Automation – the rule rather than the exception

South African print service and marketing service providers (PSPs and MSPs respectively) are not fools – they know their industry and their business. A healthy dose of pragmatism permeates the industry which is responsible for the apparent lack of uptake of automated solutions. By Vaughan Patterson

There are numerous areas in which PSPs and MSPs can automate their businesses from the workflows leading from the customer to make-ready servers, the printing presses, finishing and in the mailroom.

As soon as these companies buy one of any number of digital presses currently on the market they automatically gain a level of automation at engine level.

The print controllers already used by many also offer varying levels of automation based largely on the humble PDF document and barcodes and other intelligent marks. Where companies largely differ is in workflows and automated finishing options – basically uniting the entire process from one end to the other.

An evolving solution
Workflow automation solutions address the need to automate highly repetitive tasks from pre-press through to finishing but by definition require larger job volumes and not necessarily high volume runs. Without a large number of jobs to process, PSPs and MSPs enter a grey area of cost versus returns and ultimately profitability. That calculation is however changing rapidly.

In the past, workflow solutions were cumbersome to integrate into existing environments, exhibited numerous quirks that would need to be ironed out before they could begin to work, and could be finicky to maintain operationally. Today that is not the case. These solutions have matured so that even mid- to small-sized PSPs and MSPs can capitalise on the benefits and still garner the benefits and ultimately the profits associated.

The inherent interoperability of devices, even those from different vendors, at various stages of the production process, has largely simplified the implementation cycle. Operational maintenance has also been remarkably simplified.

A valuable offering
Automation solutions are broken into three constituent components: pre-press, for faster and highly accurate print setup; management for managing print flows and equipment efficiencies; and advanced print management capabilities. With the advances and the almost modular application of these solutions, today, almost any size PSP or MSP can benefit from automation. However, these are relatively new developments, particularly considering the lifecycle of print engines in production environments, besides the general lag that permeates the industry at different rates.

Case in point
Some of our local PSPs and MSPs have been very quick on the uptake, investing a great deal of resources in deploying these solutions to be at the very forefront of the industry. One, for example, is RGB Digital Print. Company MD, James Hawkins invested an enormous amount of time and energy, as well as capital, to be among the leading print service providers by developing and deploying automated processes from beginning to end. The upshot is that his business is able to process in the order of thousands of jobs each month instead of hundreds. He’s also growing the number of engines he has to produce material, producing substantially higher volumes of jobs and has built some clever value-add into the business for his customers. That’s a win-win situation yet it did require substantial upfront investment to understand the opportunity and consolidate it into his business. Today that task is much easier, particularly with the case history of both successful examples and hard lessons learned.

Stories such as this are not entirely rare in South Africa yet they stem from what is considered an ‘different era’ – in the past, automation was a much more intensive undertaking than it is today and I believe many more PSPs and MSPs are going to pick up on the opportunity and make it the rule rather than the exception.

Vaughan Patterson is the sales manager of Ricoh SA’s production printing business group and has more than 20 years of experience in the commercial printing industry. He’s worked at some of the country’s top businesses and joined Ricoh SA in 2012 when the company had rolled out new processes, business efficiency projects and a growing range of solutions.