

WELCOME TO THE MACHINE: HOW AND WHY WORKFLOW AUTOMATION IS NOTHING TO FEAR

A White Paper by Richard Romano, Senior Analyst, WhatTheyThink

Introduction:

A Fear As Old As Technology Itself

When people hear the term “**automation**,” a number of things shoot through their minds, some of them positive, but most of them negative. The concept of automation makes people a bit nervous for a number of reasons and on a variety of levels, so this white paper will attempt to address these concerns, as well as identify how **Enfocus’** approach to **automation**—via **Switch**—can allay the fears of graphic arts professionals, and demonstrate how it has many **advantages for graphic arts companies** of all shapes and sizes.

What Do We Mean By “Automation”?

We will look at the specific implementation of **Enfocus’ Switch** solution later, but for now, what we mean by “automation” is **creating a graphic arts workflow** that performs some action or combination of actions on production files—either document layouts, PDFs, images, or other file types—more or less automatically. This can include tasks such as sending notification or confirmation e-mails to customers; automatically routing files from FTP, Web-to-print, or e-mail inboxes to specific production servers; performing image-editing functions such as resizing or color correction; preflighting; interacting with MIS and ERP systems or even other third-party workflow systems; and so forth.

With automated workflows like **Switch**, a lot of the “grunt work” involved in file preparation and prepress can be eliminated. We’ll look at this in more detail later in this report, but for now, that will suffice as a quick definition of automation. You can see where those specific automated processes—and the general idea of automation itself— can instill no small degree of fear in graphic arts professionals. But, they are largely unfounded—or have net benefits for these same graphic arts professionals.

Let’s look at the top 10 complaints about automation and see why they are generally unfounded.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT AUTOMATION

Complaint #1 “I’ll Lose My Job”

As we all know, there are forces at work, in the economy in general and in the graphic arts industry in particular, that are driving job loss and employment issues, but automation is not one of them. Lack of demand for printed products is a far bigger challenge for graphic arts companies than automating the process of creating those printed products. And no one seems to be all that afraid of the Internet! (Well, some people are...).

The economic recession (which began in 2008) and the “print recession” (which began around 1998 when electronic distribution began to substantially supplant demand for print) have created business challenges graphic arts companies, and one of the solutions to those challenges has been to boost productivity and efficiency. So, in print shops, prepress equipment and presses **are more automated than ever, allowing more jobs to be processed and printed faster, boosting company throughput, and allowing more work to be taken on by the company.**

Complaint #2 “I Can’t Afford It”

The idea behind **workflow automation** is to **leave the grunt work to the software**, speed jobs through the system, and leave the humans free to take on additional design work and do more of what it is they love to do: design stuff. At the same time, being able to take on more work means more revenue for the shop.

Automation—or at least Enfocus’ iteration of it—**helps protect the investment that shops have already made.**

There is no need to replace all (or really any) of the elements in a workflow as Switch integrates with a wide variety of third-party applications, so there is no need to completely overhaul one’s production workflow.

Complaint #3 “I Don’t Have Time to Set It Up”

It’s true, setting up any kind of automated process. With automation schemes like Switch, the workflow can be implemented gradually so that certain bits can be set up at one given time and, depending upon the workload of the shop, other portions of the workflow can be set up at a more convenient time, like when a major project is finished and there is a bit of downtime. So you can still get the benefits of automation, but in piecemeal, incremental fashion, if you prefer.

Complaint #4

“I’m Committed to Overhauling My Whole Shop”

A good automation scheme should not take on the properties of The Blob, expanding out of control and absorbing all of one’s processes. The goal should be to **automate those processes that make sense to automate.** If, at some point down the road, it makes sense to automate the entire shop, then that can be affected one logical step at a time.

Complaint #5 “It’s Disruptive”

Yes, it’s modestly disruptive at first, but it’s “productive disruption.” It’s an investment, but an educational one. You’re learning new skills and features that will enhance your productivity down the road. And once it’s in place, the shop can go back to normal—well, normal except that now the shop is more productive.

Complaint #6 “It’s Too Rigid and Unforgiving”

There is no reason why an automation system needs to be rigid and inflexible at all. It depends on how effectively it is set up, and how well it is designed to serve the user’s needs, not its own. The Switch approach favors the former; its **modular approach** allows users to assemble and configure it in whatever fashion best serves their needs. The software is the slave to the humans, not the reverse.

