BUSINESS & CAREERS

Scoping the scene for the right scanner

HI-TECH

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David Feld gladly (almost gleefully) avoids paper. He bluntly states he's never owned a fax machine — doesn't even use the one that came with his Xerox Work-Centre multifunction printer. And, his clients communicate with him mainly via e-mail. "They even use their phones to take pictures of documents and send them to us," the Toronto-based real estate attorney says.

And there's the crux: Not all clients will simply go paperless at their lawyer's behest.

The amount of paper that lawyers handle has many of them looking for ways to reduce this intrinsic burden. Keeping documents in electronic form may be the best way, but when paper can't be avoided, document scanners enable conversion of their contents to computer files.

So, how do you pick the right scanner for your office? You could ask other lawyers who run firms similar to yours (in terms of practice area, workload, staff and other criteria) for advice. If they don't rely on scanners, here are some other questions to consider.

Is the scanner easy to use?

Ease of use is vital in scanner selection but maddeningly difficult to ascertain until you actually use the machine. However it can't be overlooked.

"People in law offices are busy. They don't want to have to learn how to use equipment," says Steve Oblin, senior marketing manager of Fujitsu Canada Inc.'s Imaging Group.

Fortunately, scanners have come a long way in recent years and now automatically handle tasks that people used to have to fumble through, for example: scanning both sides of a double-sided document; setting the resolution, size of original and colour depth; cropping scans to the size of the originals, even when different-sized originals are part of one print job.

"The scanner can do the thinking for you," Oblin says.

How much, and how fast?

Robert Marshall, account manager for Canon Canada's Imaging Systems Group, suggests a high-speed production scanner if your office will be handling 10,000 or more documents a day. "For lower-volume offices, smaller workgroup scanners could be used on individuals' desks."

Oblin warns that people who push a scanner beyond its duty cycle (measured in pages per day) may need to spend more on maintenance. That's why he suggests buyers consider scanners that meet projected needs a year or two from now, both in terms of duty cycle and speed (measured in pages per minute).

Who does the scanning?

Make the scanner convenient for people who use it the most. Ensure you can place it where frequent users can easily access it. If the scanner will be used by many people, consider a network-ready unit (often embedded in a multifunction printer) instead of one that connects to an individual computer.

If you frequently need to scan while away from the office, Marshall recommends a portable USB-powered scanner.

As well, ensure that the scanner is compatible with the operating systems (Windows, Mac or both) of all computers that might access it.

Is the scanner noisy?

"Sound level is one of the most overlooked specs on a scanner," Oblin says, adding that noisy machines disrupt office environments. "Unfortunately, it isn't

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something you can easily convey on a spec sheet or a website.

"Sound is also about pitch," he continues. "Different sounds resonate differently with different people. It's the nail-on-the-chalkboard scenario."

Can it be customized?

Scanners ship with preset functions, but users such as Feld get their machines integrated into their firms' workflow.

"When staff has to scan cheques, they just pop the cheques down on the glass and hit 'Bank' [on the scanner's touch screen]," Feld says. "The scan is done in colour and goes to that person's folder," ready for that person to work with.

Does it create "searchable" documents?

Modern computers let their owners search their contents in much the same way Google lets them search the web. To make full use of this ability, the search feature must be able to read not just a document's title but its contents as well.

Creating searchable documents usually means creating PDFs, so look for scanners that ship with a licence for Adobe Acrobat software or otherwise mentions the ability to scan to PDF using optical character recognition (OCR).

Feld scans all his documents to searchable PDFs, even though the operation takes longer and the resulting files are bigger. "The few seconds extra I wait for a large document to be OCR'd is well worth the hours of time that I'll spend looking for a document six months or a year down the road."

Can it shake hands?

Want to send documents directly from a scanner to, say, a document management system? You'll have to bone up on some tech jargon: TWAIN is an industry-sponsored software protocol that regulates communication between applications and imaging devices; similarly, ISIS stands for image and scanner interface specifications. Look for TWAIN or ISIS drivers that enable such links between scanner and document management — and verify that your system can handle the hook-up.

Can it talk other software?

Simple scanners, such as Fujitsu's ScanSnap line, don't ship with TWAIN or ISIS compliance. (Fujitsu provided me with a ScanSnap S1100 for this article.)

However, third-party developers create tools that enable ScanSnaps to scan to e-mail, Word, Excel, Google Docs, SalesForce and other destinations.

These and other "scan-to" options shipped with the S1100 and appear at the completion of a scan, but third parties, such as Time Matters and Worldox offer their own "scan-to" options via a website (scansnapcommunity.com/marketplace) similar in function to a smart phone app stores. The result: buyers can extend the functionality of their scanners without buying new ones. ∎
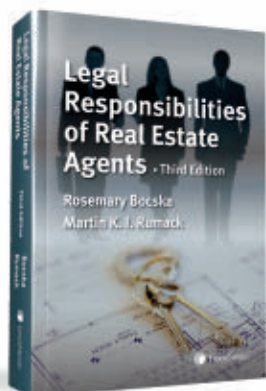
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Research salary, but don't be first to broach subject

position prior to the interview. It is important to have this information ready should salary be requested or negotiations broached during the interview.

The interviewee should refrain from being the first to address this topic as protocol dictates the employer or interviewer initiate this discussion. Nonetheless, to determine a benchmark for salary, it is best to research position titles using a number of sources. The governing legal bodies are a good resource for salary statistics.

In addition, free salary guides for the legal industry can be found on the Robert Half website (www.rhi.com/SalaryGuides). Be aware of salary variances based on geography. The salary guides often chart the percentage of variance within the guide itself. These guides have greater accuracy than the salary quotes provided by government websites.

It is fair to ask the interviewer if the open position is a newly created opportunity or has become open due to promotion or otherwise. If you are replacing someone, ask where the person is who used to have that job. If the answer is that they got promoted, that's good news. If the answer is that they moved on to another company, you might want to ask how long the person was in the role.

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If the response is, "We've had a handful of people in this job throughout the past year," this may be a red flag indicating problems within the department.

Keep in mind there are positions out there that can have a high turnover due to the nature of the job so pursue this vein of questioning in a tactful manner. Concerns about the flexibility of work hours can be addressed by stating the hours of operation and then asking if all employees must adhere to those hours.

To gain an insight into employee engagement within the company, ask the interviewer what employees say they enjoy most about working for the company. The interviewer should have a sense of this and be able to convey it in an easy and natural manner.

Once you have received a formal job offer, it is considered acceptable to ask for a copy of the employee handbook. This resource will provide much of the information that will aid job seekers in making their final decision to accept or reject the job offer. ∎

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