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Time to repurpose the office MFP?

On 15 July 2020 Konica Minolta quietly issued a press release announcing a new addition to its Workplace Hub Portfolio, an A3 bizhub i-Series. Nothing special about that, except this bizhub comes fully loaded with a Server! Is this the new reality of printing and IT Services coming together?



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Over the past ten years Printing and IT Services have been moving closer together but it has not been clear which industry will yield to the other to become the dominant “go to” provider of office equipment and services. Konica Minolta’s announcement that it is fusing together an IT Services

package with its popular Bizhub line of A3 MFP’s sets and interesting new precedent. It is certainly a differentiator and arguably the game changer. They are the first to marry to the two diverse industries into one solution. Is this evolution or revolution? Let’s look at the facts.

The bizhub i-Series range of office MFP’s have been available since April 2019. Their arrival brought 10” touchscreens, fast print speeds, large paper trays and advanced document workflows, delivered through a wide range of apps from Konica Minolta’s Marketplace. There was also remote service monitoring and, system back-up supported by industry leading security systems and virus protection.

Beyond the features, the i-Series also claimed an EPEAT Gold rating and compliance with Blue Angel standards. Redesigned fuser units were added to keep energy consumption low and, much work was evident to keep noise levels down. Seven models were introduced on day one to ensure they had an offering for most business situations.

What was not said was that this was a platform which, like many competitive MFP’s, was designed to integrate into the document workflow of small and medium sized businesses. Consequently, that meant a lot of configuration work for over-stretched IT managers and service providers to ensure that the full functionality of the MFP was achieved. →

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July 2019 saw the introduction of Konica Minolta's Workplace Hub. A suite of IT solutions also targeted at SMEs and delivered by their channel Partners. These partners came with a print background but were retrained to provide IT Services. This meant that with the full support and leverage of the Konica Minolta brand, they could now offer their clients IT service, sales, installation and consultancy. They could not provide the Business Process Optimisations (BPO) and managed services such as Virtual Private Networks (VPN's) and the security support their clients needed.

12 months on, enter the Workplace Hub Pro. What looks like, and is, a bizhub i-Series MFP (see figure 1) but, where the lower paper drawer is now home to an HPE Gen 10 Server.

This additional capability means print and document management, cloud backup, remote VPN connection and Wi-Fi management all in one place and supported by one provider. All these IT features are in addition to the standard office printing functionality of printing, copying, faxing and scanning.

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HP under their JetAdvantage Solutions portfolio can provide a wide range of solutions from third party vendors. Whether managing a private cloud,

developing workflows, controlling mobile or remote access, or maintaining security, HP has access to a solution.

Similarly, Ricoh offer a range of workplace solutions from implementing Office 365, providing data analytics for printing insights, through to collaboration for global IT infrastructure development. Managed services are a key part of Ricoh's Business Services portfolio but, they are targeted at larger enterprises needing an internationally linked, support provider with the scale and reach of Ricoh.

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Xerox has been supporting Enterprise infrastructures within healthcare, education, and government for many years. They bring content management tools, business process workflow automation support, collaboration, translation, and file sharing management tools for team working. But again, the target is Enterprise level and no sign of a merge of print and IT hardware.

Lexmark is an interesting OEM with a product range that spans all sizes of business and a focus on paper intensive industries such as banking, insurance, manufacturing,

and retail. They have a history of integrating and providing supportive IT services to their clients, especially those with SAP ecosystems where paper output is needed. Lexmark, like its competitors offer the full suite of IT service support from security to fleet management. And it is a similar story at Kyocera, Oki and Sharp, each with varying levels of IT support and services available.

So, for the larger business and enterprise, the choices are many. All the brands can provide an MFP, as fast as you like, with a familiar personalized, interface on which you can load apps and control as much or as little of your print output as you want, streamlining your business processes if you choose to do so. And you can do all that with the help and support of the brand of your choice or, their dealer or partner, if you prefer.

It is a very different proposition for the micro, small and even some medium sized businesses. Their server and IT systems usually remain separate and distinct. Print being regarded as an afterthought pain point. Some will argue that is an advantage; printers, copiers and MFP's should be an end point on the network, not an integral and integrated hub.

That still leaves the issue of telephony, maybe now using VoIP or Wi-Fi, and video conferencing, sitting outside of the scope of print management. They may be resident in the cloud or in-house on a server. Then there

is the problem of how to provide secure wi-fi through the office.

Konica Minolta spotted these problems as many of its customers fall into this small and medium size category. This where the MFP with a server onboard offers a solution. Let's look again at the Workplace Hub Pro. Remember the bottom drawer of many MFP's, the one that is supposed to hold 1,000+ sheets of A4 paper or A3 media that was specified on the purchase order but the need just never materialized? That is where Konica Minolta have neatly installed an HPE ProLiant Gen10 Server. →

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Consider the possibility of an MFP equipped with Azure Active Directory to control access to the company's IT infrastructure (not just the printer access) for all users. And it has high speed, wide bandwidth access to the internet and consequently, the cloud. Collaboration is also available through Konica Minolta's Workplace Go which leverages both Office 365, Microsoft Teams and for larger organizations SharePoint, Delve, Power BI and multiple other tools, all centered at the Workplace Hub Pro.

