



Taking Control of Commercial Print Management

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Introduction

Every business is facing similar struggles, starting with the need to have accountability and control across business and production functions and ending with an analysis of how well each are performing. For commercial print companies, the number of touchpoints in the workflow, combined with complex production, the wide range of raw materials, and the growing product mix, intensifies the need to manage, and monitor, the entire end-to-end process.

During the changing market needs over the last few years, print and digital are rarely separate mediums. As customers decide how and when they want to consume content, managing the requirements needed to deliver jobs may mean that the current solutions in the business and production workflow have fallen out of sync with current management and customer needs.

As each business grows, adds new equipment, and expands their capabilities, the existing control mechanisms become a mismatch. This lack of alignment may result in some types of jobs being poorly managed or not managed at all.

This is the perfect time to revisit opportunities to optimize print management in order to handle the growing number of jobs and their evolving characteristics.

In this paper we look at the current state of commercial printing: changes in customer needs and subsequent technology requirements, the role your employees, and the print management to ensure that the solution adoption is providing the infrastructure to optimize production and business workflows.

The journey to making the best decisions for managing any size commercial print business begins with an understanding of what is possible. No matter what the current print management environment looks like today, there is a path to success, for the organization and its employees.



“This is the perfect time to revisit opportunities to optimize print management.”

Pat McGrew
McGrew Group Inc.

1. Commercial Printing is Industrial Strength Printing

Definitions of commercial printing vary depending on who you talk to in the industry. Most printers will agree it is the print segment that services clients with diverse print needs, often in larger quantities. Commercial printing differs from enterprise or quick printing because the infrastructure is built for diverse formats and demanding delivery schedules. And, while some companies operate in multiple modes to service their diverse customer sets, and there is some overlap in the products offered, the product catalogs of commercial print service providers generally encompass a greater range of offerings.

Some of the common commercial print formats include:

- Announcements
- Books and Manuals
- Booklets and Brochures
- Business Cards
- Business forms
- Catalogs/Magalogs
- Directories
- Greeting Cards
- Inserts
- Magazines
- Posters
- Print shells
- Stationery
- Custom print work

Commercial print is truly industrial strength printing. Why? Commercial printers are required to take in all types of printing requests, produce the work in the required quantities, deliver the final product with exceptional quality, do it all at a competitive price and do it accurately due to very slim margins for error.

To provide a superior customer experience and a high level of customer satisfaction, commercial printers need print technology that meets their print demands and software that gives them the control to onboard, preflight, manage, track, deliver and audit the entire process. It begins when the work comes into the business, continues as it flows through their production environment and is delivered to the customer, and completes the journey when the job is invoiced.

2. The Role of Digital Printing

Today, the technology landscape continues to expand beyond offset and hybrid technologies to fully embrace digital print solutions. This shift is due to commercial printers recognizing the value of high-quality digital print as part of their product offering, changing the way they look at their business, their production environments, future investment plans, processes, and on-going print management requirements. Offset and hybrid commercial printers know that the benefits of digital printing can be significant, providing a path to cost reduction and process optimization as well as being healthy for the business plan as it enables new product offerings and expands the opportunities that help the business grow.

Digital printing offers the ability to tailor offerings quickly and easily to the variety of requests from their buyers. With a digital print engine, whether it is utilizing cut sheets of paper or leveraging paper on a roll, a printer can start with white paper and then transform it to mono, highlight color, or full-color printing. This flexibility frees commercial printers from minimum run requirements in the thousands and allows them to be more competitive with pricing and turnaround times. Reduced setup and changeover costs, especially when combined with innovations in imposition and ganging, let them accept smaller short-run jobs while still producing the high-quality print their clients demand. Additionally, they can leverage data and software technology to offer variable data personalization and trigger-driven customization across their print offerings. Taking it to another level, they may opt to offer embellished print and finishing through metallic inks, clear or white inks or other types of digital embellishments, including foil.

The digital print technology available to commercial printers today is just one of the many opportunities available to advance their business and gain access to new revenue streams.



3. The Role of Workflow and Print Management

To understand how the latest software technology can optimize and expand a commercial print business, it is crucial to understand the importance of workflow and the print management process. Workflows inform how work is brought into an organization, prepared for the production process, moved through steps for quality assurance and, ultimately, how it is printed and delivered. The print management process is also a critical part of making sure all production work is billed, and that each job can be audited to make sure it is as profitable or cost-effective as the business estimated prior to accepting the customer's work.

