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The Development of MIS
As acronyms JDF and JMF slip into the background, the development of print management information systems (MIS) is becoming the domain of fewer companies who have specialized in such systems for decades. Big prepress players like Agfa, Kodak and Heidelberg no longer develop specific MIS solutions, as they instead concentrate on building core products that seamlessly integrate with print management software. PrintAction spoke with three MIS vendors who have these about changes, discussing key concepts like Web-to-print, implementation challenges, and development trends.

Gerald Walsh, EFI, Advanced Professional Print Software

Walsh is Director of Market Development for EFI’s Advanced Professional Print Software (APPS) division, which oversees the company’s MIS-related operations, including the Toronto-based Monarch, Pace, PrintSmart and Radiata. He has worked with MIS for the past 26 years, starting with a small Minnesotta firm that was purchased by PrintSmart.

In 2004, EFI initiated a huge shift in printing software when it purchased PrintSafe, subsequently plugging its MIS portfolio with acquisitions of Pace Systems in 2008 and Radiata in early 2010 to increase its presence in packaging. EFI now dominates North America’s MIS landscape with as many installations as the next three or four competitors combined.

Walsh on EFI’s market position: EFI is unique because we are able to look at the complete workflow and all of our management systems. Our goal is to eliminate as many repetitions and touch points within the business as we can – on a continuous, repeating basis. We are really focused on improving profitability on every job within the plant, from the smallest company to the very largest. Because even small four-color offerings, you are going to find a solution that is very close to your business plan and business goals for whatever market you are working in.

Biggest trend in MIS development: Initially, MIS systems were estimating, job costing and accounting systems. They really focused on the administrative side of the print business and that did not change much until five years ago. EFI is really focused these days on understanding the role of the management system to include workflows automation from acquisition to output in the field, on the client’s side or within the plant, so that all the way through production and eliminating the walls between sales and administration and between administration and the shop floor. In the past, even though we had a fully integrated management system, there still tended to be a lot of silos within the business.

A key MIS module: The scheduling aspect of the process has become extremely important. It is still probably one of the biggest silos where people still struggle. We use a dynamic scheduling solution called PrintFlow to schedule the production system, so a single job might involve 10 or 15 operations, but PrintFlow ties all these jobs together into the same accounting system. It will then sequence those jobs based on delivery priorities and also on the characteristics of the individual operation. So if I am on press with a 4-colour job, I can make a lot more sense to run another 4-colour job after that, instead of changing to a job requiring three different RMS colours. This is true not only for the press but also for delivery, equipment, pocket folders, whatever the operation is. PrintFlow creates the most-optimized production plan.

Web-to-print: Think Web-to-print is receiving the most attention because it has been the fastest growth in the over all development. Initially, when printers went to the Internet, they would create a form online and ask clients to fill it out. This actually added a step to the process.

Today, Web-to-print has reduced the amount of steps that are involved and improved the accuracy of the process. This is critical for printers, especially within a digital printing environment. Your average print job might have been $13,000 the past and now it might be $3,000 or $300. You have to work less, manage more jobs, and the difficulties in managing those jobs.

Tim Daisy, Prism

Daisy on MIS for Prism’s win: market position: Our most recent for the print market is to mid-sized printers – 70 to 80 employees and up, with revenues of $12 to $15 million and above. We work very well with printers and agencies where there are multiple processes and the estimating process may be very different from one product line to another. This is where the scheduling system, driving the same equipment on the floor and, at the end of the day, feeding into the same accounting system.

Biggest trend in MIS development: I think the biggest change is in access to information and to the workflow. A production manager or a project supervisor expects to be able to get into the company and see what is going on, to manage the company, from a remote location. The entire report writer is a big part of our mobileMIS functionality. It is a very different approach to report setting. It allows me to create dashboards to not only share the data, but also to drill into the data and open up corresponding screens. We have written a report that shows all of our sales orders for Customer X over the past 30 days. I can create that list and also allow that sales order itself be actionable. In fact, many of our customers actually run the application more through the report writer than through the native screens.

Web-to-print: Everybody interprets Web-to-print differently. Some people simply want shopping-cart functionality. Others want an ability to go out and create a digital offer and then redirect the effort.

Stephen McWilliam, Avanti Systems

McWilliam is the Executive VP with Avanti and has directed the company’s strategic move into new markets for the past five years. The Toronto-based company was acquired by CIP4 president Richard Wallis, who – with a loan from IBM’s new personal-computer division – was inspired by a friend in the print industry to develop a consistent estimating application. From an application that began life on two 5.25-inch floppy drives (one for the program and one for storing data), Avanti’s Graphic Arts Management System is today one of the most-significant MIS solutions in North America with revenues exceeding more than 1.5 million lines of code.

