

"...just 2.35% of the total page volume is on A3 paper"

Lifting the veil

Establishing what the A3 printing requirement is, in an office, is not that hard. Start by looking at the quantity of paper being purchased. A review of the accounts payable ledger should quickly reveal how many A4 and A3 reams (each ream represents 500 sheets) are purchased on an annual basis. In addition, if A3 pages are being charged at twice the amount of A4 pages, then the copier invoices should provide a breakdown of the different volumes in each paper category.

A further check would be to use the free software from your current main hardware supplier to run a page count check on networked devices. All the leading manufacturers provide a tool for monitoring page counts of networked devices for free from their websites. This process is not 100% accurate though as some devices (especially copiers) are not networked, but provides good sample data from which assumptions can be made.

If you are really concerned about the user reaction and want a high level of detail then there is the option of installing an agent based print monitoring tool which will record all the details of the print jobs being sent from users PC's and provides this data in a report format. The only problem with this approach is that it doesn't tell you where the users are and therefore how easy it would be to share a more limited number of A3 devices – this requires a physical audit which takes a spatial view of the office, usually through an electronic floor plan upon which device information is superimposed.

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The Optimized Print Environment

With a potential excess spend of more than £70,000 at a 1,700 user office, spending the time to understand the proper output requirements of users offers a substantial payback. Further savings are possible by looking at the number of print enabled devices required and improving utilisation of the overall fleet.

Depending on the industry sector actual A3 usage is likely to be much lower than users perceive the requirement to be and with a little bit of internal research the data can be found to challenge the current view. There will be certain departments that genuinely need A3 capability so the answer is not to ignore the requirement completely, rather to take a balanced view of who needs regular access and who needs occasional access (and therefore might have to walk a little bit further on those odd occasions that an A3 document is produced).

Research shows that users would rather have better accessories on their A4 devices to help increased job sharing than A3 capable devices. The recommendation of this research paper is support the true user requirements and move towards an optimized output environment that will deliver both savings and happier users.

About the author: Robert Newry is a Director and Co-Founder of NewField IT, a specialist print management consultancy. NewField IT is leading provider of print assessments in the UK and has collected data on print usage at more than 30 different organisations, varying from public sector to large international companies.

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The truth behind A3 printing

The A3 Document: Perception versus Reality



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A3 – Perception VS Reality

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As offices review their office printing costs, one significant area almost entirely overlooked is the cost of having A3 devices. The perception is that the A3 document is as necessary to our office printing needs as power-steering is to our cars. The reality, as evidenced by NewField IT's review of more than 30,000 devices supporting over 75,000 users, is that A3 output in the office is remarkably low – less than 2.5% of total page volumes on average.

Yet, because of the perception, companies are spending more than TWICE as much as they needed to on printers and nearly THREE times as much on copiers to provide A3 capability to staff – extrapolating this across NewField IT's survey base shows an organisation of 1,700 staff and 390 output devices is spending £70,000 more than it needs to on output hardware. By understanding the true A3 requirements in the office companies could significantly reduce their annual capital purchases for output hardware without effecting office productivity.

This Research Paper explains why A3 output is not as prevalent in the office as many people believe. There are several reasons why the perception of A3 usage is so much higher than the reality, but discovering general user requirements and actual A3 usage is not as complicated as some might believe. This paper concludes by providing several suggestions on how any Procurement or IT Manager can challenge the accepted view.

The situation de-mystified

NewField IT has audited more than 30,000 devices covering over 75,000 staff both in the UK and overseas in the last two years and across a variety of business sectors. The statistics on A3 capability as opposed to A3 usage has been surprising. In terms of capability, an administrative building with 1,700 staff will have 72 printers capable of printing A3 documents (20% of the printer fleet) and 56 copiers/multifunctional devices (MFD) with such functionality (89% of the fleet). This varies within different business sectors, with the financial services sector being the highest with an average of 26%.

A sample of six different organisations representing 3,839 devices and over 10,000 office based employees.

“Despite the level of capability, analysis of the paper volumes and page counts shows that just 2.35% of the total page volume is on A3 paper. Given that the average office based worker produces 8,636 pages a year, just 202 pages are A3, which is less than a page a day – this hardly seems an essential accessory!”

While A3 usage in the office as whole is low, there are significant variations between departmental functions. A good example is

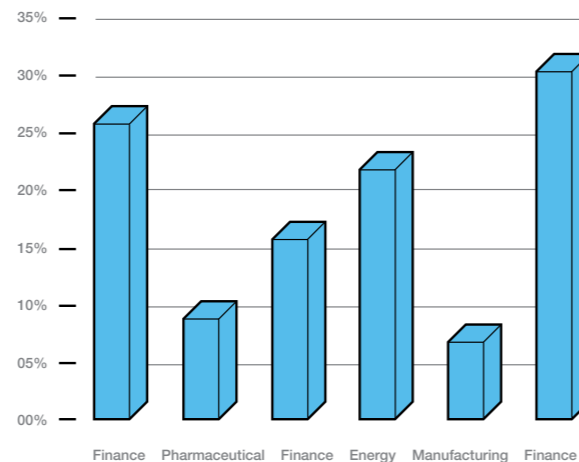


Figure 1: A3 capable printers as a % of all printers

the Finance department where A3 output is required for large spreadsheets.

