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Fujitsu ScanSnap S1500

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Over the last one and a half years, I've really come to appreciate Fujitsu's ScanSnap scanner line. The earliest ScanSnap models did not impress me much, but with the release of the ScanSnap S510, which I reviewed here in November of 2007, I felt Fujitsu had finally produced a sub- \$500 scanner that I could enthusiastically endorse under certain circumstances. Since the time of that review, I've made it a point to keep using the ScanSnap S510 on a daily basis to see how it holds up over time.



Overall, I've been impressed. The only (minor) issue I've had with the ScanSnap S510 is that the roller mechanism that advances paper through the scanner appears to be somewhat inferior to that of the Fujitsu workgroup scanners. In all fairness, this is understandable since the workgroup scanners are designed for a heavier workload. In addition, I purposely abuse my scanners by

failing to clean the rollers according to the recommended schedule because I believe few advisors are meticulous about scanner maintenance, so I prefer to assume less than ideal conditions for my longer term tests.

While the ScanSnap S510 is not as solidly built as Fujitsu workgroup scanners like the fi-6130 and fi-6140, it works just fine in a moderate single user situation, provided that you clean the rollers when necessary, and provided you can limit yourself to the software that comes with it, or any of the limited number of additional programs that interface with it.

Recently, Fujitsu released the ScanSnap S1500 (as well as the S1500M for Mac computers), the worthy successor to the ScanSnap S510. For the most part, the ScanSnap S1500 sticks to the ScanSnap playbook by offering a relatively economical, easy to use scanner that provides sufficient speed and durability for the solo practitioner, home office or ensemble firm. As was the case with previous ScanSnaps, the trade-off is the lack of a TWAIN in-



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terface, but for many this apparently is not too big an issue.

On the other hand, the ScanSnap S1500 offers a host of advantages for the smaller office. We'll delve into details shortly, but I think it is safe to say that an easy to use, duplex, color scanner with a straight paper path with a street price of just under \$400.00 (CEO Image Systems sells the ScanSnap for \$393.99 including shipping) has a great deal of appeal in this tough economic environment.

Overview

The dimensions of the S1500 are almost identical to those of the S510 (11.5 X 6.3 X 6.2 vs. 11.2 X 6.2 X 6.2). The ScanSnap S1500 weighs in at 6.62 lbs or about 12 ounces more than the S510. Unless you plan to carry yours around with you on a daily basis, the increase in weight should not be a major factor. On a positive note, the S1500 can fit in the original S510 carrying case, so if you are upgrading you can still use your S510 bag.

The overall design of the unit is very similar to the S1500, but with a few refinements. The top flap (the silver cover) folds up to support documents waiting to be scanned. This cover has been engineered with a dampening mechanism to avoid slams (and damage) when closing. The auto document feeder capacity of the S1500 is 50 sheets, same as the S510. The bottom flap folds down to catch the documents as they pass through the scanner. The S510 had two buttons: a power button and a scan button. The power button was somewhat redundant because the unit turns on automatically when you lift the cover, so the S1500 only has a single scan button, which also serves as a power indicator.

Most people who view the S510 and the S1500 side by side seem to think that the latter's design is a bit more modern and aesthetically pleasing. It is also a bit more sophisticated and refined with the addition of a "space saver" scan position. This new functionality is designed to let the user scan a single page (or perhaps a couple) really fast by eliminating the need to pull down the catcher tray at the bottom. You just lift the top cover, feed in the document, and push the scan button. One significant difference between the S1500 and the older S510 is that this new model and all of its supporting software, which we'll discuss below, support both the 32 and 64 bit version of Microsoft VISTA. The older S510 only supports the older 32 bit version of MS VISTA.

Another difference is speed. The S510 is rated at 18 pages per minute in color and B&W. The new S1500 is rated at 20 pages per minute; but in this case the specifications may be slightly misleading. In my tests, there were cases where the specifications appeared to understate the superiority of the S1500 over the S510 with regard to speed. My impression is that this has something to do with the post scan processing. Depending how you use your scanner, it may be performing OCR, de-skewing, and other automatic tasks after the initial scan has been completed, and these operations often slow scan times significantly. In my initial tests, it appears to me that the S1500 performs these tasks faster than the S510, so the net, real time gain achieved by the S1500 may exceed what one would expect under certain conditions.