McWilliam on Avanti’s MIS market position: In the mid-1990s, the industry editors asked: ‘Avanti is the open-system system on the market – what does that translate into for a print shop?’. It was at that point that we were engaging all of the various applications that they have invested in over the years to solve a particular problem – cross media, imposition or other processes. Now the challenge is managing multiple systems that can’t talk to one another. Avanti solves that problem for them.

A key MIS module: MIS solutions revolve around the job – just like the shop. But there are many folks in the shop, whether they are in customer support, sales or management, who are working around the customer. Avanti CRM makes that shift for them. Making the system customer-centric versus job-centric; giving a real-time view of everything to do with the customer on one screen. The important part is that everything is coming off the same database that there isn’t system for production and another for CRM that can easily get out of sync. This is the primary reason printers are dropping standalone contact management solutions like salesforce.com and ACT! for integrated CRM systems.

Web-to-print: Web-to-print is moving into phase two. It is no longer a way to just submit a job into the shop but can be a full-blown customer portal, where a self-serve way, customers can manage all the interactions with the print shop. Web-to-print is a full suite of Web-to-print modules including catalog, salesforce, e-Commerce, print-on-demand (POD), job submittal. Avanti also provides APIs to make it easy to integrate leading third-party MIS solutions like PrintMe, PEGE, XMPie, NewDoc and Printfile.

Biggest implementation challenge: Software is a very complex product, so if a Print MIS project is going to fail, it will not be about software functionality – it will be in the implementation process. That starts with properly defining the project. A Print MIS project touches all departments and areas of the business. Managing the project cannot be something that a line or a part-time guy alone is handling. Someonewith someone just assigned it as extra work for your spare time. It has three key ingredients: A project champion from senior management who has a true commitment to training, a very bottomed down project plan that both the printer and the software vendor buy in to and, finally, engagement with the whole company.

We have a module developed by Prism and available with TNT’s closed desk. It is a sales-processing, customer-facing and accounting system that allows users to order stock products, track orders, look at inventory levels, define price, do order very much a shopping-cart approach; it also has a partner with OPS, Online Print Solutions. They are more of a way to a run provider, allowing online creative submission of files, variable data printing, the whole system. We also integrate with EFI’s Responder Solutions Incorporated.

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Print Management Systems

Over the past couple of years, some of printing’s biggest technology players quietly stepped back from developing their own print-focused business management systems, commonly referred to as Management Information Systems (MIS). Below are some of the remaining, key MIS players, for whom the passing and dissemination of JDF- and XML-based data remains a core competency.

HIFLEX MIS

HIFLEX focuses its MIS development on six primary modules categories, including MIS Office (estimating, ordering, CRM and material management), MIS Factory (production planning, SPIC, JDF integration), MIS Information System (executive reporting), Webshop (Web-to-print), Print Supplies (print and media purchasing), and HIFLEX Mobile (Estimate and CRM) on the Apple (iPhone).

Recent upgrades: In September 2010, HIFLEX demonstrated its new MIS and Sustainability Initiative Workflow (SIW) application, which is designed to help printers conform to environmental-certification standards. As well, HIFLEX recently enhanced its Web-to-print module by bundling (at no extra cost) a number of additional software licenses with its HIFLEX Webshop, including Callas pdfSofaletter, PDF-Xchange, Kropi and PngFipx.

Headquarters: Aachen, Germany.

DALIM ES 1.1

ES1.1 is a full delivery and approval system that integrates with third-party MIS, subject-approval workflow engines, and DALIM positions ES as a system to handle multi-channel content delivery and print. DALIM ES 1.1 also enhances the company’s MIS capabilities and improves the user experience for shop-floor data collection.

New modules: ES 1.1 makes available two new optional modules: Enterpriseecal Workflow and eProcurement. The first option accepts job set-up request, purchase orders, prices, which are automatically fed back to the customer’s system. The company claims to have over 700 direct installations of its system.

New upgrades: In April 2010, PrintSmith was introduced with a new user interface, which allows users to log in to the system from any five business segments, including CRM, TQM, Materials Management, Accounts and E-Commerce. The company claims to have over 500 direct installations of its system.

Printers Software Presidio

Printers Software Presidio announced a working relationship to integrate Pressero Web-to-print module, developed by Albertay Systems, with Pressero. As an order enters through Pressero, Presidio will automatically flag orders as Presidio orders and vice versa.

Headquarters: Sarasota, Florida.

Shuttleworth

Shuttleworth Business Systems, a family-owned company, specializes in print management, Accounts and E-Commerce. The company claims to have over 700 direct installations of its system.

