be actively managed. This includes all suppliers: hardware, software, service, supplies, and consulting. Your suppliers' objectives may not necessarily be compatible with your corporate objectives. Some corporations hire independent consultants during the assessment and strategy phase, but the deployment, and operational phase also requires quality control and supplier governance.

Service Level Agreements (SLA), specify contractual activities that ensure your printers are available for use. The only way to ensure that the service supplier adheres to the SLA is to monitor the critical items over time. These metrics include % uptimes both for devices and the overall service delivered, average time it takes to resolve any issues, and frequency of breakdown. Other areas of vendor governance include billing accuracy and corporate resources expended for the supplier.

8. Sustain savings through Continuous Improvement:

Once the fleet strategy is deployed, the corporation optimizes enterprise printing through pro-active monitoring of printer assets, failures and interventions, supplies management, and service level agreements. Infrastructure management software, which collects and stores device and printing data with history and the ability to produce meaningful management information, is critical.

Continuous improvement requires active and ongoing attention to print assets and functional business needs. Human behavior can easily slip back into old habits. Active monitoring and management automation can alleviate increases in costs arising from human frailties. It is a fallacy to rely upon the manufacturers' benchmarks for each model since they are unlikely to reflect your business and management policies. Each organization has different printing behaviors and needs, it is this you need to manage and control.

9. Monitor, Measure, Manage:

The key to sustaining the savings from managing printing is to measure, adjust, measure, and adjust on a continuous and ongoing basis. This is where Managed Print Service Providers can retain and increase business by proactively demonstrating their value with regular reports on their customer's printing which should include trend analysis showing pages, costs, interventions, availability and problems. This report should identify business changes and areas where improvements can be made such as moving, swapping, or replacing equipment always with a view to reduce total printing costs, interventions and increasing user service availability.

As mentioned above, a print infrastructure management suite, is required to continuously monitor the corporate print environment to manage and generate the information for advanced business reports.

10. Regular reporting and benchmarking:

Inherent in managed print services is a regular re-assessment of the corporate print environment. As with any business best practice, scheduled comparative assessments or benchmarks are necessary to stay on track competitively and strategically. The primary objective is to ensure that the savings realized by managed print services are being maintained. For instance, your strategy may have a target of 1 failure and 5 toner interventions per device per year. However without due diligence and constant attention, this target may well deviate with cost and productivity implications. Regular comparative analysis would highlight any deviation from targets and policies. In addition technology is constantly changing so the policies established at the start of the contract may no longer be appropriate to deliver the service you require. Reporting according to a schedule is therefore critical.

Our recommendation is to conduct formal service reviews with a report of the corporate printing environment every 6 months to reveal trends against policies but without creating a management overhead. Monthly reports should be available allowing significant issues to be dealt with outside of formal reviews.

Formal benchmarking should be conducted every 2 to 3 years prior to contract renewal and should include user satisfaction analysis and productivity impact assessments. To ensure a cost effective approach, a print management infrastructure suite that continuously monitors printer service volumes and printing activities should perform this reporting.

The more you know about your fleet, the greater the potential for cost savings. Adopting these best practices on an ongoing basis will surely pay off and be reflected on your financial statements.