

Solving The Money Order Problem



Better Imaging Overcomes Difficult Documents

Spread out on 122 acres in suburban Philadelphia, the Lynnewood Gardens Apartments boast nearly 1,800 rental units, and as a result, staff must process around 1,700 rent payments in a short five-day window at the start of each month.

That translates into more than 300 payments per day during the busy period, making automated scanning an absolute necessity. But the majority of Lynnewood's payments arrive as money orders, one of the most challenging documents to process electronically.

Money orders are a scanner maker's worst nightmare. Printed on security paper with different colors and backgrounds, they are intentionally complicated to reduce the risk of fraud. And since today's criminal element gets a big assist from modern printing and optics, many of these countermeasures against fraud also make obtaining a reliable image extremely difficult. Suffice it to say that money orders present one of the biggest challenges in digital imaging.

But it gets even tougher. Besides having complicated security features, money orders often suffer from variations in the intensity of the printing itself, as many shops that issue money orders use print ribbons, which wear out over time and are changed infrequently. This results in light printing on a busy background – a “perfect storm” scenario for image quality.

A Matter of Time

The poor image quality of money orders may sound like an interesting lab curiosity while speaking in theoretical terms – but for the employees on the front lines, it can be an exasperating experience. If your deposit software can’t make out a document’s routing information or dollar amount, pulling out the item and re-scanning it, or reverting to a manual process, can easily take a minute or more.

The Lynnewood team had devised a workaround that at least rendered most money orders readable through optical character recognition (OCR). “Prior to implementing Digital Check’s solution, we had to manually write the amount of each money order on the paper before scanning,” said Carol Ridenbaugh, Lynnewood’s on-site accounting specialist. While this only added a few seconds per item, with thousands of payments to handle, the process still took most of the day.

Software to the Rescue

The first step in troubleshooting image quality issues is to check the scanner itself, so Lynnewood and their payment processor, RentPayment, brought the problem to the attention of Digital Check. Subsequent testing showed that the scanners were functioning properly, but that the latest version of Digital Check’s API that included the new Special Document Handling (SDH) feature might solve the problem. We worked closely with RentPayment to implement and test the new feature across both platforms.

Special Document Handling was designed specifically to tackle difficult documents like money orders by “cleaning up” the background noise in an image. Using intelligent

recognition software, the SDH application applies unique optical settings for difficult-to-read documents, which removes background and images while retaining the key information, and adjusts the optical settings to make a readable image. By applying multiple contrast and brightness settings based on document design, SDH effectively removes the background and can make the printed amount bolder.

When SDH was applied to Lynnewood’s system, the difference was immediate. “Before we turned on Special Document Handling, 90 percent of our money orders were unreadable,” said Ridenbaugh, the accounting specialist. “After we worked with Digital Check to solve this problem, we only have to write on about five money orders per month; only the ones where the print is so light that it is hard to read on the original paper. This change has been a huge time saver for us.”

What makes this feature exclusive to Digital Check is the fact that we can not only create one setting for each document, but we can create up to three different thresholding settings for a single page. SDH is also programmable with the ability to “memorize” specific documents, so that the same types of recurring payment items will be recognized every time. This has proven especially useful with the three most common brands of money orders, which make up the bulk of unreadable documents received by many businesses.

Happier Staff, Happier Customers

Addressing image quality issues has not only sped up the monthly paperwork crush; it’s also helped residents with less waiting and fewer questions. Michael Zucker of Jersey Central Management, Lynnewood’s parent company, praised the resolution that SDH was able to bring.

“Our customers are very important to us, so when Lynnewood Apartments alerted us to this problem, we immediately contacted RentPayment and Digital Check,” Zucker said. “Digital Check was very responsive to help us solve this issue and RentPayment was quick to implement the solution as well.”

Before and After: Adjusting Levels to Read Problem Documents



At left, a USPS money order before scanning. Note the heavy printing and bright colors in the background. At right, the same money order after Special Document Handling is applied.

