HARDWARE

Color MFPs Prove Capable and Costly

Six multifunction printers are rich in features, but prices may be hard to justify

TEST CENTER

(EXCERPTED)

WHEN WE REVIEWED monochrome MFPs (multifunction printers) a few months ago (infoworld .com/2555), it was already clear that multifunctions were the output wave of the future for corporate offices. Not only do they combine print, copy, and fax functions, but they also act as input centers for digital archiving, OCR, and the sending of images via e-mail or fax. And yet for some offices, that's still not enough. Workgroups that want to produce short-run marketing materials, professional-looking proposals, or punchier internal documents could save outsourcing time and money by moving up to a color MFP.

The six midrange color MFPs in this roundup offer a plethora of features. Five have tabloid or slightly larger paper paths. All can print and scan in duplex, and all the scanners are color-capable. All offer myriad paper input options. Most include finishers that can staple document sets, drill holes, or even fold booklets. Speed was the biggest disappointment: None printed at full engine spec in our tests, but some approached it when making monochrome copies.

Xerox's WorkCentre Pro C2636 takes top honors for printing and copying the quickest, producing exemplary output, and offering plentiful features that are also easy to use. Canon's Color imageRunner C3220 and Ricoh's Aficio 2238C rated nearly as well. Hewlett-Packard's Color LaserJet 9500mfp and Sharp's AR-BC320 Color Imager stumbled in our speed tests, and Lexmark's X762e struggled with output quality.

Power Has Its Price

As you admire that full-color copy, remember that such pages cost roughly six to eight times what a monochrome version costs — and users might print more to fine-tune colors or just to have fun. All the systems we tested include tools for monitoring and restricting access, but quiz your reseller: Can the machine set up usage-constraint templates that you can apply to individuals and groups? Can it block color jobs that don't have an associated billing charge-back code but let uncategorized monochrome jobs go through? Can the job log export to a spreadsheet, or do you have to pay extra for a link to accounting software? And ask yourself: Who needs it? Image-conscious departments — sales and marketing, HR and training, the executive suite — probably get first dibs.

The machines themselves are pricey. The MFPs in our roundup start at less than $7,500 and top out at close to $25,000. Most organizations buy under a service contract that replaces a warranty with an agreement to pay a certain charge per page. Expect a 25 percent to 35 percent discount off the list price, more in a competitive market. Negotiate against paying a click charge for scanning and other jobs that don't use toner, or bargain it against a concession on something else. The more you use the machine, the lower your click charges will be, of course. With moderate usage — 4,000 to 8,000 clicks a month — you should be able to get your charge down to less than 1 cent for a monochrome copy or print and 8 cents for a color copy or print.

Xerox WorkCentre Pro C2636

Xerox's WorkCentre Pro C2636 rates highest among the color MFPs in our roundup because it's fast, well-equipped, and adept at combining sophisticated

Xerox WorkCentre Pro C2636

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VERY GOOD	8.6
Features (25%)	9
Print quality (25%)	8
Speed (25%)	9
Ease-of-use (15%)	8
Management (10%)	9

COST: $17,890 MSRP

PLATFORMS: Windows, Mac OS, NetWare, Linux, Unix, Citrix, HP-UX, Solaris, IBM AIX

BOTTOM LINE: Our highest-rated color MFP is fast, well-equipped, and adept at combining sophisticated capabilities with the user-friendliness busy workgroups need. It also offers good value for the price.

capabilities with the user-friendliness that a busy workgroup needs. It also seems to offer competitive pricing.

The WorkCentre Pro C2636 is carefully designed and mostly well made. The scanner, ADF, and control panel sit securely on the arms of a steel exoskeleton; the printer component nestles underneath. A small plastic shelf on the machine's left side provides a convenient place to park papers while you're setting up a job. Access doors and paper trays feel sturdy; the latter are easy to adjust. Only the foldout auxiliary input tray feels a bit flimsy, as most do.

The configuration we tested included the High-Capacity Feeder option, which stacks two 520-sheet, tabloid-size trays plus dual 1,000-sheet letter-size feeders underneath the printer. Between the printer and the scanner you'll find a standard, 400-sheet output tray that can offset collated copies. Several external finishers are also available. With the fax option, our unit lists for $17,890 — at first glance a good value, though we don't know what a real-world, negotiated price for any of these MFPs would be.

The WorkCentre Pro C2636 is very approachable, thanks to a control panel designed around two physical buttons —

Features and Access — that divide most functions between managing the system and using it. In Feature mode, the color-coded LCD displays a row of buttons for principal functions, each complemented by tabs of hierarchically arranged settings. Access, where you set up the machine's defaults, follows a similar structure.

The features go deep into production-level controls. For example, when building a complex copy job from several batches of originals, you can mix documents scanned on the platen with ones sent through the ADF, mix simplex with duplex pages and number some pages but not others, run a sample copy, and correct individual settings without reprogramming the whole job. After setting up the job, you can switch to Program mode and save it. Unfortunately, the machine stores only 10 programs, and it labels these with numbers instead of meaningful names.

The WorkCentre Pro C2636 also provides good capabilities for ordinary users. You can adjust the color of scans and copies with preset schemes called Lively, Warm, and so on, and it can check color swatches on the LCD to see what the adjustments should look like. The machine automatically

detects mixed-size pages in the ADF and pulls appropriate paper from different drawers. Job Status, a physical button, displays all pending jobs in the queue in one list, where you can move jobs around.

Xerox designed the WorkCentre Pro C2636 to be partly user-serviceable via Smart Kits. Smart Kits include the tube-shaped toner cartridges and the imaging drums, which are a snap to replace, and the waste-toner collector, which is a little trickier to install. Smart Kits won't save you any cash because they simply take the place of a service visit, but they can keep you from waiting on a technician.

The WorkCentre Pro C2636 aced our image-quality and performance tests. Its 18.1-ppm speed printing black text outpaced the rest, and the text itself looked impressively matte-black, clean, and crisp at all sizes. Grayscale photos showed a somewhat limited range of shades, but images still looked highly detailed and smooth. Color graphics — always the Achilles' heel of performance — printed at a comparatively good 4.5 ppm. And samples such as Excel pie charts and wide swaths of color on PowerPoint slides showed some minor patchiness. Speaking of patches, we had to install one for the WorkCentre Pro C2636's

PostScript driver to fix a PowerPoint 2003 rendering issue: When using the standard image-quality setting, some colors printed inaccurately.

Copy speed and quality in our tests were similarly impressive. Plain-text copies appeared at a zippy 31.1 ppm, color graphics at a competitive 16.8 ppm. All copied documents looked saturated and fairly solid; copied color photos displayed delightfully sharp focus.

Substance Over Style

When you shop for a color MFP, keep these factors in mind: The MFPs we tested all offered similar lists of features but differed more in terms of how easily, quickly, or well they executed on those features. Take the time for a full demonstration of the unit and its options, and try using the control panel yourself before you buy. Also, think of the machine not just as a printer/copier/scanner/fax but as a device that can help you smooth office workflow and document management. Storing forms electronically for on-demand printing, scanning documents directly into a database, running custom applications — these are some of the real reasons an MFP could be a good upgrade for your office.

— Dan Littman and Melissa Riofrio