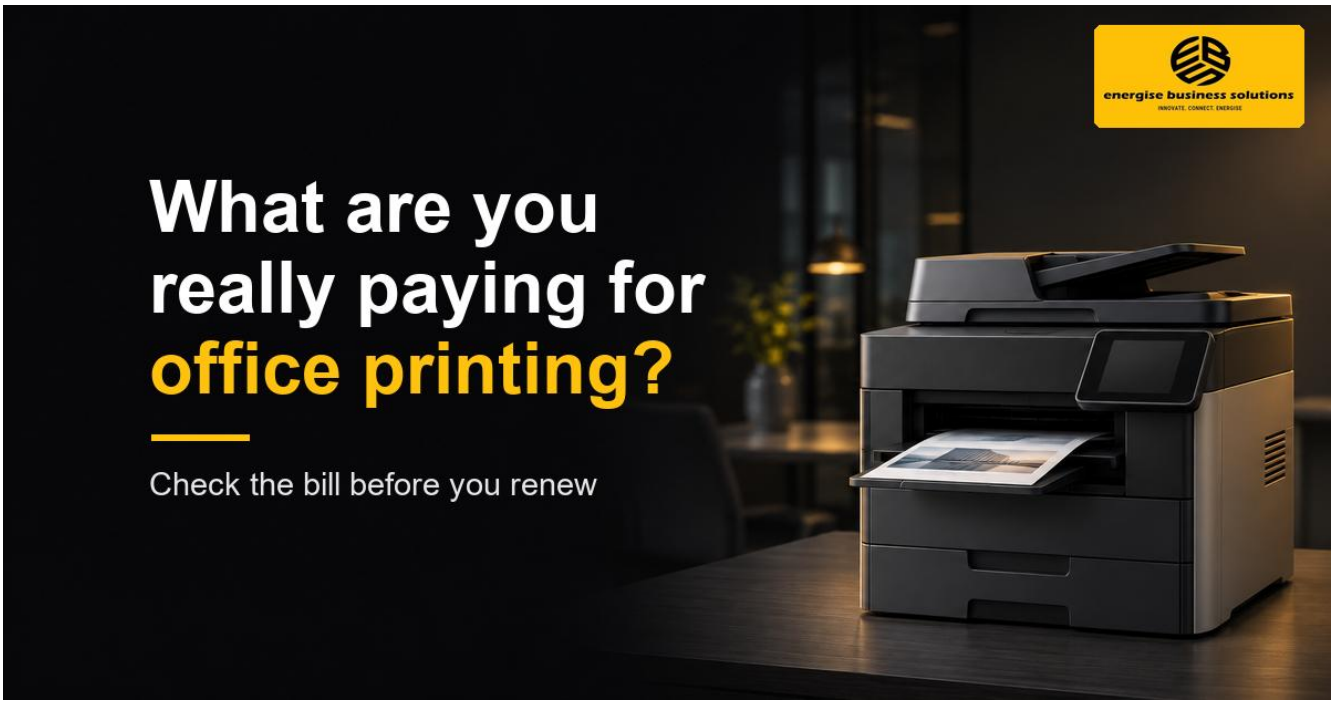


SPECIAL REPORT | NOVEMBER 2026

Executive Summary

The cheapest monthly rental can cost more over the full contract, especially if your print volume falls and you keep paying for pages you no longer use.

A finance manager opens the November copier invoice. The bill has gone up. Staff say they print less since customer invoices went digital. The usage rate rose at the anniversary, and black-and-white output is now below the monthly minimum. The supplier's renewal date is in a calendar entry nobody has checked since the contract was signed.

For a South African SME preparing its 2027 budget, that combination is worth checking now. Annual increases can raise the bill while usage falls. A contract sized for a busier office can keep billing against that old workload. And if the agreement rolls over, missing the notice date can delay a change.

Start with three complete billing periods. Match the device serial number, billing dates and black-and-white and colour meter movements to the invoice. Add the equipment rental and the charges paid separately, then record the total and the amount per actual printed side.

Run your own volume through both quotes. Check a quiet month and a busy month, then build the cost year by year using the written escalation rules. Ask what happens if the office moves, the machine fails during a deadline or you need to leave early.

THE WORKED EXAMPLE Quote B starts R175 a month cheaper at typical volume. Over three years it costs R17,697 more. If printing falls by 40% from year two, the gap grows to about R19,852. The prices are illustrative.

