New workflows promise to end printer scepticism

New and emerging workflow technologies and strategies can help documents move from creation through finishing with greater speed, more control, higher reliability and more consistent quality than ever before. The technologies that make up workflow are becoming stronger, more stable, and can accommodate a broader range of documents, a situation that most printers are unaccustomed to, says **PAUL HAGLICH**, marketing manager, Production Systems Group at Bytes Document Solutions.

**WORKFLOW** is the final critical element for print providers seeking to leverage the power of digital printing, manage the merging of digital and offset printing, and cope with the convergence of direct marketing and transactional printing.

Until now, proprietary software has limited printers’ capabilities and the choice of machines. Less than fully developed workflows have constricted the throughput of businesses, sometimes adding steps and extending the very processes needing to be shortened. Closed systems have been costly and often limited to a select series of tasks. Third-party software integration has often been inadequately supported, breeding healthy scepticism and reluctance among print providers.

Print engine and prepress vendors developed and marketed their own independent workflow architectures to lock companies into a particular approach to document production with the result that printers found it difficult to adapt to changing customer demands. Demands have increased and it’s apparent that no one company can single-handedly develop and support the many components a modern print production workflow requires.

There are four workflow lanes needed to provide a comprehensive roadmap to help guide the traffic and keep it moving as smoothly and efficiently as possible:

- **Product:** that is open, interoperable and encompasses the full-range of capabilities print providers need to drive their businesses forward;
- **Standards:** to ensure compatibility with industry-wide initiatives, widely used tools from industry leaders, and support broad interoperability with software tools, print engines, pre- and post-processing equipment, and mailing equipment;
- **Partners:** to develop and deliver tools for creation, data transformation, Web-interfaces, document management, customised content and more, all integrated into a free-flowing architecture designed to provide a cohesive roadmap for printing documents in the most efficient way possible; and
- **Services:** to provide end-to-end support from document creation through finishing and distribution, enabling print providers and their customers to work more efficiently and have complete control of all document production processes.

The roadmap for these workflows and the ways to leverage them is still being drawn around vendor partnerships but the pathways are there.

While they all share certain needs, each of the six different kinds of printers has their own specific needs, from data centres and service bureaux to traditional commercial printers, digital commercial printers, franchise printers, in-plant, and book printers.

The common need among all these providers is for a consistent, broadly capable workflow that supports their needs upstream to document creation, through all of print production, and downstream through finishing and mailing because speed
The five key rules of workflow

The real value to print providers and their customers comes in how effectively work can be created and managed through the production process. Five key rules are at the core of this new workflow:

1. **Inclusive not exclusive**: The new workflow is open and draws on partnerships and alliances to deliver comprehensive tools that are designed to work in real-world environments that handle multiple types of jobs and use different types of equipment;

2. **Easy to implement**: New workflow tools must leverage known and proven tools from creation through final output so learning curves are short and productivity is not compromised. In addition, implementation must not significantly conflict with existing processes and procedures.

3. **Cost effective**: Print workflows are tied directly to productivity and profitability so workflow investment must yield a prompt, clear return of time and throughput savings on the range and volume of jobs and increase the range and value of services to customers;

4. **Expandable**: A workflow that can be expanded and adapted as technology and customer requirements change provides investment protection;

5. **Leverages current investments**: A single, consistent, flexible workflow allows printers to leverage current investments and increase the return they provide no matter how many machines are on the floor or the number of locations. This should include computer-to-plate and offset printing, which enables printers to make decisions about which press to use as late in the production process as possible and to produce jobs that mix offset and digital output.

and flexibility are the unwritten rules of every job ticket and essential to efficient information flow that delivers profitability.

The present reality and ultimate vision is an interoperable, well-integrated workflow that is effective across a range of technologies that facilitate multiple ways for sending jobs, and how jobs can be set up, prepared and processed. That will allow printers to adapt their workflow to specific applications so they can reduce costs, add new capabilities, and drive new revenue. And new workflows should not be about throwing out what printers already have, but rather optimising and leveraging it for their benefit.

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See other articles written by Paul Haglich, such as The Seven essentials of success in digital printing on www.graphixmag.imix.co.za/73199