

Get connected: management information systems will make work flow easier

Optimising your workflow by using an MIS will increase productivity, save time and money, and give customers a more streamlined experience. By *Neel Madsen*.

As pre-press production becomes more efficient and automation on presses cuts changeover times, there is an increasing need to ensure that all steps in the whole production process are as efficient as possible. Waste, be in materials or time, must be eliminated as far as possible. The software solution is to implement a complete management information system (MIS) to monitor, measure and manage operations. This becomes even more effective when combined with a 'lean management' approach, which employs techniques to combat waste.

Integration needed

German software house, The Quick Brown Fox GmbH, offers the Aramis MIS and Portos web portal solution aimed mainly at packaging pre-press companies and trade shops. Customers include York Repro-graphics Group, Contact Originators, Reprographic Systems in Eire and Northern Ireland, and Matthews Brand Solutions.



Aramis is a job management solution specified for packaging print that can be adapted to the individual customer's needs. Its user interfaces take into account the requirements for each individual job be it corrugated, labels or film. There is also complete integration with Esko's Automation Engine and Webcenter. The software will soon include print forme management to simplify trade shops' daily operations through its automatic and transparent management of sleeves.

Willi Welsch, chief executive officer, commented, 'I am surprised to see, how many companies in the UK are still working with several isolated tools for managing different parts of their business instead of using one integrated solution. The potential for automation by connecting the order entry system with the production workflow management system (such as Esko's Automation Engine) via JDF/JMF is still immense, but in many companies left almost untouched. Yet, the understanding of integration options and benefits is constantly growing, this is something we are really observing and also are supporting by our Aramis MIS solution.'

He continued, 'Pre-press service providers are becoming more and more aware of the fact that integration necessarily needs to include their customers, too. Web portals for comprehensive job tracking and online approvals, like our Portos, help to speed up the processes significantly and make them much more secure.'

Intelligent business

Shuttleworth Business Systems launched MIS version 5.1 at user meetings held in June and July. The new version incorporates Business Intelligence, a set of tools including enhanced dashboards, customer specific KPIs, user definable reporting, executive analysis and web based reporting together with mobile apps.

The MIS package also encompasses a new user interface (UI).

Whitlam Label goes live with EFI Radius

Whitlam Label is based in Center Line, in Michigan, and has facilities around the world. It has recently become the latest EFI PSI Flexo user to convert and go live with EFI Radius ERP software for packaging, which is used by 75% of the top 400 printers in North America by revenue.

The printer worked closely with the EFI team and enjoyed a smooth and on-schedule implementation of the ERP system. 'It takes a talented group of committed people to implement an ERP system efficiently,' said Alex Elezaj, chief operating officer. 'Our group worked diligently with the EFI Radius team and we accomplished what we set out to do in the expected timeframe.'

'EFI is committed to strong customer care and to providing solid upgrade paths for our PSI Flexo users. We are looking forward to long term partnership and providing Whitlam with state of the art management systems designed to help manage business more proactively,' said David Taylor, general manager of EFI Radius.

The design of the UI has a Microsoft Outlook style, look and feel, making the software easier and intuitive to use whilst providing a customisable view for each user.

The company estimates that between 60% to 80% of the enquiries its customers receive come in via e-mail. It has therefore developed a drag and drop facility which allows e-mails to be imported directly into the system. This will recognise known customer addresses and create a new event while saving attached files.

Bryan Aplin, business development manager, said, 'We have created the new interface so that our customers can get the maximum out of the MIS system and offer their customers the best level of service possible while maximising their sales

Choosing the right system

Matthew Peacock, manager of Vision in Print, advises on how to specify your MIS

If births, deaths, divorce and changing job are the most stressful events in life then implementing a new MIS may be close to being added to the list. But it doesn't have to be, and properly approached can lead to a more streamlined, effective and happier working environment. Success starts with the way in which a new MIS is specified, just as much as choosing the right system.

