

Introduction

Although a mature technology, fax communication remains heavily used in the enterprise. The reasons for this continued use vary. For example, unlike email, signed faxed documents comprise legal, binding contacts. Also, salespeople regularly encounter prospects who feel more comfortable communicating by fax than email.

Technology, too, has made it easier than ever to send and receive faxes. Indeed, businesses today can choose from four fax communication methods:

- » **Fax Machines:** Traditional standalone machines as well as multifunction copiers/scanners with fax capabilities.
- » **Fax-to-Email Services:** Online services that enable users to send and receive faxes via email.
- » **Desktop Fax Software:** Standalone PC software that facilitates desktop faxing via a dedicated phone line.
- » **Network Fax Server Software:** Server-based software that provides desktop faxing capabilities to everyone on a corporate network using one or more shared phone lines.

Each method has its advantages and disadvantages, but which fax solution works best for enterprises with five or more employees who use networked PCs? In this report, we'll attempt to answer this question by evaluating each of the above fax solutions vis-a-vis five critical factors:

- » Ease of Setup
- » Receiving Faxes
- » Sending Faxes
- » Security
- » Cost

For each factor, we'll rate each fax solution using the following point system:

- » 0 Points = Poor
- » 1 Point = Average
- » 2 Points = Excellent

At the end of the report, we'll add up the points. The fax solution with the most points wins as the best choice for enterprises with five or more employees.

Ease of Setup

Fax Machines:

- 1 Out-of-the-box, fax machines offer true “plug and play”: simply run phone cable between the wall jack and the fax machine. However, fax machines require a physical location near a wall jack, plus each machine needs its own phone line.

Fax-to-Email Services:

- 1 You can centrally configure fax-to-email services for receiving faxes, but you must set up the sending software locally on each PC (sneaker net). Fax-to-email services don’t require any phone lines, but by the same token, they won’t work with your existing fax numbers. You may even end up having to use a different area code.

Desktop Fax Software:

- 0 Desktop fax software provides no centralized installation or administration (sneaker net). Furthermore, if you equip everyone in your company, each PC will need its own dedicated modem and phone line.

Network Fax Server Software:

- 1 With network fax server software, you install the primary software on your server, and the client software centrally from the server to each networked PC (no sneaker net). The server is the only computer that needs a modem and phone line—it handles all the incoming and outgoing faxes.

Receiving Faxes

Fax Machines:

- 1 Although fax machines make receiving faxes seem relatively easy, ensuring you receive and can read the faxed document takes some initiative. Paper, toner, and other consumables require monitoring (they always seem to run dry mid-transmission). If the machine jams, you have to call the sender to have the fax resent. Compounding these problems, you end up with paper in a digital age. If you want to store a fax on your computer, you’ll have to scan it, further degrading its quality.

Fax-to-Email Services:

- 2 With fax-to-email services, you receive faxes as an email attachment in whichever email program you use (Outlook, GroupWise, etc.). Faxes typically arrive in PDF or TIFF format, which makes them easy to store and share.

Desktop Fax Software:

- 0 Desktop fax software enables you to receive faxes in PDF format, but not via your email program. Instead, you retrieve faxes from the client software. Furthermore, your computer and modem must remain on all the time. If your PC crashes or you shut it down, you won't receive any faxes.

Network Fax Server Software:

- 2 All network fax servers ship with proprietary clients, but some of them integrate with Exchange and other mail servers. Thus, you can have faxes delivered via email in PDF format. Because the network fax server resides on site, you can centrally track, manage, and store all faxes received.

Sending Faxes

Fax Machines:

- 0 Notwithstanding the threat of paper jams, sending a fax from a fax machine seems relatively straightforward. However, you have to get up from your desk and walk over to the fax machine. Worse, because most documents now reside on computers, often as not you'll need to print what you want to fax. This time-consuming process just begs for bypassing the middleman (i.e., paper).

Fax-to-Email Services:

- 1 Fax-to-email services enable you to send faxes using proprietary client software. Because these companies lavish most of their resources on their data centers, their software typically lacks advanced features. However, some of these services enable you to send faxes via email without using any special software (you attach the fax to the email message). This method also has a downside—support for a limited number of file types.

Desktop Fax Software:

- 1 These programs reduce keystrokes and mouse clicks thanks to advanced features such as one click faxing from Microsoft Office. However, as with all proprietary software, you must factor in training for your users. Typically, these programs don't facilitate faxing via email.

Network Fax Server Software:

- 2 Network fax server software comes bundled with full-featured client programs for desktop faxing. Thus, they suffer from the same problems noted above. But some network fax servers enable you to fax from within your email program with one

distinct advantage over the fax-to-email services that offer this feature—no restriction on file types. Instead, the network fax server can convert the attached documents to fax format prior to distribution.

Security

Fax Machines:

- 1** Fax machines use a secure line, but faxes then sit on the recipient's machine for anyone to read (until picked up).

Fax-to-Email Services:

- 1** Fax-to-email services offer no security unless you opt to send and receive faxes using a secure password-protected Web site—eliminating the convenience of using your email program.

Desktop Fax Software:

- 1** Desktop fax software provides for security when sending and receiving faxes. However, as noted above, each PC must remain in operation connected to a phone line 24/7 for the receipt of faxes—an important consideration since many business people use laptops that they take home or on trips.

Network Fax Server Software:

- 2** Network fax servers securely route faxes even if you use your email program to send and receive them. The email and its attached fax travel over your secure corporate network to and from the fax server. Also, unlike desktop fax software, only the network fax server requires a constant connection to a phone line, not every PC.

Cost

Fax Machines:

- 0** Although fax machines have fallen in price, companies find it cost prohibitive to purchase a machine for each employee. Hidden costs include additional phone lines, toner/paper supplies, and equipment maintenance.

Fax-to-Email Services:

- 1** These services involve an ongoing monthly fee (per person or site-wide). Although the lack of up-front costs is attractive, these services can end up costing more in the long run.

Desktop Fax Software:

- 0** These programs are too costly for organizations with five or more employees because each employee requires a software license and a phone line.

Network Fax Server Software:

- 2** For companies with five or more networked PC users, network fax server software is the most cost-effective solution. It requires one software license and often just one phone line—even in offices with heavy fax usage.

Conclusion: Network Fax Server Software Wins

The accompanying chart tallies the points for each of the above factors. On the whole, network fax server software comes out on top with a total of 9 out of 10 points. While not perfect, it's the perfect choice for enterprises with five or more networked PC users because it matches second place finisher fax-to-email services regarding ease of setup and receiving faxes while providing superior security and sending functionality at a lower overall cost.

If you follow the advice of this report and use a network fax server, you'll have another decision to make—which network fax server? Fortunately, most provide free trials. In addition to comparing the costs and features, compare the ease of setup and maintenance, support package, and compatibility with existing systems, especially email.

Add it Up: Best Fax Solution for Enterprises with Five or More Employees				
	Fax Machines	Fax-to-Email Services	Desktop Fax Software	Fax Server Software
Ease of Setup	1	1	0	1
Receiving Faxes	1	2	0	2
Sending Faxes	0	1	1	2
Security	1	1	1	2
Cost	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	3	6	2	9

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