**Automation: Looking Forward**

*An Interview with Henny van Esch, Director of Optimus Group and CEO of CIP4 Organization*

**Question 1:** Is JDF “old news” or is it still growing, and if it’s still growing, where do you think JDF is headed?

**Henny:** JDF is certainly not old news; it is however a fact that the functional extension of JDF has recently slowed down somewhat, which is a good thing. We have reached a point where the specification has become fairly mature, and many integration projects have been installed. So while we might not be hearing much in the media about JDF, that is because it has become a mainstream technology, and has found its way to printers all over the world. So in that sense JDF itself is not “news,” but the results printers are achieving with JDF-based integrations certainly is.

If we look ahead to the next few years we will see further developments in JDF … both in the specification itself and in the adoption of JDF and related technologies … especially in the areas of business-to-business communication, be it buyer-to-printer or printer-to-printer for applications like subcontracting.

**Question 2:** Optimus has been a member of CIP4 since its inception and you, personally, have been very active in CIP4. What was your original motivation for getting involved in CIP4 and has your motivation changed over the years?

**Henny:** Optimus was one of the early adaptors of direct interfacing between MIS and production equipment. As early as Ipex 1993 we were showing integration with the manroland pecom system, not using JDF but using a proprietary link instead. In fact, during that Ipex show there was a conversation on our stand between some industry vendors about the idea of creating a standard for such interfaces. Soon after, Optimus joined what was then CIP3 with the objective of getting some MIS features built into the Print Production Format.

In the meantime Adobe, Agfa, Heidelberg and manroland began working on what would become JDF, and through our work with manroland we got involved with that effort at a fairly early stage. Having gone through the pain of developing different interfaces to various vendors’ systems, my motivation was to contribute to something that would work for all vendors. This is why I have done quite a bit of work in what has become CIP4 … to create something that would work from both a print technology and a MIS perspective. The latter was required because the equipment vendors had little knowledge of MIS, why printers use MIS systems, and what kind of information MIS systems require.

I believe that one of the great achievements of CIP4, apart from JDF itself, is the fact that it brought vendors from all over the industry together, which has resulted in a far greater understanding of each other’s processes and requirements.

My personal motivation has not changed. I still believe it is important that the industry not duplicate efforts, but instead build standards that we can all use. What’s new for me is a drive to expand the potential for automation, which can bring back profitability to an industry that is facing very hard times at the moment.
Question 3: For Optimus, what is the value of JDF?

Henny: For us the biggest value is enabling our customers to take advantage of the benefits of process automation … enhancing efficiency, reducing costs and preventing waste. This fits very well with our company strategy to bring the principals of lean manufacturing to the printing industry. Lean manufacturing provides the tools printers need to analyze, design and plan efficient workflows, and JDF-enabled systems provide the tools to execute lean manufacturing plans.

Question 4: Has JDF helped Optimus in working together better with other vendors or establishing new partnerships or markets?

Henny: Of course! Working with JDF allows us to integrate with any vendor in the world. There were vendors who we worked closely with but we hadn’t integrated with their products; now with JDF we have been able to work together with those vendors to implement automation and create new, closer relationships.

Question 5: Beyond dealing with the ramifications of the 2008-2009 recession, what do you think is the biggest challenge for members of CIP4?

Henny: I would rather speak of opportunities than challenges. The recession has caused many printers to closely look at their organization in order to focus or renew their product offerings, optimize efficiency and remove waste from the organization and production processes. Introducing JDF-based automation is an excellent tool to achieve these goals. Now the economy appears to be picking up and a willingness to invest has returned. Printers must look at investing in and improving their processes even further, and what better way is there than to use JDF to achieve that.

Question 6: Folks in the industry started using the term “production automation” or just “automation,” rather than JDF in the last few years. Is there a difference between automation and automation with JDF?

Henny: Automation (and the benefits of automation) is the goal, and JDF is the way to achieve that goal. So in a way they are two descriptions of the same development, just coming from different angles. JDF has become the de facto standard to achieve automation of production processes and increasingly, business processes, as well. The key to any automation process is communication, and communication in a well-defined, common language. For the printing industry JDF is that language.

Question 7: Where is the growth market for JDF-enabled automation; is it still in Europe and North America, or are you expecting more growth in other areas of the world?

Henny: JDF is already happening outside Europe and the US. Optimus has installed JDF integrations in Australia, Africa and South America. There are also many more examples of highly efficient JDF integrations in countries like Japan, China, India, and so on. In fact, we find that new technology is more easily accepted in these markets than in Europe, where companies tend to be a bit more attached to their existing work methods. There are new printing companies opening their doors in India, the Middle East and Asia, and new businesses invest in new technology and are not hampered by legacy systems and legacy workflows. It would not surprise me if in the next few years what we now call developing economies will outgrow more traditional markets in their adoption of these new technologies. Having said that, there are many printers in Europe and the US who will invest in automation technologies, particularly in the areas of web-to-print, process automation and MIS.

Question 8: Some industry pundits have stated that in ten or fifteen years digital printing will replace offset altogether. How does the migration, or at least the growth of digital printing effect JDF, if at all?
Henny: I’m not sure if making such a distinction between offset printing and digital printing is actually justified. The production of a job, whether produced through offset printing or digital printing, involves a workflow with a number of process steps, various production equipment and resources. It is exactly that workflow that JDF models, and for which it provides that common automation language.

There are some production processes, such as variable layout, that are unique to digital printing. CIP4 members participating in the technical work groups, including representatives of all the major digital press manufacturers, have been preempting the migration to digital print by providing extensive support in the JDF specification for digital printing. For instance, in JDF 1.4 we added support for automated layout of variable data print jobs.

**Question 9:** What do you hope to accomplish during your tenure as CEO of CIP4?

Henny: More and more printers are using JDF-enabled solutions to automate, and more importantly to improve productivity, reduce costs and improve turnaround times. Where three or four years ago most printers who implemented automation had connected a few devices or a couple of departments, now we are seeing a greater number of printers achieve full automation, from job creation to delivery.

That’s an exciting development for CIP4. Many of the benefits of JDF, such as gathering costing data via the MIS and being able to improve customer reporting and invoicing, or automating changes, scheduling and estimating, depend largely on achieving full automation.

For CIP4, we expect that this development will give us greater momentum. Where we have all of the major vendors, and a significant number of medium and small vendors, in membership today, as momentum builds in the marketplace, we expect that many specialty and smaller vendors will join CIP4, get involved and add JDF to their capabilities.

In 2004 JDF got a lot of press attention and market reaction because it was new and exciting. Now the momentum isn’t coming from vendors, but from the printers. In my tenure as CEO, I hope to see this momentum result in growth in CIP4 membership, and ultimately an exponential growth in the number of JDF-enabled solutions in the marketplace.