

Saying Goodbye to the Fax Machine

Few things in this world change faster than technology — and, when technology changes, it affects how we run our businesses, how we communicate, and, often, our business profitability. Fax machines are one of the technologies that changed business.

Remembering the first days of the fax machine is like walking down memory lane for some and a history lesson for others.

As Wikipedia relates, it was back in 1964 when "the Xerox Corporation introduced (and patented) what many consider to be the first commercialized version of the modern fax machine . . . By the late 1970s companies around the world entered the fax market." For the first time, the average business had the ability to send and receive documents in virtually real time.

Fast forward to 2013 where Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is everything. First envisioned in the 1970s, today it's virtually impossible to place a voice call in which some portion of the call does not pass over a VoIP connection.

Unfortunately, having an increasing percentage of the world's telecom circuits use VoIP is a problem for the fax machine. That's because the fax was built to operate most efficiently over a voice-grade analog circuit. VoIP is optimized for voice transmission; it uses compression techniques that maximize bandwidth. Compression is no problem for voice, but it destroys analog modem signals that fax machines were built to use.

Despite efforts to create standards that make fax reliable over VoIP, the performance of fax will continue to decline as VoIP usage becomes more and more common.

In spite of the ease of email and other real-time communication methods, however, many businesses still rely on fax machines. Here are just a few of the reasons:

- Many companies, such as auto dealerships, require signed contracts and information to be exchanged by fax.
- Financial institutions and financial service providers prefer the greater security of sending private financial data by fax.
- Faxes are often preferred by companies marketing to small businesses, oil field operators, and small manufacturing, shipping and other industries in which the targeted recipient is not at a computer all day.

As voice communication technology continues to be less and less supportive of the technology needed by fax machines, your business will want to consider these alternatives (if you haven't already):

Turn electronic documents into PDFs and send them via email.

Many documents going to vendors, customers or employees can easily be sent via email. The standard practice is to convert your document to a .pdf (Portable Document Format) format and attach it to your email. This is necessary because PDF documents cannot be edited or changed by the recipient. Microsoft® Word® 2010 or later has the PDF format on its "Save as" list. If you are not using Microsoft, there are many simple and inexpensive programs designed to convert text documents to the PDF format.

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Turn printed documents into electronic ones with a scanner.

Most offices have a scanner today. Many photocopiers or office printers include a scanning function. In addition, there are any number of options for purchasing inexpensive standalone scanning machines. Turning paper documents into electronic ones helps reduce paper, reduce storage needs and support efficient electronic record keeping. Scanning is usually quick and convenient, allowing documents to be exchanged easily via email.

Save money by sending and receiving faxes using an IP fax service.

For a relatively low cost, independent service providers can give your business a fax number, receive incoming faxes for you, then instantly forward them to one or more employee inboxes. The service can also be used to send faxes that travel over legacy analog lines so they can still be received on actual fax machines. These services save you money as they eliminate the need for a second phone line to handle a fax machine.

Continue to send and receive faxes over your VoIP lines.

If your business markets to or communicates with people at companies who can be reached more easily via a fax machine than a computer, or you send and receive sensitive financial information, you can still send and receive faxes with a fax server. "A fax server," as described on Wikipedia, "is equipped with one or more fax-capable modems (or dedicated fax boards) attached to telephone lines or, more recently, software modem emulators that use T.38 ("Fax over IP") technology to transmit the signal over an IP network. Received faxes are routed automatically to the recipient's inbox to be printed or filed electronically. Sent faxes can be received on a traditional fax machine. need for a dedicated fax server altogether.

Many of today's newer VoIP telephone systems include fax server functionality thereby eliminating the need for a dedicated fax server altogether.

Continuing to handle business communications in the face of changing technologies can require operational changes. Fortunately, handling fax communications in the world of VoIP is an easy adjustment for most businesses.



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