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# What They Think?

## *Market Intelligence for Printing and Publishing*

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### **The Hidden Secrets of Print Software Implementation**

*The implementation of print software is as important as the software itself. With every software tool, there is a foundational knowledge that will help you be more self-sufficient. Those printers who understand their software tools succeed in spite of lack of support from print software vendors.*

**By Jennifer Matt**

Software is a tool. Software implementation is the business process of getting *your people comfortable* with the use of the new tool *in your business*. Software companies spend a lot of money building software products. Software is expensive to build; good software that elegantly solves a business challenge while making it joyful to use is really expensive to build. Most software vendors focus all their efforts on the building of the software and very little of their efforts on what I'll call "translating" the value, knowledge, and best use of the software to the software users.

What happens when you build great software and then fail to invest in the implementation of that software? If I could sum it up in one word, I would use the word "frustration," because it best describes how all the players involved feel about the outcomes.

- The people who built the software—product managers, software developers, and quality assurance testers—will see their hard work not reach its highest potential. Nobody likes to build software that doesn't get used.
- The business who paid for the software development (software vendor) will not see their returns in the form of licenses, subscriptions, and profitable scale of software sales.
- The customer (the end user) of the software will literally be left to create their own interpretation of the software based on a limited knowledge and typically a small amount of effort to learn. **This end user will make a lot of assumptions** about what the software can and cannot do; people will believe them and make big business decisions based on these (often errant) assumptions. The end user will utilize a very small percentage of the functionality of the software.
- The business people who bought the software will notice a large gap between promises made in the sales process and the outcomes they are achieving in the use of the software.

*The implementation of print software is as important as the software itself because a poor implementation can kill even a great software product. When frustration is high with all the above groups, nobody wins.*

Implementation does not have to be labor-intensive or require you to be on-site with the users. Implementation simply has to successfully explain how the product works (in a fundamental way) so that users are not simply taught where to click but understand how the system is organized. Most implementations simply teach users where to click according to a very limited script of one way to use the software. When those of us who build software think through features, we are constantly considering ways to keep the software flexible. So the team

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building the software might have spent lots of time and money building a flexible application, yet the team you send out to implement the software is implementing it like it was a very restricted application.

Why do vendors use this limited approach to implementation?

If you simplify the implementation of software, you can do it faster (recognize service revenues) and you can teach new “implementers” how to “implement” easily because the implementation (where to click) doesn’t require deep knowledge about the software solution. The result is a slightly more knowledgeable implementer imparting task-level information (not knowledge) to a user. When that implementer leaves, the user knows how to do simple things but if anything outside that narrow path through the system happens (which it does everyday), they have no foundation on which to think critically for themselves. You can’t teach people all the features of a software application; most of them are too complex and it would be a waste of time because each user is going to rely on different aspects of the software for their particular business needs.

Good implementation has to be about real foundational learning about how the software system works. For example, we recently built an online solution for the labels and packaging space. One of the fundamental features of this system is that 100% of the data it exposes to customers online is from the underlying Print MIS. This foundational idea has to be understood, not just mentioned, not just listed on a PowerPoint slide, but truly understood. When printers first starting using this system in production, they asked questions that revealed that they did not understand this key fundamental aspect of the system. “How do I change the price of the product on the website?” This question reveals a lack of understanding of the core aspect of the system. When you say “100% of the data in the solution comes from the MIS,” that includes the price of the products. In our experience, it takes several weeks of using the

system to understand that you control what your user sees and experiences on the website by changing the data in the Print MIS. We adjusted our implementation to stress this from the beginning; it hasn’t removed all the questions, but it has greatly decreased the number of weeks before printers start to “get it on their own.” The reason fundamental understanding is important is that it allows the users to think for themselves. Once they understand some core aspects of the system, they can figure things out on their own. When they figure things out on their own, those things are remembered at a much greater rate than when someone tells them how to do it once.

Good software implementation is a co-creation between the vendor and the customer. You cannot sit back and passively be “fed” the knowledge about the software from the vendor. An excellent implementation takes effort on both sides. If both of you are focused on the goal of understanding the software, not jumping into the tasks right away, it really helps. The leadership of this has to be with the print vendor because they are the holder of the knowledge.

Everybody wins when a software tool gets implemented well. My colleague Jane Mugford always calls me when a certain phase in an implementation happens. We don’t have a name for it but it’s when the end users start bringing new ideas of how they can use the software tool to solve more and more of their business challenges. It sounds something like this: “Currently we have Dorothy managing a spreadsheet of our customers who get regular shipments of products. Couldn’t we schedule those to go into production in the MIS and then auto-generate the email notifications to customers?” When this happens you have set in motion something that you can’t even control—nor would you want to. Your people are going to dive into every corner of your business and find all the ways they can use the software to make your business run better. It’s a very good day in the life of your business. Jane and I celebrate with a phone call and a high-five emoji in Slack.

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