1 Gather the bills and meter readings

Collect the equipment invoice or finance debit, the service invoice, the signed pricing schedules and opening and closing meter readings for each machine. Use the contract's billing period. An invoice issued in October may cover September usage, and a rental debit may follow a different cycle.

Work by serial number. Subtract the opening reading from the closing reading for each counter the contract uses. If a device was swapped, get the closing reading for the old machine and the starting reading for the new one. Ask for the original reading when a charge is based on an estimate or a later correction.

A printed side and a sheet of paper are different units. Check how the quote counts double-sided jobs, A3 pages and a page with a small colour logo. If an invoice shows a total counter and a separate colour counter, confirm whether the total already includes colour before adding the two.

2 Rebuild the monthly bill

Begin with equipment rental, fixed support or software fees, and per-page charges. Apply any included allowance, minimum or overage exactly as the contract defines it. A minimum billed volume is a floor. An allowance is a volume included in another charge. An agreement can combine the two in different ways.

Record paper, separately purchased supplies and outsourced printing alongside the copier bill when they affect the decision. Track them separately so you can see which option changes each cost. Use the same VAT basis on both sides of the comparison, and flag credit notes and one-off charges before estimating a typical month.

Calculate the effective copier cost per printed side by dividing the copier bill by the actual sides produced in the same period. For three months, divide the combined bills by the combined output. This avoids giving a quiet month the same weight as a busy one. If the meter shows zero output, record the fixed spend for that month.

3 Compare two quotes on your own volumes

A small distributor prints 3,000 black-and-white sides and 300 colour sides in a typical month. Both offers cover the same work and service for 36 months. All figures are fictional and exclude VAT and paper. Both charge for each colour side, and neither includes a page allowance. Comparison amounts are rounded to the nearest rand after calculation.

Pricing term	Quote A	Quote B
Monthly equipment rental	R4,500 fixed	R4,100 initially
Black-and-white per side	R0.14	R0.19
Colour per side	R1.10	R1.35
Minimum billed black-and-white volume	None	2,500 sides per month
Annual escalation by charge	0% rental and usage	15% rental, 0% usage
Once-off setup fee	R0	R750

At typical volume in year one, Quote A bills R4,500 + R420 + R330 = R5,250 a month. Quote B bills R4,100 + R570 + R405 = R5,075 before its R750 setup fee. That is R175 less in the first month before setup.

4 Price quiet months and the full term

The table uses year-one prices before setup. In a quiet month, Quote B bills for 2,500 black-and-white sides when the office prints only 1,500. In a busy month the higher usage rates absorb its starting rental advantage.

Monthly workload	Quote A	Quote B
Quiet | 1,500 black-and-white + 100 colour	R4,820	R4,710
Typical | 3,000 black-and-white + 300 colour	R5,250	R5,075
Busy | 5,000 black-and-white + 600 colour	R5,860	R5,860

Apply each anniversary increase to the previous year's monthly rental. At 15%, Quote B goes from R4,100 to R4,715 in year two, then to R5,422 in year three. Multiply each monthly rental by 12, add that year's usage charges and add setup once. Quote A's rental and both quotes' per-page rates stay fixed in this example.

Full-term cost at typical volume	Quote A	Quote B
Year 1 including setup	R63,000	R61,650
Year 2	R63,000	R68,280
Year 3	R63,000	R76,767
36-month total	R189,000	R206,697

Holding the starting rental at R4,100 isolates the escalation. Rental alone totals R147,600 at 0%, R162,852 at 10% and R170,847 at 15% over three years. At 10%, the monthly rental goes R4,100 → R4,510 → R4,961. Check the signed rate, charge and anniversary date rather than assuming they are standard.

5 What happens when volume falls

From month 13, the distributor moves invoicing online. Black-and-white output falls from 3,000 to 1,680 sides a month. Colour holds at 300 because the sales team still prints product sheets. Overall output falls from 3,300 to 1,980 sides, a 40% drop. Year one costs stay as shown.

Quote A bills for the 1,680 black-and-white sides produced. Quote B bills for 2,500, leaving 820 unused sides a month. At R0.19 per side, the minimum alone adds R156 a month, or R3,739 over the last two years, compared with charging actual usage at Quote B's rate.