Out of the Box Experience

One of the ScanSnap S1500's most notable features is the ease of the standard set-up. The out of box experience is as close to perfection as any scanner I've worked with. You simply insert the installation disk and you're prompted to regis-



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ter your scanner online. Next, all of the included software, with the exception of Adobe Acrobat 9 Standard (which comes on a separate disk) is automatically installed. Once the initial install is done, you install Adobe Acrobat (I was able to skip this step since I already had Adobe Acrobat 9 Pro Extended installed).

After all the software is loaded, you plug in the scanner and attach the USB cable to your computer. You then lift the lid of the scanner, which turns it on. Your computer should recognize the scanner, install the ScanSnap driver, and you are ready to go. You can immediately initiate a scan by putting a sheet of paper in the scanner and pushing the blue scan button on the scanner, or you can right click the ScanSnap Manager icon in the system tray near the clock to initiate a scan. Before you begin your first scan, however, I'd recommend that you right click on the ScanSnap Manager icon and select Help...Online Update. This will ensure that you have the most recent version of the software before you begin using the scanner.

In contrast, the typical set-up for most scanners can be somewhat more challenging. It may entail selecting a scanning source, drivers, or a scanning application, all of which can be confusing for a novice user.

Getting Things Done

The ScanSnap line has always offered automated scanning with reasonable defaults, but the S1500 takes this automation to a new level. The scanner can automatically scan both sides of a document (duplex) while automatically analyzing the document on the fly. It can recognize whether it is scanning black and white, grayscale or color document, and it can automatically correct the document if necessary on the fly. Pages can be automatically sized, cropped, and de-skewed. If a page is inserted upside down; it will be automatically rotated to the proper position. In addition, blank pages will be automatically removed. The net result is that novice users can get professional looking results with the push of a single button. Of course, for more advanced users, controls give users the opportunity to customize scan settings as necessary.



To give you just one example, you can opt to perform optical character recognition (OCR) on the document or not. Doing so allows you to search through the document, but slows down the scanning process. In some cases, it may not be necessary to perform OCR on the whole document to capture the information you need to index. In the case of a new account application, all of the information you need to capture might be on the first page. The ScanSnap 1500 allows you to specify that OCR only be performed on the first page of each batch.

This version also includes "marked text as keyword" option that is very impressive. It allows you to use a standard highlighter to highlight text on a paper B&W document before you scan it. Then, when you scan the document, the software will automatically add the highlighted words to the keyword properties of the PDF file. This is not the only method of adding keywords. You can also use the ScanSnap organizer's tools to add keywords after the scan.

Another neat trick you can perform with a highlighter is cropping. ScanSnap allows you to draw a border around a block of text with a highlighter to crop it. This is very useful if, for example, you want to pull a quote from an article. You can crop it, perform OCR on it using the included ABBYY FineReader software, and then place the quote in a MS Word document. This technique should work equally well if you want to lift figures from a document and paste them into an MS Excel spreadsheet. The ScanSnap Viewer offers additional cropping capabilities, including the ability to perform multiple crops simultaneously.

Fujitsu claims that the new ScanSnap S1500 is more intelligent than previous models and I'd have to agree. A new feature called "auto quality" can identify the size of the document passing through the scanner, and adjust the default resolution accordingly. Why is this important? Because small documents (think business cards as an example) typically have smaller font sizes. Increasing the resolution of these smaller fonts improves readability and increases the accuracy of OCR. All of this happens without any user interaction, provided the "auto" scanning setting is selected.

An ultrasonic sensor inside the scanner analyzes each sheet of paper as it passes through the feeder. If it detects more than one sheet at a time, it will alert the user. The scanner does allow for the fact that there are times when you intend to send two sheets through the feeder simultaneously, for example when affixing a sticky note to a document; so there is an over-ride option that allows multiple pieces of paper to flow through scanner at once.

