

IT Analysis - Printing – the Achilles heel of the iPad for business?

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With iPad sales already outpacing sales of Macs in the US, taking just 28 days to shift a million units, it's fair to say that the consumer popularity of the iPad promises to match that of the iPhone.

While Apple is keen to tout the iPad as a true alternative to the PC, pushing its web browsing, email, photos and video viewing capabilities, it does lack some features when it comes to business productivity – one of which is native printing support. You may wonder if in today's digital age this is really necessary, but there will always be a preference to print documents in the business environment – so direct printing would certainly boost the iPad's appeal to business users.

Although Apple has released a new version of its productivity suite iWork for the iPad to increase its attraction to business users, its recommendations for printing an iWork document are to "send the file to a desktop computer" and print from there or use the iPad's file sharing feature. Hardly the most elegant solution for printing.

For now, the lack of built-in printing functionality means that iPad users will need to turn to third-party apps for their printing needs. Pocket Watch, Dynamix and EuroSmartz have all produced optimised versions of their printing apps that run on the iPad as well as the iPhone and iPod touch – but these apps do rely on file sharing with a computer. They also must of course be purchased, and print functionality can be limited as typically you must print from the print application rather than from an open application such as email.

But there is hope in the fact that Apple's support documents indicate that the iPad does not "currently" support direct printing, suggesting that this feature will be added to the future release of iPhone OS4 this Autumn.

A lack of print support is not new to mobile device users, and the emergence of cloud printing applications that enable users to print to any device, without the need to install a multitude of drivers promises to simplify printing on the go. For instance, Ricoh's HotSpot Printing App inserts a "print" menu option into the BlackBerry email application, allowing it to search for the nearest Ricoh HotSpot Printer location. Once you have "hit the spot", any document or attachment can be sent from the BlackBerry to the Ricoh HotSpot Printer of choice.

HP also recently announced its new service offering, ePrint, which enables BlackBerry users to securely print documents from printers at public locations like hotels, airports or libraries. Its ePrint application locates and selects the closest printer, after which users can finalise printing of the document. An email with a security code is sent that authorises printing of the document. Both Ricoh and HP's solutions are powered by the PrinterOn network of public printers called PrintSpots. However, support is currently limited to BlackBerry and smartphone devices.

An alternative solution is the use of the cloud printing solution from Cortado. This is already available for BlackBerry, iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad and Android, and currently hosts more than 6,000 printer drivers. Cortado Workplace is a free cloud printing application which enables documents to be printed by any Wi-Fi or Bluetooth printer. Its corporate server platform goes one step further using Active Directory to ensure that users only print to printers they have rights to.

There is further hope for iPad printing through Google's CloudPrint. Part of the Chrome OS projects, CloudPrint aims to allow any type of application to print to any printer. This includes web, desktop, and mobile apps from any kind of device – potentially, this could be used on a

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BlackBerry, Windows machines, Macs, or even the iPad. However, Google's CloudPrint project is still in the early stages of development, and indications are that in order to use CloudPrint, users will have to associate their printers with their Google Account, and it will rely on the availability of "cloud aware" printers – none of which yet exists. Clearly this is not without its challenges and is something that will require collaboration between operating system and printer manufacturers.

Cloud printing solutions certainly minimise the dependency on driver installation and updates and offer an attractive and simplified user experience for mobile printing. The prevalence of paper in the business world is not going to disappear overnight, and without simple and secure native printing capabilities, the iPad will gain less traction in the workplace. While simple third-party apps do offer a workaround, these could lead to the problem of printing being uncontrolled, so within the enterprise businesses would need to ensure that printing from any

mobile devices does not fall outside the scrutiny of regular desktop printing.

While the consumer frenzy around the iPad continues, one vendor who has the ability to address the business printing needs for the mobile business environment is HP. It recently announced its plans to integrate webOS into both the "slate" and web-connected printers. It remains to be seen what printing support will be available on its first webOS tablet, the Hurricane, later this year, but HP is certainly uniquely positioned to potentially deliver an integrated and simplified printing experience for mobile users – in both the consumer and business market.

Whether Apple can achieve this for the iPad depends on the capabilities of iPhone OS 4. The printing world is meeting the mobile world, and those that can provide the simplest and most flexible approach to bringing the two together are most likely to make the greatest impact on business users.

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