Its Admin Dashboard offers asset, user, and application management from one interface. It is also a Wi-Fi hub with management tools to configure and manage both private and public networks using Sophos access points which can include protection through the firewall.

Now, it is easy to generalise about servers and, like PC's and laptops there are numerous combinations and choices. Form factor is the first question. You can be forgiven for the image of rows of cabinets with racks and multiple server bays connected by miles of cables. If you are an enterprise with a large web presence, then the image is probably correct.

But what about the micro business or SME who needs help with the pain of surviving the current pandemic. Especially as staff may not be able to return to the office, for at least some of the time. A tower

server is simple, efficient and value for money. They can be cheap too, starting at less than €500 (\$585).

The Konica Minolta solution is to "bundle" the server in with the MFP although this description over-simplifies the proposition. They will carefully align both the MFP and the Server specifications, and their support levels to match your precise requirements, making this almost a customised solution.

You could argue that there is a risk in combining a Server and an MFP in one box. What if one breaks down, is the other affected? No, they remain independent devices, even down to the power cords and they are packaged into a one square meter footprint.

With office printing hit hard by the pandemic and MFP's transforming into servers, there are even more difficult questions to consider. Could we be at the end of the road for printing requiring its own server support to manage queues, as well? Google were here first, some ten years ago, when they beta tested a cloud print service but, that will end as 2020 becomes 2021. Now, enter Microsoft with their Cloud Print Platform solution.

Just a few months ago, Microsoft announced it is moving Windows Print Server functionality to the Microsoft 365 Cloud and specifically onto Azure, its open source, flexible cloud platform which allows users to build, deploy and manage applications across the Microsoft worldwide network. Interestingly, Azure does have competitors

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Payment is also packaged into a combined fee which includes your print contract, click charges, the suite of IT services and support included. A compelling package and one that will be hard for any competitor or aftermarket supplier to break.

such as Google, Amazon and VMware but, it is quickly becoming the standard for a wide range of industries which require proprietary solutions such as Healthcare, Financial Services, Government, Retail and Manufacturing. →

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Currently known as Universal Print it is initially targeted at educational users, the benefits are compelling. Organisations will no longer need an on-site print servers with their costly overheads or, to install printer drivers on devices across the enterprise. In addition, by leveraging Azure Active Directory, additional security for printer access and location-based printer discovery and administrator controls are available. Plus, there is the convenience of printing anywhere for mobile workers.

The major OEMs seem to be advocates of the Microsoft initiative. Canon Inc. have already said that they are committed to a partnership with Microsoft for their imageRUNNER Advance products. Similarly, HP have announced participation in the initial roll-out along with Konica Minolta, Lexmark and Brother.

Software companies who have already been offering cloud print solutions are recognising the benefits of this Microsoft initiative and, are supporting the integration. These include Ysoft, Omnibridge and SafeQ, Pharos, Ringdale, Papercut, Kofax and Uniflow Online.

For the channel and its distributors and dealers, installations will get easier as Microsoft Universal Print rolls out to other industries and, the major cloud-based software integrators roll out solutions. With a greater flow of information and even better print management and security,

the challenges raised by the Corona virus pandemic, especially those of “working from home” may be a little easier to manage once Universal Print is fully deployed.

So, where does that leave the Workplace Hub Pro and the printer/server concept? In a strong position as there remain many industries and markets where the law does not permit storage in the Cloud on servers in other countries. Also, local edge-type servers are often the only viable solution for small businesses to achieve compliance. They also provide for an efficient working environment with reduced latency (the time from click to screen response) for its users. A key issue as small businesses pivot to a work from home business model.

This is the new conversation which Konica Minolta are training their partners to hold with small businesses. Although the discussion may be triggered by renewing and extending the managed print services contract, it is also now different. It starts with the return to work and the new normal, quickly moves into work from home, security, then into IT requirements, finishing with new business processes, document workflows and ending with how much printing is being cut. All these new services partners will need to offer if they are to move forward from yesterday’s A3 MFP upgrade world.

For small businesses, the business owner may be the contact point. IT support may have

been sourced from a variety of local providers with varying skill sets and solutions. Bringing print and IT requirements together at a device level with an integrated support package and upgrade paths is a compelling proposition. It is also an easier sell to the client as the solution is managed through one point of contact and one contract. Although Konica Minolta’s Kai Ohnesorge, their Senior Portfolio Development Manager, explained that it will be a collaborative approach with HPE for break/fix issues with the Workplace Hub Pro.

For the aftermarket, the risks are clear. It is becoming harder to break into MPS contracts with a third-party supplies proposition, no matter how compelling the price. Although the industry can expect hardware to remain in the market longer, the link between print and IT services in the office has been strengthened by the pandemic and that further complicates the sale. Konica Minolta clearly have hit on an emerging niche and the Workplace Hub is an important milestone product.

This means the aftermarket reuse conversation needs to be held now, ready for when the MPS contract ends. A closer relationship with IT service providers, is going to be essential in the future, finding partners who are open to offering environmentally beneficial solutions and IT competence has just become an urgent must have. ■



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