PCs and Faxes: Making the Connection

By adding a fax board to computers, you reach more people more quickly

Fax machines are “a great convenience,” says a contractor with a smile. “I used to finish reports a day early, so I could run them off in time for Federal Express to pick them up. Now with a fax, I can put off finishing reports until the day they’re due.”

But for the contractor’s staff, fax machines have brought an unwelcome change. “Suppose we’re faxing a 25-page report to three locations,” he explains. “Since it takes 30 to 60 seconds to fax an 8½-by-11 sheet, we could be feeding pages through that machine for more than an hour!”

To make matters worse, everyone must often wait their turn for the fax machine to become free. Because stand-alone units cost between $2,000 and $3,000, the contractor has provided only one machine for the entire office.

Making fax faster

But there’s a new product on the market that may solve such problems: the add-on “fax board.” This piece of equipment gives personal computers the ability to function like a stand-alone fax machine.

First introduced in 1985, the units consist of a single circuit board along with modem and related software. With prices ranging from $400 to $1,500, last year, between 20,000 and 30,000 fix boards were installed in the United States.

Using a fax board, contractors can:

- enter documents on their PCs through their normal word-processing programs.
- fax these electronic files directly to other locations, without having to convert the documents into paper copies first.
- fax documents to multiple locations, listed in the PC’s directory, via a single command.
- receive fax transmissions of electronic documents directly from other locations, rather than having to rekey paper copies.

Though fax boards can function like stand-alone machines, there are differences between the two. Fax boards come with operating software, and therefore need no separate control panel. Since files are electronic and can be run off when needed on the PC’s own printer, fax boards don’t feature the document scanners and printers seen on stand-alones. And because they reside within a PC, fax boards don’t require separate power supplies.

Room for improvement

“The fax board business is about 80 percent software and 20 percent hardware,” explains Jim Stewart, telecommunications product planner for Brother International.

“There are some 30-plus companies that actually have products on the market. Although many are large companies with deep pockets, no one has yet made a substantial impact. There are no clear market leaders.”

Pointing out the sale of fax boards began taking off less than three years ago, Stewart believes “most of the boards being sold today are very low-end, slow, and dumb. But the quality of the software is getting better and better. As users become more aware of the capabilities possible, they can reasonably be expected to demand more?

These sentiments are echoed by Jim McGann, a spokesperson for AT&T “Many vendors are coming out with fax boards,” he says, “and the market is really growing fast. As fix boards become better known, the demand will only increase.”

But McGann points out stand-alone machines are easy to use, whereas PCs with add-on fax boards require training operators, calling up software, working through menus, and turning on accessories such as printers. “There will always be a need for stand-alones. I don’t know if fax boards will overtake stand-alone machines, but there’s obviously room for both?

The advantages

McGann, Stewart, and other fax board manufacturers cite higher qual-
ity documents as a major advantage over stand-alone machines. “Since you can print out the document on the PC’s own printer, you get a much better and sharper image than is possible on a stand-alone,” says McGann “which lets your salespeople and executives make better presentations.” Stewart also points out that “once you receive a fax and store it on your PC, that document can be manipulated with your editing and graphics publishing software?”

Fax boards are also touted as money savers. The units cost less than stand-alone machines while greatly improving productivity and reducing staff time in many applications. “And on top of everything else,” says AT&T’s McGann, “you also cut your phone bill. While a stand-alone machine is printing out copy, it’s running out telephone charges. But with a fax board, you just sort the documents electronically, then run them off on your PC printer.”

Look for little things

With so many products available from so many companies, Stewart of Brother International suggests “little things mean a lot; His firm’s own Intellifax for example, allows users to automatically convert from word-processing format to fax format, condense a standard 132-column PC screen readout to 8½-inch paper size, and merge letterhead and signature into the finished transmitted document.

On the other hand, AT&T’s Fax Connection can send up to 255 document pages without interruption—and according to McGann, offers the “distinct advantage of supporting either Group II or Group III protocols, thus providing access to 98 percent of facsimile devices worldwide.”

Panasonic advertises a Fax Partner that can be programmed to send or poll for messages automatically at specific off-peak telephone hours. In this way, the company suggests, users can shave their phone bills substantially.

Other major companies that offer fax boards include Advanced Vision Research, American Data Technology, Communications Technology, Computer Peripherals, Dest, EIT, Fujitsu Imaging Systems, Gamma-link, Genoa Systems, GMS, Intel, Microlink International, Microtek Lab, OAZ Communications, Pamirs, Pitney Bowes, Quadram, Relisys, and Xerox Imaging Systems (formerly Datacopy).

The alternatives

While fix boards occupy a PC expansion slot, some manufacturers have introduced an external facsimile modem that comes in its own housing. These units connect with most PCs that communicate in ASCII and thus are compatible with MS-DOS and other operating systems. But external modems are only interfaces, unable to harness the full power of a PC as internal fax boards can.

Also note that some PC documents can be transmitted to fax machines without using a fax board. In some cases, PC documents can be accepted by electronic mail services and converted into fax format for transmission to the desired numbers. And, using a special kind of software, some PC users can fax documents to various locations without the use of a fax board.

The great majority of American businesses, of course, still have no fix machine at all, so the number of firms needing to transmit large volumes of material is comparatively small. But that number will increase as fax machines become a standard means for transmitting information from business to business.

Faxing Dos and Don’ts

Just as a phone sends your voice over the telephone wires to the person you called, a facsimile machine sends the words, pictures, and charts on a piece of paper over the telephone wires. No matter what kind of fax machine you have, you can affect the quality of the copy you send by following a few simple guidelines.

- Use a cover sheet with your name, phone number, and fax number, even if you’re sending a fax for someone else. If the fax doesn’t come through clearly, the recipient will want to contact you for a clear copy.
- Number pages clearly. Make it easy for the recipient to keep pages in order.
- For documents that will be faxed several times, use large type and plenty of white space whenever possible. A third or fourth generation fax will be difficult to read unless the original was carefully prepared.
- If you are concerned about clarity, test your material by making a copy on your fax machine before you send that important document.
- Don’t use color on fax documents without making a test copy first. Dark colors can block copy and sometimes slow transmission.
- Don’t use correction tape or fluid on documents to be faxed. Always remove paper clips and staples to prevent damaging your machine.

—Karen Adelman, AT&T facsimile product manager