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Modern Litho stays ahead of the curve in management with EFI Auto-Count shop floor production intelligence

Challenge:

Modern Litho has always embraced the technology workflow advancements that drive efficiency and productivity. The company is a leading example of integrated workflow automation and was one of the first businesses in the world to fully integrate a Kodak PRINERGY prepress workflow with EFI™ Monarch™ ERP software.

And while that level of workflow automation reduces the number of steps Modern Litho needs to take to get jobs submitted, processed, printed, and shipped, Jim Tomblinson, the company's vice president of operations, and the rest of the senior management team at Modern Litho also discovered a key psychological advantage that another technology — EFI Auto-Count® shop production intelligence — can have on boosting the bottom line.

The award-winning production intelligence platform automatically collects accurate, up-to-the-minute production data, including counts, press status, speed, and other critical information directly from its equipment in real time. Auto-Count makes its critical, real-time data available to production, scheduling, and customer service for instant status updates and more efficient job management. As a result, printing companies can enhance their job communication processes from production to customer service.

Challenge:

Monitoring and tracking operational metrics to maintain high productivity

Solution:

"When we first looked at the advantage of an integrated workflow, much of it was around the capabilities of an ERP and scheduling," says Tomblinson, a veteran print operations expert who

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For nearly eight decades, companies seeking excellence in commercial and digital print have trusted Modern Litho for their communication and marketing needs. Regarded as a premier printer of specialized publications for niche markets, Modern Litho's capabilities include high-performance offset print, finishing, and distribution of marketing and member communications, advanced variable-data print, direct mail, and mailing services. Modern Litho is a G7 Master Qualified Printer and holds renewable resource FSC and SFI Chain-of-Custody Certifications. Markets of interest include nonprofit and member-based organizations.

The 190+ employee company employs a leading service and quality offerings in full-size (40") commercial offset and publication work with its complete bindery and mailing departments. Its sister company, Brown Printing, specializes in digital and small format commercial jobs as well as wide format, signage, and display graphics. The newest Modern Litho location, formerly Midtown Printing in St. Louis, extends the company's reach in local and regional markets. The combined operations have a long and successful history of producing quality work, extending the company's five-year trend of double-digit growth.

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regularly speaks at industry events about the advantages of an integrated workflow. "Then, about seven years ago, Bob Howard, EFI's product lead for Auto-Count, convinced us to try putting an Auto-Count system on one of our presses."

Once installed, Modern Litho executives found it impossible to ignore the immediate productivity advantage they gained. "Weeks after putting the first Auto-Count unit on a press, we had it on all our presses," says Tomblinson. "And then we started adding it to our bindery equipment."

Why the rapid response? Because while other workflow enhancements are designed to simplify the process so operators have fewer steps and tasks to manage, Auto-Count encourages those same staffers to think more about those tasks and their overall performance. More than any other technology the company has installed, Auto-Count can facilitate a tangible — but not heavy-handed — solution for motivating operators to improve their throughput.

Auto-Count can build accountability into performance in a way that makes good employees want to do even better. For example, each Auto-Count unit also has a light tower attached to it with a simple but highly visible red, yellow or green indicator on it to show whether a piece of equipment is stopped, operating at slower-than-capacity speeds, or running at full tilt. "Even something as simple as putting those lights at a machine gives operators more awareness," Tomblinson says, "and it leads to them increasing their productivity."

Solution:

"With Auto-Count, it has been possible for us to pick up our productivity by 10% year-over-year just from the increases we gained in machine uptime."

JIM TOMBLINSON,
VP OF OPERATIONS,
MODERN LITHO

Result:

Today, Modern Litho operates 18 Auto-Count systems, monitoring operations in a pressroom that will soon include 10-color, 8-color, and two 5-color offset presses as well as a full complement of folders, stitchers, and perfect binders. The systems are integrated into Modern Litho's EFI Commercial Print Productivity Suite, a workflow platform that features Monarch as its core ERP technology.

"The payoff starts instantaneously," Tomblinson says of his Auto-Count systems. "It is not like with other workflow products where you have to get all of your automation up and running before you see any benefits. Once Auto-Count is installed, everyone starts monitoring his or her own performance more closely."

In his office, Tomblinson relies on Auto-Count Plant Manager, a program that allows him to track progress for all of the Auto-Count monitored equipment on a single screen. "Plant Manager replicates everything I might see going on walking around the plant," Tomblinson says, but with the advantage that it is continuous and aggregates data for everything going on.

"Everything is at my fingertips when I'm looking at Plant Manager," he adds, "and it gives me the tools I need to analyze everything."

Now Tomblinson knows much more than most printing operations executives about what each production device is doing, and he knows it sooner. Other print operations might have to wait weeks or months to see trends in their business — whether that means noticing a dip in on-time deliveries or recognizing that jobs that run on a certain piece of equipment end up requiring longer make-readies.

A perfect example of this occurred late in 2015 when Tomblinson

Results:

"The throughput improvement that came just from initially installing Auto-Count was equal to what we would have gained from hiring and training another full-time employee."

JIM TOMBLINSON,
VP OF OPERATIONS,
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noticed a gradual speed decline on one of the company's presses. "This was such a gradual shift and only on certain substrates that the Team Lead hadn't discovered it," he says. "But because I ran the production analysis, this was obvious."

Thanks to the company's data analysis, Modern Litho was able to investigate the issue, ultimately tracing it back to some needed maintenance on the press's feeder. These types of gradual changes in productivity can always happen, but without Auto-Count they could possibly go unnoticed, slowly reducing throughput and profitability.

"Auto-Count allows me to have such a broad plant production view that, frankly, I wouldn't want to be without it," Tomblinson says.

Modern Litho has set standards for each machine using the data it collects through Auto-Count, benchmarking its equipment for speed and downtime as well as for make-ready times. Plus, the company builds in metrics for when equipment needs to go off-line for maintenance based on usage volume to help ensure that equipment stays in top operating order.

Auto-Count's patented measurement technology provides data-driven reports that provide the visibility managers like Tomblinson need to plan and improve production processes proactively while reducing waste and downtime and increasing output. Auto-Count users rely on the advanced shop production intelligence platform to optimize their estimating and production standards as well as their capacity utilization. For Modern Litho and many other users, the technology ends up being a key factor in continuous improvement efforts, increased productivity, and higher profits.

The company's aggregated data on operator performance also give Modern Litho a rock-solid metric to help determine merit-based salary wage increases during employees' annual revues. "Any good manager is going to be able to tell when an employee is performing better over a year's worth of time," Tomblinson says, "but he or she won't have data. Now I can pull all of that information immediately in a way that reflects and supports our merit increase decisions."

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