

June 26, 1997

HP's new printers impress

LaserJet 6 series is faster and sharper, though PhotoSmart has limitations / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

IF YOU CARE ABOUT THE way your work looks on the printed page, you will be stunned by the quality of Hewlett-Packard's new printers, the HP LaserJet 6 series and the PhotoSmart Photo Printer. Although both of these printers are at the top of their class, HP is sure to have an easier job selling the LaserJets than the Photo Printers.

HP's LaserJet 6 series is the latest in a long line of LaserJet products. Compared with the LaserJet 5 series, the new printers are faster, have better print quality, and are rated for heavier monthly print runs.

At the bottom of the line is HP's LaserJet 6Lse. Priced at \$399, this printer can crank out 6 pages per minute (ppm) at 600 dots per inch. The printer takes 18 seconds to warm up and print its first page - quite a time-saver in a home office. HP rates the printer at 6,000 pages per month.

Although HP provides drivers only for DOS, Windows, and IBM's OS, the printer is compatible with every other LaserJet printer that's ever been made, so as long as your computer has a parallel port, you should be able to use this printer.

HP's LaserJet 6Pse is built for small businesses and work groups. It prints at 8 ppm and can churn

out 12,000 pages per month - roughly 400 pages per day. The printer has two parallel ports and an infrared port. The IR port is handy for printing from laptops, Apple Newtons, and Windows CE computers. Instead of fussing with cables, you just point your portable at the printer and go. The 6Pse is priced at \$799.

At the top of the line is HP's LaserJet 6MP. Priced at \$949, this is the only one of the 6-series printers that works out of the box with an Apple Macintosh.

The 6MP comes with PostScript, a special printer language invented by Adobe in the 1980s. Although PostScript was created as a universal printer interface, it's being increasingly marginalized by Windows 95 publishing programs, which don't need PostScript, and Adobe's Acrobat system, which has PostScript built in. The 6MP is just one more example of how Macintosh users are being forced to pay for their loyalty to Apple's dying platform. Still, it's a great printer.

If you want to share a printer with others in your home or office, you have two choices. You can simply share your printer over the network using the printer-sharing software that's built into Windows 95, Windows NT, or MacOS. The problem with this technique is that if your computer is turned

off, nobody else can use the printer.

A more flexible (but more expensive) way to share a printer over a network is to buy a special print server. HP has three print servers that are worth mentioning. The JetDirect 150X print server is the simplest, with a list price of \$199. This box comes with an Ethernet interface and a paral-



Hewlett-Packard's LaserJet 6Lse can crank out six pages per minute.

lel port. Plug in any of HP's new printers and you can print using Microsoft's standard network printer protocols.

If you've got non-Microsoft machines on your network, go with HP's JetDirect EX Plus print server. Priced at \$349, this box lets you print from Macs, Novel Netware, and even UNIX workstations. I've been using the EX Plus for two weeks with no problems. The only pain is that the installation software requires that you use a PC running Windows. HP also has a version, the EX Plus 3, which can handle three separate printers; it lists at \$649.

I'm less excited about HP's new PhotoSmart printer. This printer only prints photographs, although it does a great job at that one task. Designed specifically for the home market, the printer is part of HP's aggressive effort to become the leader in digital photography. I'll review the other parts of the system, HP's digital camera and photo scanner, later this summer.

The PhotoSmart printer can print on standard white paper (a penny per page), special inkjet paper (2 to 5 cents per page), or HP's Glossy PhotoSmart photograph paper (90 cents for a full-

size page, or 35 cents for a 4-by-6 print). With the expensive paper, I couldn't tell the difference between these prints and prints made in a regular photo lab. Of course, to get a good print you must start with a high-quality digital image. I got mine off a PhotoCD that I made with Kodachrome slides from my wedding. Beware printing low-resolution images that you might download from the Web: This printer will clearly show their limitations.

Don't bother using the PhotoSmart printer with traditional inkjet paper. Even prints made on Hammermill's JetPrint came out muddy. What's worse, the printer puts down so much ink that the paper ripples and warps.

At \$40 per refill, the printer's ink isn't cheap either. HP says the prints will last forever in a photo album, or for a year exposed to ordinary light. But whatever you do, don't get your prints wet: The ink is water-soluble.

The entire PhotoSmart system only runs with Windows 95. HP says this isn't a problem; I think that not supplying drivers for Windows NT is a serious mistake. Many "power users" are increasingly turning to NT because it is faster and dramatically more reliable than Windows 95, and it's these power users who are willing to shell out \$499 (list) for a printer that only prints photographs. Most other users, I suspect, will be happy with a multipurpose inkjet printer that still does a great job with photographs and can also print text.

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HP LaserJet printers
6Lse: \$399 (6 ppm)
6Pse: \$799 (8 ppm, 2 parallel ports, 1 infrared port)
6MP: \$949 (8 ppm, 3 ports, Mac, PC, and PostScript)

HP print servers
JetDirect 150X: \$199 (Microsoft only)
JetDirect EX Plus: \$349 (AppleTalk, Novel Netware, Lan Manager, UNIX, and more)
JetDirect EX Plus 3: \$649 (handles 3 printers)

HP photograph printer
PhotoSmart: \$499 (Windows 95 only)