New cassette printer a standout? Users think so

Valerie Neff Newitt

August 2023—No jams, downtime, or lost time. Plenty of savings, speed, and employee satisfaction. Users of what General Data calls its next-generation cassette printer for histology laboratories say they’ve seen all that and more.

Craig Simon, laboratory director at Lab America in Frederick, Md., a division of Indivumed Services, brought in the LaserTrack Flex printer in June 2022. “I was tasked with finding a cassette printer that wasn’t too expensive but still operates well and can withstand certain chemicals and processing,” he says of his early days at Lab America in 2021. Ink, he says, is “too past tense.” He prefers laser “because it lasts forever.”

He describes his small team as fast and efficient. “I wanted to make sure that everything I purchased for them was up to the highest standards in terms of printing and prep. Now, when they get their email notifications saying they have new tissues coming in, they go right in, print out all their blocks, and they’re ready to go.” Simon estimates it takes no more than two minutes for a batch of 20.

While it’s printing, he says, they can prep everything else. “They can prep for blood work, for histology cutting. They can do a lot of other things. It doesn’t take long to print blocks, but this gives them a bit more free time to expand on their own uses and work with other histology functions.”

General Data launched the LaserTrack Flex, its fourth-generation printer, in early November last year. One of its advantages, says Dave Autry, VP of sales at General Data Healthcare, is that it enables one-, two-, or three-sided printing on the cassette and makes it unnecessary to write on the cassette. The customer now has traceability versus information with pencil or marker that could disappear, he says, noting that three quarters of customers who have purchased the printer (starting at $55,000) have ordered it with the ability to print on more than one side. “We believe customers are seeing more data needed in the future,” Autry says.

A manager of anatomic pathology at a hospital in the southeastern U.S. (whose institution prefers not to be named) says his lab is using three-sided printing. “If you have this extra real estate on the cassette, you might as well use it,” he says. They’re able to put the case number on two sides. “Regardless of how you lay it down, you can still see the number.” Even if it were to get scratched off, he adds, “we have it on the other side as well.” The institution’s name is on the cassette also, which is helpful for cases that are sent out for additional studies and “better for the patient’s safety,” he notes, “because it allows these blocks to be returned to their original location.”

He describes the printer as “compact, durable, reliable, and fast.”

“I’ve worked with other cassette printers that constantly jam. Sometimes it’s a minor jam; we read an error and have to get the cassette out and restart. Or it could be a major jam. Either way, it takes more time. That alone saves us time.”

The barcode is easy to scan, he says. “I’ve been in some institutions where we’d have to try to scan a block multiple times.”

With the Flex printer, they can scan and track easily, he says. Downtime is rare, in his experience.
Because the Flex is a laser printer, the barcode is on the cassette “perfectly all the time every time,” says Sean Holman, grossing supervisor at Quest subsidiary Dermpath Diagnostics, White Plains, NY. He and his team had the Flex for 90 days during a pilot of a prototype. “We ran 30,000 cassettes through it and never had a misprint. We never had to reprint.” There were the expected growing pains because it was a prototype, he says, and his lab’s experience helped make possible what’s available today. “It’s still very new, but everybody who has seen it, touched it, and played with it wanted it. That’s just a fact.” He is hoping to have 12 of them by the end of this year.

The three-sided printing is something no other printer does, Holman says. “The front of the cassette will always be the case number and barcode. But the left side of the cassette might identify the specimen as liver, and the other side of that cassette might say an iron stain. Right now we use different color cassettes for different things, or special stains.” There is money to be saved, he says, by having one color cassette on which various things can be written on each printable surface.

There is no learning curve, Holman says—beyond about 15 minutes of instruction time. “Ridiculously easy” is how he describes it.

To Holman it’s about not only patient safety but also employee satisfaction. “If you come to work moping” because the equipment tends to malfunction “and you know you’re going to struggle, you’re not going to be happy on the job. We demand a lot from our employees, so we want to give them the best equipment to ensure the best quality of work for us, our doctors, and our patients.”

And the Flex, he says, “is a pretty awesome piece of machinery.”

Valerie Neff Newitt is a writer in Audubon, Pa.