

PRINT MIS:

A LOOK AT THE PAST BRINGS US TO THE FUTURE

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When I began working in the print industry back in the 1980s, the technology landscape was quite different from what it is today. Layup sheets were done manually by the print estimator in an effort to maximize the printcuts. Estimates were done with a calculator, a pen, a telephone, and paper. The paper reps came in and updated the pricing binders. And if you wanted to know information about a press run, you walked over to the press operator and asked him (sidenote: I don't ever recall working with a female press operator!)

Film was shot in a darkroom. Plates were burned. Presses hummed. When things went well, we didn't run out of paper or ink, and the job was delivered on time. Inventory, estimating, scheduling, shipping, invoicing, and everything in between were *all* manual processes.

Fast-forward 30 Years

Automation is everywhere. We have streamlined systems, integrated equipment, and eliminated the majority of manual processes. Departments are functioning more efficiently than ever before, and print shops large and small now recognize the value of implementing a print MIS solution.

However, many still don't fully appreciate the true impact that a robust print MIS can have on the bottom line. They view MIS as a tool that *only* produces quotes, estimates, and job tickets.

Infotrends, the print industry's leading analyst firm, defines the print MIS category as "a system designed to track jobs in real time through each step, delay, and change as it moves through the print production process; providing owners and managers with the ability to see what is going on within the business. When integrated with the various systems within a production environment and the appropriate external systems, a print MIS can provide efficiency to a printer by identifying key information, such as workflow bottlenecks, and by automating tasks such as job estimating and scheduling that can save money."

The Role of MIS Today

Today, printers are moving beyond the basics of just "putting ink on paper" to managing the complete marketing cycle of print projects or adding new business lines such as fulfillment, direct mail, marketing services, and/or large format. Many are investing in the next steps

of automation and integration with a renewed focus on sales and marketing, and providing tools that help their customers access the print shop at any time, from anywhere, and on any mobile device. This helps them differentiate themselves from their competitors and meet the needs of the print buyer who has higher expectations for customer service and is more "technology savvy." "Speed," for many, has become the new competitive focal point.

The Disconnect

However, one of the biggest challenges many shops face is connecting these disparate "islands of automation," which result in break points in the workflow (where data has been entered in one system and has to be re-entered into another system(s), resulting in duplicate entry of data and the potential for human error). Additionally, as more companies purchase new equipment or software to replace the old, they are quickly realizing integration capabilities which they have not had in the past. This is due largely to evolving JDF standards.

Unfortunately, many print shops are still utilizing legacy systems that are not Web-based, cannot handle the new lines of business very well, and cannot integrate with other internal and external systems. As a result, they often revert to creating manual workarounds that have become a part of the formal process (remember the 80s?).

Maximize the Effectiveness of Your MIS

Printers are not using print MIS to its fullest capabilities and often not implementing existing features. Some are even purchasing a second print MIS and running them concurrently in an effort to remedy the situation.

So how can a print shop successfully integrate legacy equipment and islands of automation, while remaining agile, competitive, and poised for growth?

First off, you need to understand your business and conduct a thorough needs assessment to ensure that your print MIS solution is helping to drive your business, so that you can focus on where you want to take your company, rather than where it has been. When done right, your print MIS enables your company to handle growth successfully and profitably. And because your business is in a constant state of evolution, it should be adaptable, scalable, and modular.

WHAT'S HOT!

Additionally, your print MIS should be the *only* system of record to help your team stay organized without the reliance of “workaround” solutions such as spreadsheets or other applications. Everything needs to be able to communicate with the print MIS, which is why it is recommended that any new equipment purchases meet JDF standards. With JDF, a printer can begin implementing automation on a limited basis and add processes and equipment at a later point without the need to reengineer processes that are already automated. What this means to you and your shop is that your new press can communicate with the Print MIS, which can communicate with your prepress, and your accounting package can now receive posts from your Print MIS.

As orders are becoming more personalized, and production has been driven by JIT ordering via the Web or EDI, print MIS continues to shine in this area. It removes many of the redundant and “non-value-add” tasks of creating an order and moving and tracking this order throughout the production cycle. The demand to ingest Web-to-print or transaction jobs directly into the print MIS will continue to be one of the highest demand requests going forward.

By having real-time data and information at their fingertips, company owners now see the value in extracting business analytics and costing data produced by these new pieces of equipment or software. With the new Print MIS, the business intelligence that can be gleaned will prove

critical for the business decision makers within a company to ensure profitability, sustainability, and growth.

Print MIS is evolving to become the central nervous system of a company's operation. It extends out and touches almost every phase of the business, in addition to every aspect of the production workflow. Print MIS has, indeed, become the necessary piece of a company's business and production lifecycle.

Joanne Gore is the director of marketing for Avanti (www.avantisystems.com) and has more than twenty years of B2B marketing and communications experience, including corporate and small office environments. She graduated as a graphic designer and, prior to joining the corporate world, worked in the print industry as an art director, typesetter, and printing consultant. Joanne is a marketing geekette by day, a fitness instructor by night, and a mom 24-7.

Avanti develops innovative, award-winning Print MIS solutions that help print and communication organizations automate all facets of their business and cultivate a more meaningful relationship with their customer. Since 1984, Avanti has been providing industry-leading and JDF-certified print management software to commercial and in-plant print shops. The company has developed the most open industry solutions for sheetfed, web, digital, large-format, and binderies with integrated modules extending from the Internet through to the shop floor, CRM, and invoicing.

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LIVE Case Study