

Will smartphones and tablets herald the era of ubiquitous printing?

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Quocirca Comment

Since the release of the iPad in 2010, the market has become awash with a variety of mobile print solutions including Apple's AirPrint, HP ePrint, Ricoh's HotSpot printing and Google Cloud Print to name but a few. Many printer vendors are banking on the soaring demand for smartphones and tablets to revitalise the opportunity for printing, in the office, at home and on the move.

With projections that smart phone sales will reach 300 million worldwide in 2010 and up to 55 million tablets forecast to be sold this year, the opportunity is significant, even if only a small proportion of users actually need or want to print. But as the two walled gardens of printers and mobile devices come together, are vendors in danger of over complicating an essentially simple process?

The mobile and print worlds are remarkably similar in many ways. In the mobile world, data and applications are increasingly the keys to opening up new revenue opportunities for device manufacturers and platform providers. In the printer world, pages are king as it is the ink on pages that drives revenue more than the hardware. The collision of two markets driven by proprietary platforms has created challenges in developing universal printing capabilities across mobile platforms.

So faced with a diverse mobile device platform landscape, it is unsurprising that it has spawned such a wide array of mobile printing solutions from printer vendors. Most of these solutions are predicated on sending a document as an email attachment, via the cloud, to a web-enabled printer which has an associated email address. The exception to this is Apple's AirPrint which currently supports printing to HP "cloud-aware" printers only – which include HP's OfficeJet, LaserJet Pro and PhotoSmart printers.

HP's head start

HP has had a clear head start in the market, being the first (and so far only) printer vendor to offer direct support through AirPrint. But what are the options for businesses, not using HP printers, that want a reliable and universal way to print to office devices from smart phones or tablets? One solution is HP's ePrint Enterprise, part of an HP Managed Print Service which enables Blackberry users to print to any network enabled printer.

HP has also just announced that ePrint Enterprise now also support iPhones and will be extended to Android devices in May 2011. Ricoh and Xerox also have their own solutions which require emailing a document to a registered printer. One notable and recent addition to the mobile printing fray is from EFI, the provider of Fiery controllers for MFPs from a variety of manufacturers – including Canon, Xerox, Ricoh and Konica Minolta.

EFI PrintMe Connect

Interestingly, EFI's PrintMe cloud printing solution was launched nine years ago in response to the need for secure printing for mobile workers at locations such as hotels and airports. PrintMe offers automatic discovery of printers and their location, without the need for printer drivers or additional software. Documents are uploaded to the cloud through either the PrintMe web site, email, PrintMe print driver or the PrintMe smartphone apps. Documents can be printed through the PrintMe server to any PrintMe enabled printer client.

PrintMe also supports direct mobile printing without the requirement for the cloud. Documents can be sent directly to any Wi-Fi connected Fiery driven printer. Its latest addition, PrintMe Connect for AirPrint supports the new AirPrint platform and iOS 4.2 meaning users can print easily from any application on their Apple device to any Fiery printer. Once

installed on the network, PrintMe Connect for AirPrint will show all available Fiery-driven printers as destinations on a user's printer list. There is no need for the individual user to download an application or for the enterprise to purchase a specific iOS-enabled printer or upgrade or modify existing printers or MFPs.

Of course, the question remains as to how much mobile device users really want to print – and if there are no simple and intuitive ways to print, it is likely that users will just not bother. But even if just a small proportion of the huge installed base of mobile device users print, the market represents significant incremental revenue opportunities for printer vendors. Of all these vendors, it is only HP that has really put a clear stake in the mobile printing ground has certainly

taken a leadership position in the mobile printing space, providing a simple and effective way to print from Apple's latest generation of iPhones, iPods and iPads. But where EFI can potentially capture more mindshare is in the enterprise environment, where its Fiery-controller devices are widely installed.

In the meantime, the market will continue to be characterised by a mix of solutions from printer vendors and third party app developers. EFI PrintMe Connect certainly offers the potential for ubiquitous printing – at least in the enterprise, but its success will be on its partnerships and joint-marketing with printer and MFP vendors to ensure enterprises fully understand how it can be deployed to offer a simple and secure approach to mobile printing.

About Quocirca

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Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

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