Automating Wide Format Printing
by James Harvey, Executive Director, CIP4 Organization

Like most areas of printing, $11 billion (USD) wide format printing segment took a hit in the 2008-2009 recession, but manufacturers have responded to this growth market with better quality and faster processing speeds. Today one of the top areas of interest is integration and automation of wide format printing. As in offset and other forms of digital printing, automation and workflow integration of wide format printing means lower labor and production costs, and the ability to produce more short-run jobs cost effectively.

Led by Hewlett-Packard, CIP4 recently organized a Wide Format Working Group that is looking at applying JDF-enabled automation to wide format printing. They are already drafting an Interoperability Conformance Specification (ICS) document that can be used as the basis for certification testing. The working group includes participants from diverse and key companies, including:

- Agfa
- Caldera Graphics
- Canon
- Cyrious Software
- Dalm
- Data Image Group
- EFI
- EskoArtwork
- Global Graphics Software
- GMG
- Heidelberg
- Hewlett-Packard
- Océ
- Onyx Graphics
- Optimus
- Printable
- Printing Industries of America
- PSik Solutions
- Screen
- VIGC

Jose L. Abad Peiro, Worldwide Program Manager for DesignJet Web Connected Printers and Solutions at Hewlett-Packard (HP) is the chair of the Wide Format Working Group, and he took a few minutes to answer some questions and provide some insight on the motivations for HP and its customers behind this effort.

HARVEY: What is HP’s motivation for leading the effort to add wide format-specific features to JDF; what problem does this solve for you and your customers?

ABAD PEIRO: Having listened to our customers, HP, working together with CIP4 members and HP’s Alliance Partners, has identified a number of gaps in wide format printing workflows. Current challenges include color management and job estimating.

In the case of color management, when customers submit their jobs to print service providers over the Internet they frequently have color management issues such as double color management, wrong rendering intents, or wrong translations from one color space to another, etc. These issues can be resolved if all products involved share the same definition on what needs to be done, and how.

As for job estimating, print service providers have difficulty in providing accurate estimates of how much a job will cost to produce, and therefore how much to charge their customers. By enabling good interoperability with MIS using JDF, accurate job information can be extracted from the wide format printer. This information can be analyzed by the MIS system in order to establish print production costs and margins. The print service provider can therefore generate timely and more accurate customer quotes.
HP strongly believes in choice for the customer. Working with CIP4 members and HP’s Alliance Partners to implement the JDF open industry standard in their solution components provides this choice. Customers are not locked into proprietary systems, their investments are protected and they can invest in additional solution modules as their business needs change. The ‘HP Certification for Wide Format Printing using JDF Exchange’ gives customers the assurance that solution components that have achieved ‘HP Certified’ status will have good levels of interoperability.

HARVEY: When we think about wide format printing applications, beyond billboards and banners, there are some pretty creative applications like wall transfers and bus wraps, using diverse media such as vinyl and synthetic substrates. What aspects of wide format printing does JDF cover, and what needs to be worked on for future editions; or is it simply a matter of defining an ICS that is specific to wide format printing?

ABAD PEIRO: Currently we are focusing our efforts on working with alliances on web-to-print, MIS, Color and RIP vendors.

HARVEY: Are your efforts solely focused on ink-jet wide format, or are older screen printing methods being incorporated?

ABAD PEIRO: Our efforts are focused on ink-jet wide format.

HARVEY: What is the benefit to the printer of incorporating wide format presses into a JDF-enabled automated production environment?

ABAD PEIRO: JDF provides for automation by making sure products and processes are able to interconnect to each other with little or no all user interfacing. HP works with alliance partners to achieve this interoperability. Automation and interoperability is the key to reducing costs in operation for printing and production. One of the benefits of JDF is that products from different manufacturers are able to work with each other. From the web storefront to print production, HP certification assures that Wide Format printing workflow solutions based on JDF integrate well with each other.

With HP certified partner solutions, print service providers can more easily build an e-store front to market their wide format print products and grow their customer base. HP certified partner solutions can help print service providers improve their customer loyalty and differentiate their service offerings through automated CRM tools. Now print service providers can also take advantage of wide format print production automation tools to reduce cost and improve profit.

HARVEY: Is HP selling any JDF-enabled wide format printing solutions into the market today, and if so what are they and do you have any customer examples?

ABAD PEIRO: HP is working with its strategic alliances to ensure JDF capabilities are available in the wide format industry. In the area of JDF, the ‘HP Certification for Wide Format Printing with JDF Exchange’ ensures that HP Certified products “use the same” [JDF] language. Hence, products from different HP alliance vendors that are ‘HP Certified for Wide Format Printing with JDF Exchange’ will have a higher level of interoperability among themselves.