Another area is Human resources. A3 output in these areas can be as much as 15% of annual page output. Since these departments have high usage, the actual usage in other parts of the organisation is even lower. Our analysis of individual machines shows that many A3 capable devices go months without producing a single A3 page.

The variation in A3 usage also applies to business sectors. The financial services sector creates the highest number of documents – page volumes are on average 11,550 per user per year – more than 34% higher than the overall average. A3 page volumes as a percentage of total output at 0.96%, despite more than 25% of all devices being A3 capable.

The question then is why do office based staff believe they need access to A3 output?

The reason is partly historical. A3 page volume used to be important but has been in decline for several years. NewField IT's research found that five years ago A3 usage was on average double what it is today. The decline in A3 usage has been brought on by the improvement in Microsoft Word and Excel skills and greater use of printing features which fit the document to the A4 page.

One of the other key areas is the amount of A3 copying. Our analysis of client copier volumes revealed that A3 copying was twice as much as A3 printing. Some of this will have been genuine requirements, but a lot is also due to the automatic sensors in digital copiers which select a larger paper size for any document that is even slightly beyond the A4 standard size.

“As people move more to scanning and printing original documents, which can be scaled to fit the paper size available, the requirement for A3 output has declined.”

Furthermore, the A3 myth has been perpetuated by several of the copier manufacturers. Originally, devices were either A4 or A3, with A3 capable devices sold as ‘nice to have’ and at a premium. Then to promote a competitive advantage some copier companies started offering A3 as ‘standard’ and soon all copiers over 35ppm became A3 capable. While the A3 page volumes, particularly copying, seemed important this sales line was very successful.

Yet the decline of A3 volumes has gone unnoticed and many of the copier vendors still maintain that A3 is necessary for any copier/MFD over 35 pages per minute.

User perceptions are starting to change though. Recent user interviews by NewField IT discovered that when asked what additional output options users most needed, stapling and duplex printing was much higher than A3 output. Figure 2 overleaf is a summary of Web Interviews conducted by NewField IT on over 1,000 office based staff in the last year.

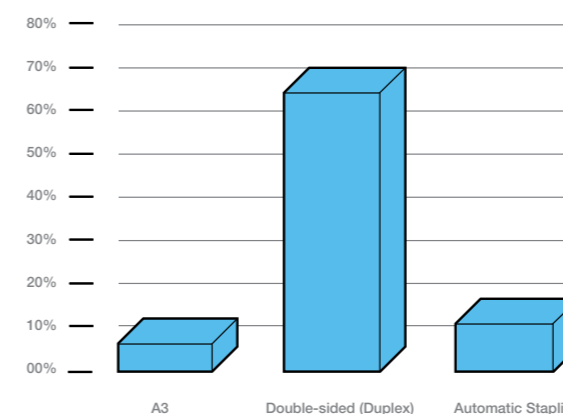


Figure 2: What additional feature would you most like added to your printer?

The reason that staff want other features than A3 is that printers are increasingly shared, more so in larger companies where offices are open plan. Once six or seven people start sharing a single device for all their output the issue becomes job separation and paper capacity rather than paper size. A printer with a stack of abandoned or part collected documents is a familiar sight in many offices and has a bigger effect on user satisfaction than access to A3 output.

The Cost of Perception

Listening to a copier/MFD hardware sales pitch, there is no extra cost to the user for an A3 capable device, so why not have the facility, even if use is occasional? The sales pitch continues that the only difference is that every A3 page is twice the cost of an A4 one, justified on the basis of the page being twice the size. In fact many of the copier vendors look derisively at those hardware manufacturers who don't offer A3 as ‘standard’. The truth is that the cost of A4 based devices have come down significantly and that there is now as a high a premium for A3 capability as there ever was.

“Comparing the cost of an A4 mono printer against an A3 equivalent reveals a 105% premium for an A3 device. For colour printers the premium is higher at 190% – a worrying difference given the rise of colour in the office.”

For copiers/MFDs the premium is harder to accurately measure because the A4 range over a certain size of device is very limited, but our analysis shows the premium to be between 100% to 220% depending on the manufacturer.

Using the average costs and NewField IT's database of A3 capable devices against actual A3 output, the cost of the A3 myth can be revealed. For mono printing, the cost to the average organisation (1,700 staff) surveyed by NewField IT is £26,125 in capital purchase costs. For copiers and MFDs the additional cost is £33,100. Add in colour devices, and this size of organisation is spending more than £70,000 in providing a capability that is hardly used.

There are other costs around purchasing A3 capability other than just the hardware premium. The footprint of a mono A3 capable device is much larger than that of an A4 device; 70% larger by volume on average. For those companies tight for office space this is no minor irritation. Then there are maintenance costs. Printers are usually supported on a component basis (unlike copiers/MFDs which have an all inclusive maintenance charge per page) and the cost of a maintenance kit for an A3 device is 26% higher than that of an A4 one. Finally, an A3 capable device consumes more power as the fuser unit is 41% larger and whether an A4 page is being printed or an A3 one, the whole unit is heated up. All in all the decision on whether to purchase an A3 capable device should not be taken lightly – a courier company would not equip itself with lorries if all they required was a van! So when the capital outlay is equally significant, why treat office output devices any differently?

