In-Plant Printer Edition

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Ricoh Software & Services | Ecosystem eBook Series

Input: The Starting Block

The Starting Block

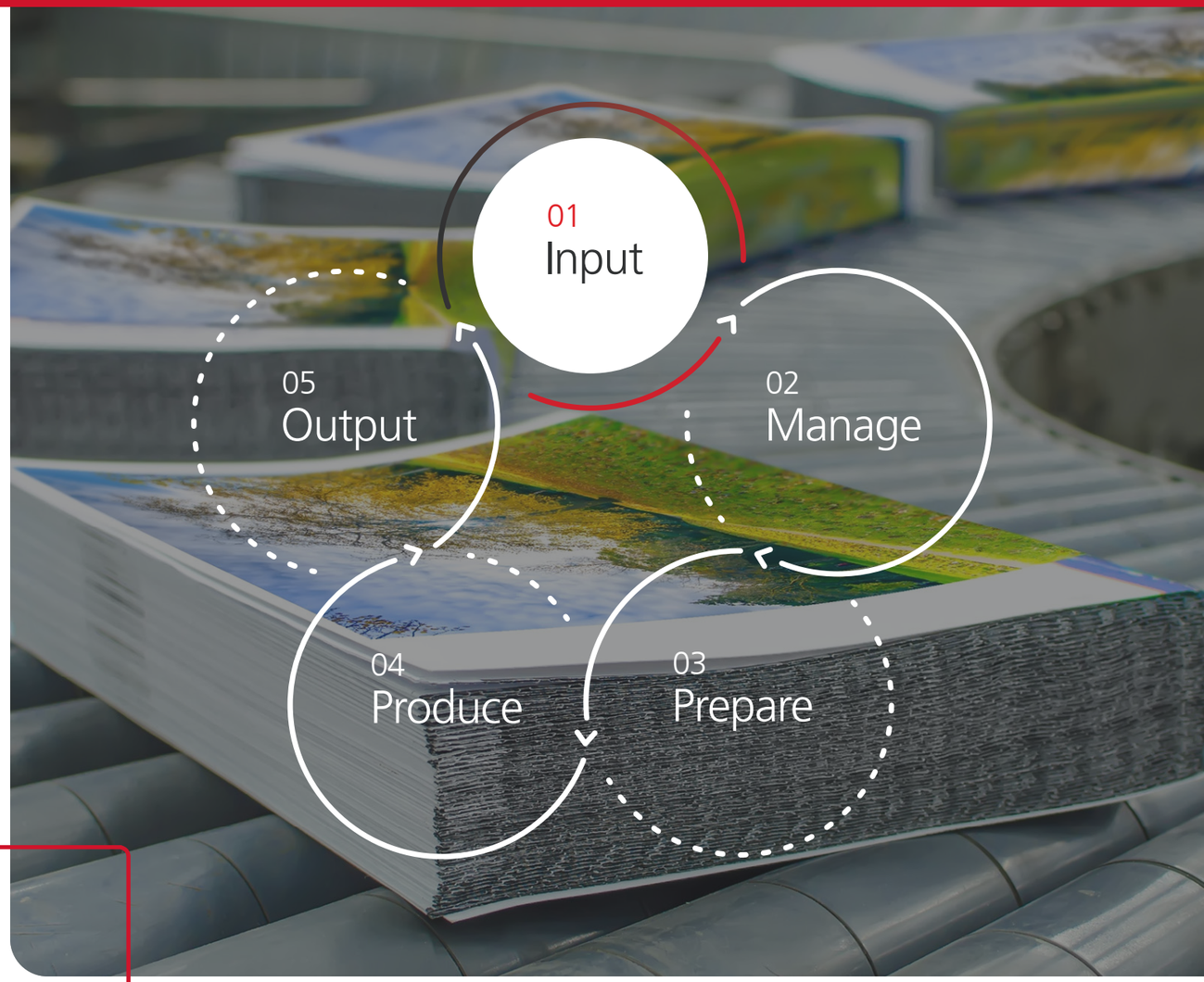
Simply put, in-plant printers - insurance, banking/finance, retail, education, manufacturing or government, to name a few - need to prove their worth and not force the companies they serve to seek an outside alternative, saving the organization money while staying competitive.

It is undoubtedly a tall order, so how do they do this?

For starters, in-plant printers need a proactive approach to be able to manage the ecosystem infrastructure that drives their print business forward. The days of relying on whiteboards, spreadsheets, and team knowledge to bring work onboard, capture department specifications, and optimize production output are in the past. No matter the size of your in-plant facility, limiting the touchpoints on the job is your path to efficiency and overall satisfaction.

Think of it as a relay race: every runner has their position, but it takes a team plan to ensure that everyone understands the pace and maximizes their handoff points. The lead runner has a starting block to help them launch, so they spend extra time understanding how to use it to get the best advantage when the starter pistol fires, but ultimately there is a handoff to the next stage, who is equally important in getting to the finish line.

