

## Printers that take the load

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Printing out from a PC has certainly got a lot easier. My first printer was a slow, noisy dot-matrix device that consumed quantities of perforated paper, jammed all the time, and needed a thick data cable to connect directly to my Apple IIe. It also turned out to be incompatible with my first portable.

Sharing a printer between two or more PCs was tricky until makers of printer and PCs standardised on USB technology to connect their devices. Then sharing a printer was just a matter of installing the printer driver software on each PC, and swapping the printer USB cable between PCs as required.

The next advance was to share access to one printer between several PCs on a network. There are two main ways to do this. The first involves connecting the printer directly to one PC and using the operating system settings to share it with others on the network. The second is to connect the printer to the network, either directly using a standard Ethernet cable if the printer has a built-in network card, or via a print server box.

The latest development has been for most of the leading printer makers, including Hewlett-Packard, Canon, Brother and Lexmark, to build WiFi wireless networking capabilities into some of their printers including all-in-one inkjet machines that combine printer, scanner, copier and sometimes fax capabilities in one desktop machine. In theory at least, that means you can set up your wireless all-in-one printer, hook it up to your wireless network automatically and print from any PC connected via a wired or wireless connection to the same network.

I have been testing wireless all-in-ones on their networking promise, and on performance more generally. Two I have looked at in particular are the Lexmark X7675 and the HP Photosmart C6380, both suitable for home or small office use. Also, Canon has just announced a new wireless all-in-one, the Canon Pixma MX980, which looks impressive on paper. It supports both Ethernet and WiFi networking, and its description suggests it is particularly worth considering if you are a digital photo enthusiast.

Lexmark, the US printer maker, pioneered WiFi networking in printers and the Lexmark X7675 Professional, which costs around \$199 (£150 in the UK), packs plenty of features. These include text and photo printing, fax and scanning capabilities together with Ethernet and WiFi networking, which all together make it suitable for both home and small office use.

Setting up the X7675 is simple and involves step-by-step onscreen instructions and installing a black and a colour ink cartridge.

The X7675 comes with a full set of software for Windows-based PCs and Macs. It can also be used for PCs running Linux, but with the sacrifice of network fax capabilities. Connecting the machine to my home WiFi network following the onscreen instructions took less than 10 minutes and was problem free.

One of the X7675 features I like best is an indicator on the front showing the status of your WiFi connection - green for "connected", yellow for "on but not connected", and red for "off". Once on green, users can print, fax, scan and copy from a PC over the network or directly. The X7675 can also scan files to a PDF, send the scanned copy as an e-mail message, or save it to a USB flash memory stick and print directly from a PictBridge-enabled camera.

Overall, the machine produces good quality text and photo prints. The automatic two-sided printing and the comprehensive software suite that includes an optical character recognition package are big pluses. My only quibble is that it is slower than some all-in-ones.

HP's Photosmart C6380 is also aimed mainly at home and small office users. It lacks fax capabilities or an automatic document feeder but makes up for this by delivering high-quality photo prints, thanks in part to its specialised printhead and five separate ink cartridges.

At around \$180 (£147 in the UK) it is slightly cheaper than the Lexmark machine and includes USB, wired and wireless connectivity options. Setting up is easy - HP supplies an admirably short step-by-step guide, an automated installation routine and a full set of drivers and software for Windows-based PCs and Macs.

I tested the printer with both an Ethernet cable connection and using its built-in 802.11b/g WiFi and was impressed with how easy it was to hook up the machine to either a fixed Ethernet or wireless network, and by the reliability of the WiFi connection.

The C6380 produces reasonable quality text at a good speed. Where it shines is in photo output. Like some other "photo-centric" printers, it has two printer trays - a 125-sheet standard tray and a small separate tray for 5x7in photo paper.

Both the Lexmark and the HP machines function well as wireless network printers but, given the choice, a cable connection is almost always more reliable. Wireless printers come into their own when it is difficult to run cables or for more casual printing.

In terms of basic office functions, the Lexmark offers more features including networked fax options, but if you plan on printing a lot of digital photos, the HP machine could be a better bet.

#### **The pros and cons: all-in-one is not for all**

**Q. What are the good and bad points of 'all-in-one' printers?** All-in-one or multifunction printers combine the features of an inkjet printer, scanner, copier and (often) fax machine in a single, convenient unit. The downside is that they may not perform as well as the best-in-class device in each category. What is more, if one part breaks, the whole machine may become worthless. **Q. What are the main connection options I should look for?** The most common way to connect a printer to a PC is via a USB cable, so make sure the device has a USB connector (and cable). If you have a home network and want to share your all-in-one with other networked PCs, look for a standard Ethernet port or WiFi networking option.

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