

Case Study: Northwest Area Education Agency

PrinterCloud Provides Regional Educational Services Agency with a Powerful, Convenient and Unified Print Management Solution



Challenges

- A hybrid direct IP/print server infrastructure in a distributed print environment made print management difficult and time-consuming
- Next-generation features like mobile printing were neither easy nor cost-effective to implement
- The agency lacked the ability to fully monitor and analyze print activity

Established in Iowa in 1974, [Northwest Area Education Agency \(AEA\)](#) is one of nine regional intermediate education agencies designed to support students, teachers and administrators with high-quality school improvement services such as career training and special education.

The organization employs 275 professionals and works in partnership with 35 public school districts and more than 30 accredited private schools across a ten-county area in the northwest portion of the state. Together they serve close to 45,000 students. Yet its size and scope hasn't prevented Northwest AEA from enjoying a reputation as one of the most outstanding organizations of its kind in the entire country.

For all its success in the educational service sector, print management remained a challenge for Northwest AEA. The organization operates a distributed hybrid environment with a disproportionate mix of macOS- and Windows-based computers, and for several years its printing solution was also hybrid—manually configured direct IP printing for the Macs, a print server for the Windows machines.

"We have six locations throughout Northwest Iowa with varying numbers of printers at each location" explains Bradey Malloy, a network administrator at Northwest AEA.

"We are 90% MAC OS and 10% Windows for our end user devices, so it got to the point where we had so few Windows machines it was kind of silly to continue using a Windows print server, and the Macs weren't working very well with that print server to begin with," which is why they were direct IP.

Results

- Centralized administration and self-service installation has made print management simpler and more efficient
- Mobile and Secure Printing features give advanced users the functionality they need
- PrinterCloud's in-depth reporting provides macro- and micro-level insight into print usage

Malloy and his team began looking for affordable, enterprise-grade cloud solutions that would offer a balance of centralized management, next-generation features for their advanced users, seamless multi-platform integration and ease of use that was as effortless on the backend as it was on the frontend.

"We did experiment with Google Cloud Print for a while, but we didn't have a ton of luck with it," says Malloy. "[PrinterCloud](#) was the only option I found that did everything we needed and wanted."

Challenge #1—Centralizing and Simplifying Print Management

There were two key problems with Northwest AEA's printing setup prior to adopting PrinterCloud.

The first was that centralized management was all but impossible in a print environment that used conventional direct IP printing alongside a Windows print server. The second was that printer self-installation was equally tricky in that environment, especially among end users with varied skill levels.

Together, these shortcomings placed extra burdens on the IT support team. They had to spend time manually configuring the Macs for direct IP printing as well as fielding end users' calls for help with Windows printer installations.

Solution

Because PrinterCloud unites the stability of direct IP printing with the unique convenience of centralized administration and self-service installation, Northwest AEA's end users and its admins now enjoy a stable, consistent print experience across the entire organization—regardless of their client OS.

Instead of having to perform "tedious" direct IP configuration and deal with constant print-related support calls, Malloy and his team simply direct users to a 60-second YouTube video demonstrating how to identify and install nearby printers with a single click.

"PrinterCloud has greatly simplified how we manage our printers. And it also gives the users control of their own printers. Between those two things, it's a no-brainer. Things just work," he says.

Challenge #2—Meeting the Needs of Advanced Users

With a fragmented and traditional approach to print management, it was difficult for Northwest AEA to implement any kind of next-generation functionality to serve its advanced users.

Mobile users and guests were unable to print from their mobile devices, and secure printing wasn't an option without resorting to expensive third-party solutions that couldn't guarantee full compatibility with the organization's hybrid print environment.

Solution

Next-generation functionality like Secure Printing and Mobile Printing is integrated natively into PrinterCloud. This means those features can be made available immediately and seamlessly across the print environment from the moment PrinterCloud is implemented.

With Mobile Printing, on-network users can quickly print to authorized devices right from the "Share" button, while guests or BYOD users can print easily through email-to-print functionality. And with Secure Printing, users can ensure that their confidential documents stay that way.

"If users come to me and say, 'I need to be able to print from my iPad,' we show them how to do it," says Malloy. "We have just about everything that we could need when we run across a situation."

Challenge #3—Monitoring Print Activity

Given the difficulty of print management in a direct IP/print server environment, it's not hard to imagine how limited visibility was.

With the direct IP machines, there was simply no convenient way to monitor print activity on an ongoing basis. As for the Windows print server, it offered little more than standard print queue data.

Solution

PrinterCloud provides in-depth print reporting across the entire print environment. This feature not only gathers detailed information on each and every print job, it also gives admins the ability to arrange it in a useful and intuitive way—by user, department or frequency of printing, for example.

"We don't limit what our employees can print, but we do check that [PrinterCloud] report monthly just to see who our highest printers are. All of our printers are leased, so if we get a big overage charge, we can track it back to the user and see why that's happening," says Malloy.

As a result, Northwest AEA has unprecedented visibility into its distributed print environment and

can promptly address any anomalies.

Conclusion and Savings Summary

PrinterCloud has dramatically simplified print management for Northwest AEA, provided significant improvements in usability for advanced users, and given their IT team far greater visibility into its print environment. While the exact cost savings have not been calculated yet, one of the clear results has been a significant reduction in time their IT team needs to spend on print-related issue. From an IT support desk standpoint, PrinterCloud has greatly reduced the number of calls Northwest AEA receives to install printers, which frees up IT's time to work on other projects.

"On rare occasions, we still get support calls asking us how to install printers. When that happens, we direct them to a YouTube video we created that shows them how to use the PrinterCloud self-service portal," said Malloy. "And they usually respond within two minutes and say, 'We got it taken care of. Thanks!'"

"PrinterCloud has greatly simplified how we manage our printers. And it also gives the users control of their own printers. Between those two things, it's a no-brainer. Things just work."