A Tale of Two Printers
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November 2017 issue, Drive Light
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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .
It was time to buy a new printer.

It seems that all the traditional computer input/output devices are falling out of favor. The rise in popularity of the tablet computer and now especially the smartphone have played a major part in this. The previously iconic combination of desktop computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse and printer has not been the norm in the personal computer / tech world for some time. The laptop or notebook PC, which generally eliminates the need for a separate display, keyboard and mouse, has been outselling the desktop for quite many years already. Now the ultra-portable smartphones and tablets, with their integrated touch-screen displays, have surely put monitor, keyboard and external pointing device sales in a steep decline.

Printer sales are also declining. I'm like most people in wanting to cut back on the amount of paper in my life, both to reduce clutter and help the environment. I'd much prefer a paperless life, where my bills and financial statements come as downloaded pdfs, rather than hard copies in the mail, and my file cabinet of personal and financial data is a USB external hard drive. Smartphones are helping in this trend. More and more, tickets, coupons and other identifying documents are being accepted when displayed on a smartphone or tablet screen, instead of having to present a physical piece of paper (barcodes have also helped make this happen).

While my goal is to eliminate my home file cabinets by scanning my existing paper documents and insisting on electronic documents in the future, there are still times when I do need to print. Some of the continued interest in computer printing is probably generational. I still own printers; my adult children do not. Just as most millennials have "cut the cord" in their switch from cable TV (or televisions in general) to streaming content from the Internet, they have also abandoned the personal printer. My son and daughter, both in their late 20's, each still own a laptop in addition to their smartphones, but have no interest in having a printer. They have no need to print photos, preferring to post them online or display them on their phones. The few hard copies they need to make can be printed at work, or at the copy center at Staples or Office Depot (or at Dad's house).

I started my work life in the early 1980's, so I've witnessed the evolution of the personal computer and the personal printer. I've owned dot-matrix and daisy-wheel impact printers, as well as ink jet and laser printers. When my children

were young, they had their own individual printers and desktop computers for school work, resulting in four printers in the house. Every computer needed its own printer as each stood alone and disconnected in the days before the Internet. Since the development of modern home networking and networked printers, my wife and I have been sharing a single printer for the past eight years.

The HP OfficeJet Pro 8500 all-in-one network printer I bought for my wife in 2009 has always resided in the downstairs bedroom that is her home office. She uses it weekly to print stock lists for her job as a retail seed merchandiser. It is a printer / scanner / fax machine in one unit, with a single-sided scanner feeder in addition to flat-bed scanning capability (it can automatically scan a stack of pages on one side only). It can also automatically print double-sided to save paper. It has a wired Ethernet connection to my home network, so I can print to it from my "office" upstairs. It is not so useful for me to run downstairs to scan, so I have kept my old USB flat-bed scanner in my office.

I still have an old HP Deskjet 5650 printer and an Epson Stylus Photo R340 printer in my office, but I've not used either in over eight years and should probably get rid of them. The Deskjet is old and slow, and I get better quality for the few photos I need printed by going to the photo center in Costco, rather than using the finicky Epson. I also have a Samsung ML-2510 low-cost black laser printer, but I don't use it much. Laser printers use heat to fuse powdered toner to the paper, and this printer seems to generate quite a lot of heat. I can feel an excessive amount of heat coming off the top of the printer when it has been on for just a few minutes, so to reduce energy usage (and fire risk), I only leave it on long enough to print.

One thing I have always wanted in a printer is the ability to print on 11" x 17" paper. I have this capability at my work and find it is really useful when printing CAD drawings and diagrams, as well as large spreadsheets. Another useful feature I've been looking for is the ability to scan double-sided originals automatically (this is a special feature of the scanner's document feeder). Late last year I saw an HP OfficeJet 7740 all-in-one printer advertised with a great price at Fry's; it had both features, so I bought it as a birthday present to myself. I planned to set it up in my office in place of my scanner, so I would have printing and scanning at hand. Unfortunately, my life is often too busy, and so this new printer sat in its box for most of 2017.

Over the years, the HP8500 printer served us well with few issues. Occasionally the print quality would drop, with blank streaks in the printed output. Using its diagnostic software to clean the print heads usually solved the problem, though with time multiple and more frequent cleaning cycles were needed. Finally, this spring, even three head cleaning cycles didn't completely restore good print quality, and the HP diagnostic software reported that new print heads were needed.

With most HP printers I'd owned, the print heads were part of the ink cartridges, so you got fresh heads with each cartridge replacement. With the HP8500, the ink cartridges were just ink reservoirs; the heads were separate replaceable modules. Despite their supposed simplicity, the HP940XL ink cartridges it used still cost around $100 per set (three color cartridges and one black). Even though the two print head modules cost around $80, I was happy enough with the performance we had gotten out of the printer over the eight years we had used it, and so bought a set.

Replacing the heads was easy to do, and at first solved the problem completely. The print quality was once again excellent. A month later, however, the printer abruptly stopped working. It gave an error message that no heads were installed, thus it refused to print at all. I tried removing and reinstalling the heads, with no improvement. Only then did I go online to search on this fault and found many other users with the same problem after replacing heads. The only solution reported by these users was to temporarily reinstall the old print heads until they were recognized, and then swap the new heads back in. Even this was not often a permanent solution; some reported having to perform this swap periodically. Since I'd listened to my wife and thrown the old heads away right after installing the new ones, this solution was not an option. Because a new printer's cost was not much more than another set of heads for this one, it was time to go shopping.

My wife of course needed to print for her work activities the next day, and it was

too late to get her a new printer that evening. Fortunately, I had the new HP7740 printer I had bought for my own use but had not set up yet. The setup for this network printer was far easier than the old HP8500 was eight years ago. Once the new printer was powered and connected with an Ethernet cable to my home network (it could also connect via Wi-Fi), the printer software and drivers could be installed easily from the HP website. The software automatically searched for the printer on my network and configured everything. Creating an HP printer account on their site allows you to obtain an email address for the printer. Any emails sent to that address are printed (up to 10 MB and up to 10 attachments), making it easy to print remotely or from any device that can send emails, including smartphones, tablets and Chromebooks. I installed the software on her computer as well, so we could both use my new printer.

Later that week we went printer shopping for my wife and bought an HP OfficeJet Pro 8715 from Costco. It had all the features of the HP7740 but had only one paper tray for 8.5" x 11" paper. It was just as easy to set up and, as a bonus, it uses the same HP952XL ink cartridges as the 7740. I set it up in place of the broken HP8500 in her office, and she has been happily printing ever since.

Our old HP8500 served us well for many years. These two new printers provide many new capabilities and are easier to set up and use. Hopefully we can look forward to many years of good use out of them as well.

It is a far, far better printing situation than I have ever known.