New upgrades: In May 2010, Lepex introduced a new workflow tool – to speed up the quoting process, a free upgrade to its esti- mating module. The tool also includes an automated text functionality that allows technicians to interface and integrate with the Quotation Letter and Works Order Report on selections from the Wizard. Multiple estimates and alternative options can now be included on one page. Lepex also offers to support building straight EDI when the Wizard is deployed.

Third-party integration: In December 2009, Printers Software Presidio announced a working relationship to integrate Pressero Web-to-print module, developed by Albertay Systems, with Pressero. As an order enters through Pressero, Presidio will automatically flag orders as Presidio orders and vice versa.

Headquarters: Sarasota, Florida.

Printers Software Presidio

Having entered the MIS market in 1999, Presidio MIS is now built around eight primary modules, including Estimating, Job Control, Schedule, Shopfloor, Accounting, Inventory, Order Tracking, and Estimating. Add-ons are available to interface and integrate with other business systems. The company claims to have installed various versions of its software in over 3,000 locations.

Recent upgrades: Presidio includes eBuilder as a template-based variable data applications that allows customers to customize, proof and approve documents like business cards and brochures from a Web browser. eBuilder, allowing the company, then generates an imposed press-ready PDF when the order is placed.

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Headquarters: Sarasota, Florida.
DMS! Tracing its founding roots back to 1984, DMS! describes its MIS as a multi-lin- gual, multi-currency software package that integrates the administrative and production processes for all printing techniques, including toner, sheetfed and web offset, gravure, and all finishing processes. The company has over 13 modules, with a key application being DMS! Direct Ma- chine Interface (DMI) to integrate con- ventional fives and toner-based process, as well as post-press equipment. According to DMS!, DMS! is ideally suited for multi- environment projects.

New Modules: In March 2010, while at Ipex, DMS! introduced four new Prod- uct Suites. The company describes the

Globe-Tek GT Enterprise

Founded in 1985, Globe- Tek’s GT Enterprise is now a complete MIS solution for medium-to-large-size commercial (offset and toner-based) and packaging print- ers. The MIS is developed in C++, and runs on Oracle 9i. GT Enterprise is fully com- pliant with Open Database Connectivity protocols and able to network with IDFX/XML-based systems.

Recent upgrades: Showcased in September 2010 at Label- expo, Globe-Tek’s Visual Schedule Board application is based on a re-design and overhaul of scheduling components in the GT application, including the Graphic User Interface. The application’s Gantt chart provides an overview of all the jobs in the plant, while an analytic tool provides a cost comparison when changing/swapping resources. More features of the Visual Schedule Board include:

- grouping of jobs filing and reservations (including scheduled operative tasks), multi-access and overlapping schedules, what-if-scenarios, and bottleneck detection.

headquarters: Toronto, Ontario.

Technique MIS

Established in 1995, Technique focuses in MIS development on 11 module cate- gories, including Customer Relationship Management, Order Management, Data Collection, Inventory Management, Job Costing, Customer Portal, and Connect. The company claims to have custo- mers spread out in over 17 countries and in-plant facilities.

New Modules: At Ipex in May, Tech- nique, which focuses in the book, maga- zine, commercial printing, newspaper and direct marketing sectors, released nine new MIS applications. The CMYK Community Feeds module delivers real-time information from a variety of Web sources, while the Quick Printer module provides Web-based pricing and order entry. The other seven new modules are called Book Estimating, Markets CRM (Apple iPad), Complaints Management, Configurable Sales Inquiry, Commercial Shrink, Data Collection Facility (with dashboards), and CEP Update.

headquarters: Leeds, United Kingdom.

Avanti Graphic Arts Management System

In July 2010, Avanti released version 12 of its Graphic Arts Management System, which now includes over 20 modules for commercial and in-plant facilities. The company claims to have joined forces to inte- grate with various production processes, including In-Plant, Finishing, Order Management, and inventory Management (CRM) module includes new business-generation and lead-tracking capabilities. The company’s Desktop Business Intelligence module allows for tracking change information for customer orders, quotes, and job status. In April 2010, Avanti won a Best of Show award in the Print Midwest category for its CRM module with Microsoft Outlook integration. This provides for the automatic synchroniza- tion of emails, contacts, tasks and ap- pointments between Avanti’s Print MIS and Microsoft Outlook.

Third-party integration: Version 12 now includes the ability to easily integrate Avanti MIS with Professional Technology’s Web-to-print application, which allows users to pass on transaction information to a third-party. More third-party integrations in- clude Adobe Print Shop, Xerox DocuWorx, XMPl and Heidelberg Prinect.


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