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I bought my first HP LaserJet printer in 1992. It was one of the best printers ever made — the venerable Model 4, churning out a whopping eight pages per minute at the incredible resolution of 600 dots per inch (dpi). It cost an arm and a leg — just under \$1,400 after every discount I could beg or wheedle. I retired it a while ago, but it still does service today in the church to which I donated it, churning out bulletins and correspondence with ease.

In the three years since I retired my LJ4, I've searched in vain for a replacement. With literally hundreds of models from which to choose today, you might think the choice is easy. It is not, for the following three reasons:

- **There are too many choices**

Whether it is an inkjet printer, a laser printer or a color laser printer, just about every consumer electronics company from HP to Hyundai has jumped into the printer market. Each uses a proprietary design for replacement ink or toner cartridges, each works differently in terms of speed and resolution, and there is no easy way to make a head-to-head comparison.

- **There's little delineation between personal and business**

**use.** It would be lovely to return to the old days, when “business” printers were designed for high-volume output and carried a price tag to match. Today, it is nearly impossible to find a printer optimized for business use — they are filled with such features as photo printing that may or may not have relevance to the office environment. One model I saw even has a built-in MP3 player so you can listen to music while printing.

- **They don't cost enough.** This isn't just

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currently priced higher per milliliter than the world's most expensive, gasoline and most luxury fragrances.

When it comes to shopping for printers, accountants and their clients are seriously handicapped and misled at the point of sale by the lack of information about printing costs. They pay for cartridges without knowing how much ink is in them or how many pages one will print. They are forced to shop blindly due to a lack of standardized printer ink unit pricing (such as cents-per-page printed). It is not enough to look at the prices of printer cartridges either, since the lowest priced cartridges often have the highest cost-of-ink per page.

### **Five Tips for Simplifying the Process**

So what's a reasonable office manager to do? There are few hard and fast rules, but the following five steps may help in the process, particularly for accounting firms looking to update their hardware at the end of tax season:

Don't fall for the "all-in-one" solutions. The combination printer/fax/copier/scanner machines may seem attractive, but they may also carry a penalty in the cost of their ink cartridges. A better idea is to fax directly from your computer desktop, invest in a good office scanner (scanners are automatically copiers, too) and buy the printer that will best do the job.

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**Assess the need for color.** For most tax and accounting professionals, only the final, finished client copy or document to be filed needs color, and, for the limited number, a color laser jet may be the best investment. Prices are falling, and, while the toner cartridges are pricey, they are still light years away from the cost of replacing color inkjet cartridges.

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**Check for printer drivers.** As hard as it may be to believe, printer manufacturers crank out these machines with almost callous disregard to whether or not they will actually work with current or past operating systems. Go to the manufacturer's website and check to make sure before you buy.

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**Do research online.** It is not hard to find information about printers, especially if they are having massive problems. I use Amazon.com's reader feedback or I Google "[name and model of printer] problems."

If (and until) printer manufacturers begin giving consumers real information about real costs, the problems with buying a new printer will remain. And they apply just as well to home use and home offices as they do the work office.

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