Your print starting block is a solid system to capture job orders using a process that standardizes every element, the rest of the team gets it done.



The Common Onboarding Problem

Every job that comes into your in-plant facility has a few elements in common, with the most basic intake starting with the following questions:

- **Who/which department is ordering the job?**
- **What and where is the work to be printed?**
- **When is the job due?**
- **How will it be charged?**

Each question appears easy, but even these basics can set off a chain of emails, phone calls, and conversations that consume time and resources.

- **Who/which department is ordering the job?** The answer can be complex. While the contact information should always be in the record, departmental orders may be missing a responsible party. Simple things like contact details can be out-of-date as people change jobs or working locations and there is rarely a process to verify details that come in by email, fax, or phone call.
- **What and where is the work to be printed?** The job assets may be a file on a server that is printed regularly, or it may be a new job with a file attached or a pointer to a file location. Depending on the naming conventions in use, it may be challenging to determine what version of the file is to be printed. Using the wrong version is a crucial mistake that adds time and cost to the job. It's easier if a digital asset or content management system (CMS) is in use, but still many in-plants rely on directory hierarchies and hot folders to manage the work they produce.
- **When is the job due?** Delivery timeframes can be a point of negotiation in the plant. Some work is set up on a regular cadence, while other work comes in ad hoc requiring scheduling. Relationships and perceived urgency can color how work is slotted, which may not promote efficiency.
- **How will it be charged?** Charging for the work is another pain point. Some in-plants use charge numbers but may also accept credit cards, purchase cards, or even cash. Others look at the in-plant as a cost of doing business and avoid the conversation about the cost of the work and its market pricing.

For plants that outsource some of their work the order entry process takes on added complexity. There are real costs to working with an outside vendor. Without some rigor in the order entry process, it is possible to accept jobs that carry a higher cost than anticipated, leaving everyone frustrated.

Relay teams create race plans that account for race conditions and the behavior of other runners by standardizing their approach to changing conditions. Job order entry requires the same approach because mistakes can and do happen when every inbound order is seen as unique, requiring individual handling.

Speed Through Production with Automation

Job order entry is designed to capture the information to execute the job. However, gathering the job specifications comes with the risk of error because it's easy to create a personal shorthand from a series of email or phone conversations for everything from paper sizes to due dates. The more people there are taking orders in the plant, the more variation develops, creating a very inefficient process.

Those conversations may happen several times during production as each new touchpoint needs assurances about the intent of the production.

Automating job specification capture is the starting block for production efficiency. There are several approaches that in-plants use to normalize how they onboard a job. A common practice is to use a web-to-print solution that forces users to provide a minimal level of detail before the work goes into production. Product templates for each type of printed product the plant can accept are useful because they include the specification ranges for sizing, paper constraints, and finishing options. The magic in this approach is how you lock down each entry element to ensure that sizes and options are limited to what you can produce. This simple solution ensures that no work comes in that can't be produced. It also makes the order entry process fully self-service.

Additional Automation Opportunities

If a Print Management Information System (MIS) is used, there could also be an online quote request portal available for users. These portals are directly linked to the estimating and costing processes of the print MIS and guide users to answer the minimal job specifications to enter the job. Many print MIS portals also allow users to upload their artwork and data files that can be submitted into the workflow once converted to a production job.

File formats are another area where verification and validation can be helpful. If the plant workflow is based on receiving PDF files and someone sends a PCL or an MS Word document, what is the protocol to solve that challenge? These situations can be routed through automated handling when the right elements are in place, eliminating the need for manual intervention.

Create Universal Onboarding for Efficiency

Ad hoc or one-off jobs wreak havoc on the best-laid plans for automated job on-boarding. It may not be possible to capture these custom requests with your web-to-print or print MIS portal, so users may still submit details through email. The power is in setting up processes so that requestors are guided to provide the minimal information needed in a normalized format, allowing in-plant staff to convert it into a job ticket.

One commonly overlooked solution to assist in on-boarding custom orders is to have internal staff use the web-to-print or print MIS portals. A customer support representative can convert the email or paper-based information into an order using the same software solutions for the routine work. The only difference being the internal user will have a higher access level with the ability to enter more specifications and set more customizations. By using the existing solutions, the order can be converted to a job and retain any set automation into the downstream print production workflow.

The Bottom Line

Just like short distance track runners, getting off the starting block is often a predictor for the outcome of the entire race. It is the same for your job on-boarding process. If there are too many methods to request a print, it takes longer to do the work. If the job and file information is not standardized, it makes for an awkward and slow exchange into the print MIS and subsequent workflow.

Fix your job on-boarding to not falter at the start, and your entire print production workflow can run. If you're ready to optimize your job onboarding, contact us for more information and how a workflow assessment may help determine your workflow needs.

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