Cost with lower volume from year two	Quote A	Quote B
Year 1 including setup	R63,000	R61,650
Year 2	R60,782	R67,140
Year 3	R60,782	R75,627
36-month total	R184,565	R204,417

Quote B starts R175 a month cheaper before setup. With lower volume from year two, it finishes R19,852 more expensive over three years. The rental continues to rise as the office prints less, and the minimum limits how much the usage bill can fall. If a higher-cost quote offers better support, ask what that means in practice. For a dispatch office that needs delivery notes by 07:00, find out who will restore printing or provide a replacement in time.

6 Check the terms and billing red flags

Ask each supplier for the exact rental and service term, when notice must be given, the early settlement amount on the date you expect to switch, and collection or relocation charges. If the rental and maintenance are with different companies, obtain both sets of terms. Ask whether an upgrade starts a new term or carries any balance into the next agreement.

Check what the service charge actually covers. List toner, drums, parts, staples, labour, travel, delivery and software where relevant. Ask the supplier to distinguish a response target from the time to restore printing.

CHECK THESE BEFORE RENEWING Repeated estimated readings. Charges after a machine was returned. An increase applied early or to rental when only usage should rise. Minimum shortfalls with no separate explanation. A missing rollover notice or an unverified notice deadline.

7 Count the costs outside the copier invoice

Ask accounts for desktop printer and cartridge purchases, including those paid from petty cash. A low purchase price can conceal a high cost per page. Track actual output over a representative period, along with ink or toner spend, to see whether a small printer earns its place.

Log the time staff spend clearing jams, reprinting jobs and chasing toner. Pull rush printing invoices from the last few months. Add paper and power where they affect the choice. If dispatch relies on paper during outages, have the installer confirm whether the backup supply can handle the printer's load and test a real job under backup power.

8 Check whether the fleet fits the work

One shared machine may be cheaper to support. Two smaller devices can keep essential work going when one fails or serve teams on different floors. Use actual A3 and colour volumes to decide what each location needs. Default routine work to black-and-white and give colour access where the work calls for it.

Buying outright can suit an office with stable needs and cash available. Compare the purchase price, supplies, maintenance, repair risk and eventual replacement over the same period as the rental. For a rental, put flexibility or a replacement commitment in writing before assigning it any value.

9 Use print data to change daily habits

Department usage reports can show where colour or reprints drive costs. Limit access to named-user reports and use department totals where they are sufficient. Badge or PIN release can reduce abandoned jobs, and meter-based toner alerts can trigger replenishment. These features can work with standard automation. If a tool uses AI to flag unusual trends, have someone check the readings before acting.

Volume usually changes when the work changes. Route incoming documents into an approval workflow, use e-signatures where appropriate, and trial digital delivery notes with one team before changing the process across the business.

10 Protect personal information at the printer

Payslips and HR letters can sit in a shared output tray within reach of visitors or colleagues. Hold sensitive jobs until the sender releases them at the device, restrict who can retrieve them, and provide a secure way to dispose of abandoned pages.

Some multifunction devices store jobs or scanned images on internal drives or other storage. What remains depends on the device and its settings. Before a swap, repair or lease return, confirm what the model stores, agree how the supplier will sanitise that storage, and obtain written completion evidence tied to the serial number. Preserve required business records in the proper system before wiping the device.

POPIA section 19 requires appropriate safeguards for personal information. Section 14 addresses retention and secure disposal of records. Include device storage and printed output in the business's review of those risks.

11 Five questions to take to your supplier

1. What would we pay in a quiet, typical and busy month, and exactly how do you count colour, A3 and any minimum shortfall?
2. Which charges increase, on what date, and what is the total for each year at our expected volume?
3. What happens if our volume falls, we move premises or need to exit early? When must we give notice?
4. Which supplies and service calls are covered, and how will we keep printing if this machine breaks down?
5. How will stored data be cleared when the device is replaced or returned, and what evidence will we receive?

Take the last three bills and the completed comparison to the renewal meeting. Ask the supplier to price a smaller fleet or a lower minimum if your workload has changed, and put the agreed rates, service cover and notice date in the signed schedule.

12 Your editable quote comparison

Use the same device requirements, print volumes, contract term and VAT basis for both offers. Where terms differ, enter the cost year by year and record anything you still need in writing.

Input or check	Quote A	Quote B
Term, start date and VAT basis		
Rental and other fixed fees per month		
Black-and-white and colour rates		
Included pages, minimums and overages		
Quiet, typical and busy monthly totals		
Annual increases by charge and date		
Setup and normal end-of-term costs		
Full-term total at your expected volume		
Notice deadline and early settlement amount		
Service exclusions and breakdown cover		

Preferred quote and reason _____

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