To level-set, workflow is the set of processes a job follows from the time it is brought into the print environment until it is delivered to the customer. Some print workflows begin at the point of job sale, but all begin with its people as the foundation in the onboarding of work, capturing specifications, verifying raw material inventories, and reviewing scheduling against the known delivery requirements. While many commercial print businesses have comprehensive tools like print Management Information Systems (MIS) to help capture job information and integrate it into the business systems, others rely on its people to push the process at the appropriate pace and with the appropriate information.

In order to understand the importance of workflow in print management, let's look at the key processes of onboarding, monitoring and optimizing your processes.

Onboarding processes are often time-consuming for everyone. It is where job specifications are captured, capabilities are verified, decisions are made about delivery timeframes, and cost and production estimates are determined.. If there are mistakes in estimating the costs, margins are at risk and if there are mistakes in estimating the time to produce the work, deadlines are at risk.

Job Preparation takes over at the point where job assets are received. Those assets may be print-ready files from a prepress service agency or files sent directly by a customer that require some preparation to make them print ready. Prepress activities to impose the file, preflight, adjust print objects, manage color space changes, and deal with change requests that can consume more time than was built into the estimation and quote, so tracking them is important. Scheduling the print on the available devices and ensuring that it prints as expected is the goal, so tracking each job and alerting the team to anything that might stop the on-time delivery becomes essential element of the workflow.

Monitoring the jobs is an integrated process that doesn't end when it is printed if the job calls for enhancements like varnishing or foiling, and then final finishing.

Finishing might happen inline as part of the printing process on some offset, cut sheet and continuous feed printing setups, but many commercial printers use near-line finishing to maximize their finishing equipment.

Optimizing the flow of a print job is extremely important because each touchpoint has a cost associated with it. Today, software technology makes it possible to automate the onboarding process and many of the preproduction steps. It also offers the opportunity to track work as it makes its way through each process before, during and after printing—through to delivery to the customer. This tracking information becomes the audit trail for customer service needs, cost reconciliation and business planning. When a printer can automate these processes while also streamlining and optimizing the work that is going through them, production staff can focus on more valuable work.

Not all software solutions for print workflow are created equal, so it pays to review how you manage and control your jobs and if your current methods are giving you the best return on investment. Print management, whether it is a manual, semi-manual or a completely automated process, should optimize the process of routing jobs in the print environment to the right machine at a scheduled time. Whether there is a single device or multiple output devices, print management tools are essential for the operations or production manager to optimize the time-consuming processes for getting work to the print device and start the work.

Automation is your fastest path to improved margins. The return on investment (ROI) is often enough to not only pay back the investment in the workflow and print management software solution but also enables expanded capacity to take on more work, deliver it more efficiently, and positively impact the bottom line.

4. The Value of a True Production Output Management System

Commercial printers know the value of managing their environment, but there are still options to consider as the technology and product set grow. Output Management is the process and controls used to monitor, track and report on the finished product (or output) that comes from the print and finishing processes. An output management system can come in a multitude of configurations and implementations—and can also have a range of capabilities. Some systems are built for smaller or lower volume print and digital delivery environments. Others are aimed for the mid-size or light production printers that have larger volumes, but may not be producing at a level that would elevate them to the high-volume category.

Next are the production levels commercial printers who grew their businesses providing high-volume, high-quality print work in any format a customer requested. Some have specialties, but many will print whatever the order demands so long as they have a device that meets the requirements. These printers are often experts in mass production, though many have also developed solutions for customization and personalization. With that growth into new types of products comes a requirement for tighter tracking and management. That is where the idea of a production output management system fills the gap so that they can handle large volumes of work that needs to be routed to different devices while leveraging automation, tracking and reporting on all active processes.

Any organization looking at workflow and print management software solutions should be evaluating their options to make sure that they can handle the current level of work coming through the print environment, and also ensure that it can expand and grow as the work increases, and becomes more complex, over time.



To start your assessment, look for the ability to:

- Onboard work rapidly
- Seamlessly identify and reprint damaged or incorrect work
- Leverage automation with rules-based logic
- Ensure print and digital delivery
- Send notifications as a step or trigger within the workflow
- Provide address cleansing and postal optimization for mailers
- Bring 'like' work together through commingling capabilities
- Complete tracking and audit trail capabilities
- Offer modular, scalable architecture

A true production output management system should deliver immediate and sustaining ROI for the print environment and the organization as a whole. It should deliver improvements to the current way employees work day-to-day and create opportunities for them to focus on more critical tasks that drive higher levels of value and inspire innovative ideas. While an organization might choose to approach this in a multi-phased approach, the right solution will scale in a modular and easy-to-implement process, providing a platform for business success.