Too often a new MIS is chosen, with the best of intentions, by a select few individuals usually including finance and IT. The result may be an excellent choice, but implementation often founders when it is imposed on existing inefficient office procedures, and users fail to understand its purpose, how to apply it to their jobs and perhaps feel threatened by it.

The solution is to involve a small team of respected users, representing the main functions, to streamline their current working methods and then develop a functional specification and for the new system to support them. An independent professional facilitator will guide the user team and be able to ask challenging but tactful questions and coach them in the appropriate analytical tools and useful lean techniques. At key stages, the user team must confirm their suggestions with senior managers and then communicate project progress to their colleagues.

With effective facilitation the user team will identify shortcomings in their current processes and develop streamlined alternatives. An effective way to do this is using flipcharts and stick-it notes to produce a 'multiple activity chart' of current methods, and then facilitate the team using lean techniques to minimise wasteful steps.

Multiple activity charts show process steps, arranged in

logical progression along 'swim lanes' for each person or department involved in the process. A 30% reduction in the number of process steps is not uncommon before even implementing a new MIS or upgrading an existing one! And often user team members are surprised how much better they understand the challenges and information needs of their colleagues by participating in the charting process.

The final flipcharted multiple activity chart can be transferred to Visio, or a spreadsheet, for ease of communication with MIS vendors and others. The team should also develop an 'information matrix' showing information required by each department and indication whether it is vital, important or useful and indication the information origins and use on essential documentation. The information matrix is best prepared on a spreadsheet projected onto a large screen so that the user team can agree its content by consensus.

Together with a wish list of non-specific system features for users, the streamlined multiple activity chart and information matrix provide checklists for evaluating and testing user functionality of prospective MIS packages. Prospective systems can be rated compared on each feature as 'fully capable', 'partial capability' or 'requires bespoke software'. Of course, other factors such as cost, ability to share data with other commercial software must be identified as well as the vendor's commercial stability, ability to provide good technical support, etc, must be added to the full specification.

With structured participation of users to specify their needs and gain their 'buy in' from the start of an MIS selection, successful implementation with minimum stress is much more likely.

opportunities.' He continued to explain that the upgrade is centred round the ability to use the system more quickly and efficiently in order to make it the centre of the business and drive all events through it.

Version 5.1 now enables user-defined groups to be set up so that for instance sales can create a group, which shows only the areas of the system that is particularly relevant to them. Other new features include a search function and an option to export data to Excel.

Paul Deane said, 'We are excited about the new version 5.1 as it offers an end-to-end MIS for printers of all types and sizes. There are many challenges facing printers today and, critical to the success of any modern business, is the need to add value to the supply chain and to deliver a world class customer service.'

Constant expansion

EFI acquired the MIS/ERP provider Radius Solutions in 2010, and in 2011, it further expanded by acquiring Prism Group. Both of these

acquisitions enhanced the company's portfolio of solutions for the packaging print industry, with Radius replacing the PSI Flexo system.



Radius is an integrated ERP/MIS solution for flexible packaging, labels and folding cartons that offers modules for every part of the business, including estimating and order handling, production scheduling, shop floor data collection, purchasing and materials movement, job costing, manufacturing resource planning, financial management, customer relationship management and business intelligence.

Digital link

The most recent product offering from Label Traxx is Digi Traxx, a new tool developed to give companies with existing business management systems the ability to automate order production to the HP Indigo press. Orders are accepted via XML with the tool adding key data elements such as digital eye marks and step and repeat, not in the existing system. It then creates the necessary JDF files and sends them to the HP digital front end or to Esko's Automation Engine.

Commenting on the product introductions, vice president of sales and operations, Luther Erlund, said, 'As more and more label printers and converters move to digital printing, they often find their existing business management software cannot fully support the complexities of the new digital presses. Digi Traxx provides the link to reap the benefits of automating the order entry and production process without replacing existing business systems.' ■