

From MIS to BIS

Print MIS used to be about replacing the cigarette packet calculation. Over the years it has added functions and with the arrival of JDF has the potential to multiply the information it deals with even more. The real issue now is making sure that production and cost data is accurate and that other aspects of the business are captured and offered in a way that helps the business. The Business Information System has arrived

A MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEM USED to be about generating estimates quickly. Then there was control of costs and perhaps stocks of paper or work in progress. Now comes JDF and the expectations that printers had of their MIS begin to rise. While today there are some packages available that concentrate purely on rapid estimating, print MIS is really becoming a much more sophisticated business tool – in line with the needs of the users.

MIS has always been good at looking retrospectively at what has happened and generating reports to support this; the requirement is shifting to an MIS able to provide data in real time to allow printers to take decisions that affect their business far quicker than monthly reporting allows. This is a major shift.

Firstly the data has to be extremely accurate, particularly on the costing elements, and secondly the data has to be presented in such a way that it is useful. So much information is possible that the danger becomes that the decision maker becomes

paralysed or relies too much on one set of information. Helping printers get this right is the job of those supplying MIS.

It's an issue that Paul Deane, managing director of Shuttleworth understands very well. The company is one of the best established of the UK's MIS providers and intends to stay that way. The Kettering company last year moved to a purpose built unit on a new technology park in the Northamptonshire town and the teething niggles with the advanced environmental management systems are still being felt. But the move has been worthwhile, if only to demonstrate that this is a company that is in business for the long time. This is an increasing consideration for printers as the MIS becomes more and more vital to a business. Select a company that disappears in a year or so and problems are likely to follow. Shuttleworth's staff too have appreciated the move from the side streets of the town to a smart unit, even if few have yet decided to cycle to the office each day. Internal communication must have improved as a result.

"We've had a very positive response from customers," Deane says. "It shows we are investing for the long term. This is particularly true in a period of consolidation, because I'm sure that in the next couple of years there is going to be more consolidation."

The Kettering site employs around 30 of the 46 staff on Shuttleworth's books. The remainder are engineers dotted around the country or software developers who, thanks to the internet, can work from a home which is halfway up a Welsh mountain or in equally remote locations.

Shuttleworth has carried out its share of consolidation, acquiring MIS operations in specialist areas to give it access to new niches in the industry. With the trend to create broadly based groups in order to offer a broader spread of services to their clients, this ability is going to be very useful indeed. Deane points to one customer working in pharmaceuticals where it supplies labels, cartons and leaflets, each printed (and estimated) in a different way.

Shuttleworth's acquisitions have placed it in a good position. "Because we cover the various sectors, we can pick up the odd-balls," says Deane.

With consolidation comes the need to bring all the business data to a single point. Large business has appreciated this for many years, hence the success of SAP users. A similar demand is building now within vertical business sectors and print is part of this movement towards process automation and for Management Information Systems to evolve into Business Information Systems.

This year's Drupa exhibition will see a continuation of progress in the adoption of JDF as a way of linking production systems and generating the data needed to run a business. The

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increase in fast turnaround short runs is only sustainable with automation, whether through web2print order placement or the creation of work dockets to be printed at the same time as a digital print job. This year's event will be the point where JDF moves from 'maybe' to 'must be'. He continues: "It's been slow progress for everybody concerned. But there is increased interest from printers wanting to introduce operational efficiencies to their business. But we are yet to see the real impact from implementations so far.

"What is happening is that it is becoming clear that the process starts at estimating, which means that the decisions made at data input are greater than ever before. What is decided at estimating sets the path for manufacturing the product. The JDF has to be right at the beginning.

"But also any implementation of a JDF workflow needs to support amendments. I have come across implementations where a company has adopted JDF to find that it can't make changes to a job. Every print job has slight amendments at the very least and the MIS must be able to cope."

It also requires printers to have real information about their costs, something which last year's Pira/Vip report discovered is not necessarily prevalent. While the report had 70% of printers using cost-based estimating, "many of those who claimed to use costing were probably only using a charge out rate, which is not the same thing," says Deane. "Estimating is a calculation of the true cost of producing a piece of material and must be based on all the costs involved."

This means also that other relevant data should be included, information and costs which are hard to calculate and which come under the heading 'soft costs'. This covers administrative time wasted, perhaps through looking for numbers or tracking a file, which could be put to better use and information lost which might be useful to the business. "How many printers record why they don't get a job?" says Deane. "They should understand whether it is a price issue, or that they couldn't make a delivery date." If the reason is understood, action can be taken. Costs might be slightly out so might be put right by changing a paper or production method, while they might also be a long way out signalling a deeper problem.

This takes the MIS system into the area of customer relationship management, going beyond the collection of production data to record sales calls into all aspects of a relationship between customer and supplier. In print this might be recording when a proof was delivered and following up on that proof so that production schedules are not messed up. "All that information should be readily available to the user. We do

this through an events system, which we developed to record any business activity. It can be configured to send emails to relevant people, reporting on all activity relating to a client for example," he says.

Some printers will use a third party application with the problem that data will stay within that system. Others have developed means of canvassing for customers and recording what has happened that is specific to that customer. In this case the information has passed from the business to the sales executive who is running his own contact system, which is also less open to management scrutiny. Says Deane: "We have seen customers jump on this and it has made a difference to them. For example, a complaint from a customer is not a problem if it is treated as an opportunity. How you respond is important and shows that either you care as a company about the customer or you don't. If activity is recorded, then there is a better chance of responding."

The softer business charges, which as Deane agrees are much harder to address in terms of calculating costs, can contribute to the overhead that the business has to support. "What is the cost of having somebody spending four hours a day tracking down work or chasing someone for some information they need to take a decision?"

"We are working on ways to provide the information that printers need to make more effective decisions about the way that they run their business, to make more effective decisions on a day by day basis, to identify these key issues they need to address. That's where we see the future."

It is more than the type of dashboard display of data that many MIS and workflow companies are coming up with. A dashboard can provide too much information or may not discriminate between those presented with it, and is often restricted to senior management rather than being spread to those who need to act on the information presented.

Deane explains: "This issue today is that as everything becomes more dynamic, printers need to automate administration, especially for short run low value jobs, yet stay in control. They must realise that what happens in their business today will affect what happens tomorrow. So we need to deliver information far more quickly and in a far more business friendly way. We need to provide information that is not readily available, that has immediate impact and that is delivered in real time.

"We feel the way that we have dealt with this and the way that we can deliver information to the desktop is going to be unique to this industry. It is what we are going to emphasise at Drupa." ■