WhatTheyThink?

Market Intelligence for Printing and Publishing

All or Nothing with Print Software

When buying and implementing print software, start with the simple jobs software does well, implement and learn. Do not get stuck in a myriad of "use case exceptions" as an excuse to do nothing. You will never get ROI and you'll never find software that can do everything.

By Jennifer Matt

Software is built to do specific jobs. Just like jobs that humans have, some parts of the job are simple, some are complex. On some days, your CSRs answer simple questions, respond to simple requests, and process simple orders. On other days, customers have very complex requirements that require collaboration across multiple functional areas in your business and the CSR's job turns into an air traffic controller and a project manager. Humans are more flexible than software; competent employees can easily flex between simple and complex.

Software is less flexible than humans; software does lots of simple things like keep track of the orders that are in progress and complex things like maximize a press sheet by ganging jobs from different customers.

I don't know what to call it other than the "all or nothing mentality" when it comes to our approach to how software will be implemented into a print business. For some weird reason (which a psychologist might be able to explain), the people who are tasked with implementing new software are laser focused on the most complex scenarios they can possibly think about. This focus on exceptions and edge cases drives most software implementations off a cliff.

For example, you're trying to implement a simple web-to-print solution whose primary job is to enable your customers to place re-orders. Let's pretend that you're in the labels and packaging space so your reorder percentage is above 50%. Why is it that, when you're implementing this software, the initial and strong reaction is to think up every exception to why this won't work for special orders, complex orders, or persnickety customers?

What if we all decided to focus on what will work, implement that and then consider moving from simple to more complex? What if you moved forward and implemented the software to take over the simple stuff before you sat around and dreamed up every possible outlier? You know what happens when you implement software to start handling the simple stuff? You start getting return on investment. You know what happens when you dream about all the exceptions where it won't work? You are very far away from getting a return on your investment.

In printer A, the management team approached the purchase of an automated scheduling application as follows. They put one person in charge, they explained to that individual that it is their expectation that in six months they should know more about how the scheduling application works than the vendor does because they will be using it all day every day. It is their scheduling application, they should own it. They also said they should start with the easiest possible scenarios—schedule the stuff that

cannot be moved, the program work. That's where you start: the stuff that has to be run on a specific day on a specific machine. Then move to the stuff that has to be run on specific machines, but has some variability on the day. The most complex are those jobs that come in unexpectedly and could potentially run on multiple presses. Don't start with the most complex. Don't delay your start because you haven't figured every single use case out. Start because starting is the only way to really learn. You don't learn anything by dreaming up why it won't work. You learn by actually using the software for your business and keeping your focus on how to make it work, not why it won't work.

In printer B, the management team approached the purchase of an automated scheduling application as follows. They didn't assign any specific person to learn it. They bought minimum training from the vendor. They trained all their "schedulers." They had meeting after meeting after meeting about all the use cases that won't work. My colleague Heath Cajandig (now at Mimeo) used to call this conversation something like "man with blue hair storms into the plant use case." It is a play on how absurd people can get in dreaming up exceptions. There are still humans around to detain the blue hair man and to continue to use the scheduling application as it was designed. Learning is the key. You learn by using it. The best way to approach software is to think about what it can do for you and start letting the software do that—then your people will make suggestions based on their real-life use of the software. This is magical. Your CSR says, "I noticed we can configure email alerts and custom reports out of our Print MIS. I manually pull an inventory report and email it to our top customers each month—why don't we program that into the Print MIS to do it without me?" Pure magic when it comes from your people because it shows that they get the software and they get that their time is valuable and should be dedicated to human specific tasks that add real value.

Are you in the middle of implementing software? Do you have underutilized software in your print business (100% of printers do). The software was built to perform certain jobs. What jobs is it doing for you? What jobs have you delayed the implementation of because the software can't support every single use case your team dreamed up? If you have software that allows customers to reorder, if it can only handle 50% of your orders, are you waiting until it can handle 100% (you will be waiting forever)? What would your CSR team look like if 50% of the order volume got entered into your Print MIS via your customers in a self-service fashion? This is a dramatic number. Forget about the exceptions, forget about the use cases that involved blue-haired men flying into your plant. Implement the software to do what it was built to do. Learn, iterate, and then dream up new improvements with the time you've saved.

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