Complaint #7 “It’s Too Complicated”

As humans, we have an innate tendency to ascribe inscrutable complexity to anything we don’t readily understand, despite the fact that most of us handle pretty complex processes quite handily. Learning how to set up and utilize a workflow automation system is far less complex than creating one from scratch. And any good software developer makes the learning curve for users as simple as possible.

If you can use a computer and run any of the mill graphic arts program, you can learn to use Switch.

Complaint #8 “We’re a Small Shop; Automation is for the Big Guys”

As was said earlier, **any decent workflow system should be scalable**. In fact, it may even make more sense for small shops to automate their workflow processes. Given that small shops don’t have the resources or the number of employees as larger companies means that they need to do more with less, to be more productive.

Complaint #9 “I Don’t Want to Give the Computer Complete Control of My Shop”

Graphic design is and shall always be a product of human creativity, and no computer can replace that; the human factor will always be a factor. **Automating certain repetitive tasks processes does not take human creativity out of the picture**. In fact, the idea behind automation is to allow more time for creativity. The idea is to automate only what is automatable—not everything under the sun.

Complaint #10 “I Don’t Know; It Just Seems Like It’s Just a Big Black Box”

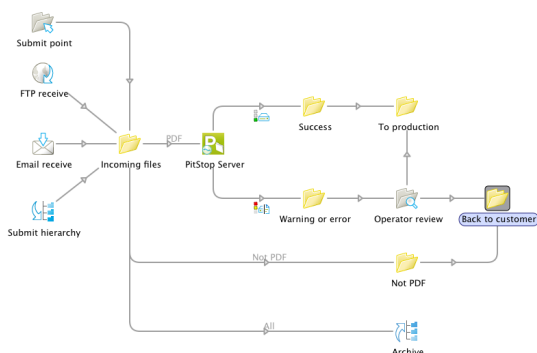
There is always the concern that any automated workflow lacks transparency, that you’re not quite sure what is going on inside it. In fact, with Switch, it’s pretty easy to see exactly what is happening at any given moment in the workflow, both schematically and textually.



ENFOCUS SWITCH

Enfocus Switch is a workflow tool that has been designed to specifically address all the foregoing complaints and requirements of workflow automation. Switch allows print buyers and print providers to **automate repetitive or mindnumbing tasks** so that users can get on with the more stringent—or fun, perhaps—demands of production and running their businesses. What can be automated? It’s really up to the individual user, but some things that Switch can automate include:

- Downloading files from FTP servers or e-mail inboxes and routing them where they need to go.
- Sending notification or confirmation e-mails to customers.
- Sorting files by file type, metadata, and conditions.
- Splitting or merging PDFs.
- Converting native layout documents to print-ready PDFs
- Integrating with third-party software for image enhancement, imposition, color management, proofing, etc.
- Preflighting and fixing files.
- Automating Web-to-print job receiving and verification.



Switch is configured and controlled via a simple visual interface and drag-and-drop tools. The hallmark of the product is that it is **completely open**, and can handle just about any file type created in any application, which means that shops don't have to replace anything they have already invested in. **Switch also links to a company's existing MIS or ERP system.** And third-party plug-ins to Switch can add even more functionality, standardizing processes and output from other applications, such as Adobe Creative Suite tools.

SwitchClient is a communication tool **that can be used in conjunction with Switch to further keep the human factor in the automation process** by letting users to submit files together with metadata or job ticket information. It then prompts the human operator for instructions on what to do with files that require attention, such as a failed preflight. It also bears mentioning that Switch won a 2011 Intertech Technology Award.

Much more about Switch, including a **free trial**, and an introduction to the Crossroads community of users can be found at <http://www.enfocus.com/en/products/switch>.

SO...WELCOME TO THE MACHINE

Automation is not the enemy. Having collaborated with many graphic designers over the years, I always find it shocking how many don't even avail themselves of style sheets or the batch processing tools in Adobe Bridge, and waste hours upon hours manually reformatting images and text. Likewise, it's just as shocking to realize the extent to which resistance to automation results in many lost hours of more productive—and more satisfying—work. We ignore all these conveniences at our, and our businesses', peril.

This white paper was sponsored by Enfocus.

For more information about Enfocus' Switch product family, please visit www.enfocus.com/en/products/switch.