Bundled Software

The bundled software has not changed much from that of the S510, although this bundle contains more recent, upgraded versions. Perhaps the most significant piece of software included here is the full version of Adobe Acrobat 9 Standard. If you do not already own a copy of Adobe Acrobat, this piece of software will set you back about \$229 so, if you were thinking about purchasing the software anyway, the net cost of the ScanSnap S1500 to you, if purchased from CEO Image Systems, would be \$164.99. That's an incredible bargain. If you already own a previous version of Acrobat Standard, the upgrade would cost you would be about \$79.

CardMinder 4.0 allows you to perform duplex business card scans and extract data in editable form. By default, it only captures name, company, email address and phone number, but you can configure it to capture additional information if you wish. It seemed to me that this version did a better job than the previous one with OCR, but perhaps that is due to the S1500's auto quality feature discussed earlier.

The ScanSnap Organizer has an updated interface. It now has a MS Office 2007 feel to it with a ribbon across the top. The Organizer offers a good interface for performing all sorts of tasks including, but not limited to, viewing thumbnails of files, adding keywords directly to PDF files, moving, rotating or deleting pages, and more.

ABBYY FineReader for ScanSnap provides the OCR engine that enables the software to convert scanned documents into editable files. This is the program necessary to convert scanned documents to MS Word, Excel or PowerPoint files. It is also the program that allows you to extract text from a scanned document and place it in another file.



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New in this version is a module that allows you to scan directly to a SharePoint server. This feature is of more interest to larger firms than smaller ones, but it could be of value to smaller firms if they lease SharePoint from a third party provider.

What Else

Because of its lack of a TWAIN driver, the ScanSnap's functionality has been somewhat limited. That's because scanners typically communicate via a TWAIN or ISIS driver. Since the ScanSnap does not allow for this, you are usually limited to the applications that ship with the ScanSnap.

Exceptions are starting to pop up, however. For example, for document management, CEO offers connectivity with the very capable CEO Image Executive software. This enterprise grade product is capable of supporting from one user to thousands. With prices starting at \$499 per user, it is an excellent value. Interactive Advisory Software (IAS) recently announced that their platform is now fully compatible with the ScanSnap S1500 and the ScanSnap S300. There is nothing preventing others from following suit and developing connectivity with ScanSnap scanners. A friend of mine who works for a franchisor recently created a link between his firm's software and the ScanSnap so that franchisees could avail themselves of the ScanSnap's excellent performance and reasonable price.

In Summary

The ScanSnap is not for everyone. Although its design in some ways resembles that of Fujitsu's workgroup scanners such as the fi-6130 and fi-6140, the ScanSnap was not engineered to process 1,000, nor even 500 pages per day. Although I don't know of any official Fujitsu position on the matter, I'd say that 250 pages per day is the upper limit of this machine. As we've mentioned numerous times, if you need to flexibility to interface with a wide range of applications, you are better off with a scanner that supports TWAIN and/or ISIS drivers.

In spite of some limitations, the ScanSnap S1500 is an excellent product and an excellent value. If you are a solo or small office, you can outfit yourself with a ScanSnap S1500, purchase CEO Image Executive (or other equivalent DMS product) and improve your overall efficiency greatly for under \$900. At that price, the payback period should be very short. The ScanSnap would also make an excellent addition to a larger firm that has networked or workgroup scanners, but perhaps needs to supplement them with a few lower volume models. It goes without saying that the ScanSnap S1500 is very well suited to a home office, or even as a travelling companion.

When it comes to scanners, it is extremely important to understand your needs, and then purchase the right tool for the job. The Fujitsu ScanSnap S1500 is without a doubt an excellent entry level color, duplex, 20 pages per minute scanner with an automatic document feeder and a host of sophisticated automatic features. If you can live with its limitations, you will no doubt love this machine. If your needs exceed its capabilities, spend the extra money and purchase a workgroup scanner.



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