5. Managing the Commercial Print Environment

In commercial printing, the type of work that can be found in production, evolving customer demands, and technology expansion changes what is possible. Now is the time to explore how a true production output management system can optimize your commercial print environment. With the right combination of features and functions, the output management system can be the gateway to optimizing the print production environment.

First, the onboarding system may be integrated with FTP sites where customers place their jobs, or in a web-to-print storefront or ordering system. It could also be taking work directly submitted to the management software from in-house creative teams. By its very nature, commercial printing work is variable. Everyday can be a new mix of products that require slightly different prepress touch-ups, color profiles, imposition, media, inks/toner, finishing and delivery. When this is managed manually, it extends the time to onboard, opening the door to human-errors, and limits the ability of the environment to run at full capacity.

The answer for many workflows has been to templatize, add rules, and automate with workflow software to provide a reliable solution. These automated workflows are set up to catch all incoming work and the exceptions set aside to be reviewed by a skilled staff member.

A robust solution can also transform files types that are not aligned with the workflow standards, improve and add value to them while making sure there is a breadcrumb trail of every process and change that has been made for audit and compliance purposes. This allows for automatic preflight, setup and routing of jobs to the right print device regardless of the manufacturer. In fact, the system should be able load balance between printers if one goes down so there is an a quick—sometimes automatic—path for rerouting the jobs and completing them without a significant delay in the print schedule.

Finally, this type of solution should provide visibility, insight and reporting that allows for the reconciliation of project estimations, actual costs, and delivery timeliness. Nothing upsets a print schedule like a piece of work that has gone missing and isn't noticed until the customer calls. As you review your commercial printing ecosystem, consider how many of these advantages would translate into a better workplace, better cost containment, and stronger profitability.

6. What Changes for Users?

When changing any process environment, the impact to users is crucial to understand. Your employees are your best asset and the champions of your business. Understanding the positive benefits for everyone is a must to gain acceptance of a new workflow solution and make sure implementation is successful. This comes down to three main areas: ease-of-use, print management and visibility.



Ease-of-Use

The design and usability features must allow staff to easily understand its operation and quickly become proficient through live training (virtual or in-person) and other learning resources, such as a learning system, on-demand video, manuals, and quick-start guides.



Print Management

Ensure the solution you select provides users with the ability to easily define rules-based automation that leverages templates to drive the work through your pre-defined workflow processes. The technology should handle the bulk of the work coming in for production with only a small percentage of files held out as exceptions for handling by your experienced and valuable employees.



Visibility

The way we work continues to evolve with technology and global change. The solution should have web dashboard interfaces that allow you to see your environment from wherever you are, alerting your teams to problems with jobs and provide information on when work was received, where it is in the process, when it is complete, and when it is delivered.

7. RICOH ProcessDirector™: Meeting Today's Needs

Challenging times call for new methods, vision, and a renewed goal to control the costs of the environment we manage. Ricoh is uniquely positioned to help our current customers, and those looking for a new solution, too.

We bring RICOH ProcessDirector™ to commercial print environments believing it will not only meet your needs today but also grow with you into the future. Here are just a few benefits delivered by our powerful RICOH solution:



Know the status of every job.
Track jobs from receipt through delivery for complete piece level visibility.



Increase throughput and equipment utilization.
Integrate disparate systems into a single, vendor-neutral and centralized workflow.



Improve efficiency with automation.
Automate manual tasks and workflow processes to eliminate human errors, reduce costs and meet deadlines.



Meet compliance and reporting requirements.
Easily generate audit trails down to an individual piece level to respond to queries or audit requests.



Manage personalized communications across channels.
Deliver individual documents to a customer's channel of choice.



Minimize mailing costs.
Maximizes postal discounts by using business rules, pooling documents, pre-sorting mail, and streamlines mail handling.

RICOH ProcessDirector is a rich, modular, and scalable solution now offering a subscription pricing option brings more financial flexibility for workflow optimization.

If you are ready to take your commercial printing environment to new heights, we invite you to learn more about RICOH, RICOH ProcessDirector and our staff of experts that are at the ready to make sure your next move is successful. At RICOH, we ask you to imagine change and then let us help you realize it.

About Ricoh

Ricoh is empowering digital workplaces using innovative technologies and services enabling individuals to work smarter. For more than 80 years, Ricoh has been driving innovation and is a leading provider of document management solutions, IT services, communication services, commercial and industrial printing, digital cameras, and industrial systems.

Headquartered in Tokyo, Ricoh Group operates in approximately 200 countries and regions. In the financial year ended March 2019, Ricoh Group had worldwide sales of 2,013 billion yen (approx. 18.1 billion USD).

For further information visit www.ricohsoftware.com

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