

Automation Customers at NAB Seek Format, Connectivity Solutions

What do recent mergers portend?

BY STEVE KRANT

DALLAS—At NAB, expect a variety of automation approaches, often from the same vendor, ranging from the traditional—dedicated workstations and multiple redundancies—to more open, “IT based” and channel-in-a-box solutions. An emerging trend: Single-source packages that wrap traffic and automation into one workflow.

A recent spate of acquisitions and assimilations (e.g., WideOrbit-VCI, Miranda-OmniBus,

tions, plans and the technology available to them.

OFF THE SHELF

Keith Bland, senior vice president, technical operations for Barrington Broadcasting Group is currently focused on acquisition, format conversion and metadata distribution

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—Dave Folsom, Raycom Media

and Evertz-Pharos), may signal the demise of automation as a standalone category. It’s a natural evolution with increasingly complex, file-based workflows the new normal. Herding everyone onto the same messaging/metadata page remains a challenge. And experience still matters, especially to control cash-strapped stations’ perfectly good legacy hardware.

TVTechnology polled some automation-savvy senior managers about their current opera-

tions, plans and the technology available to them. where to look for it; what to do when it arrives, and which systems need what notifications and information to properly handle it. When everything goes right, we can catch a show, load its timing and metadata into automation, identify the codec/wrapper, convert and move it to our playout server, adjust levels, up or down-convert HD/SD, air it frame accurately, then move it to offline archive—all without a single person’s intervention, other than scheduling in the traffic



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system.”

Bland hopes to find multiplatform editing, play-out and archiving systems at NAB that use off-the-shelf hardware, “There’s no good reason an HD capable server should cost \$75,000 or editing \$30,000 per seat,” he said.

‘STATION IN A BOX’

Simpler, low-cost systems are also favored by a “big four” technology manager whose network demands anonymity.

“Deploying ‘station-in-a-box’ solutions using service oriented architecture [SOA] is the definite direction for master control and other media systems. With commonly available IT

technology, we can build robust, adaptable, scalable systems for a variety of workflows; aggregating different pieces of hardware to cobble an automation system together no longer makes sense.”

‘DISTRIBUTED MODEL’

Reed Wilson, Belo Corporation’s executive director of technology, Reed Wilson, acknowledges that the company has been fairly aggressive in a lot of areas, but there’s more to be done in master control and production.

“Sixty-percent of content comes either from DG [Fastchannel], an FTP delivery service, or on DVD; we don’t have the people to process all that content, so we’re constantly looking at ways to get it on-air in an automated fashion,” Wilson said. “We’re moving [away from] having someone in master control all the time—a ‘distributed’ model where we monitor and control individual stations during fully automated time periods. We can remote-in to their systems, but we have no content at the monitoring site, just control.”

Belo recently installed Grass Valley’s Ignite system at KMOV [St. Louis] and “continue to look at ways to automate the news production workflow.”

IS BXF READY FOR PRIMETIME?

David Folsom, vice president and chief technical officer for Raycom Media in Montgomery, Ala., has been experimenting with IT-based solutions for their HD master controls. “Off-the-shelf hardware with affordable backup and redundancy are very compelling, [but] these systems still require lots of refinement,” Folsom said. “We see the promise of automated master controls as a means of operating more than one station cost-efficiently, whether multicast, mobile or a shared services channel.” For NAB, Folsom doesn’t “expect any master control innovations beyond the further evolution of

IT-based solutions.” He sees “great promise in BXF, but [it’s] still not ready for prime time. The carrot on this stick is a true ‘live’ log, there are still many hurdles to leap.”

BACK TO THE FUTURE

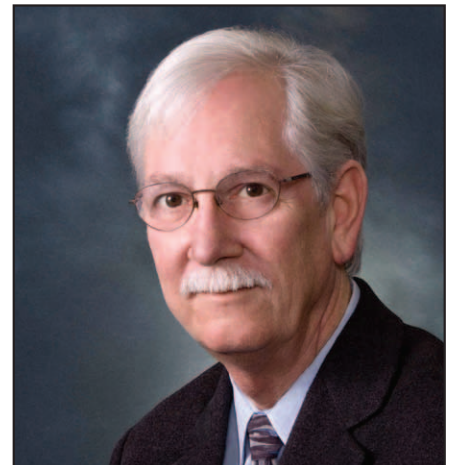
Del Parks, vice president of engineering & operations for Sinclair Broadcast Group in Hunt Valley, Md., feels that the basic structure of automation hasn’t changed in many years.

“It needs to move into the multichannel, multi-platform environment,” he said. “And so does the scheduling and billing software, they’re all so 1980’s.” On the newsroom side, the group, which has 46 full power stations in 35 markets, will be implementing production automation with Ross Video’s OverDrive. On BXF and the traffic/automation convergence, Parks wonders “when and who’s really doing it effectively?”

PUSH TO WEB

At the opposite extreme of the group spectrum, John Schilberg, vice president of technology for Oklahoma City-based Griffin Communications oversees three Oklahoma stations that have employed automation for several years to multicast. “We’re working to blend our HD and SD worlds and automate push-to-web efforts,” Schilberg said. “I’ll be a sponge at NAB, trying to learn what others have experienced; what changes they would have made. We’re assessing automation at many levels, including whether it actually improves our on-air product.”

Standards for metadata, formats and interoperability are top-of-mind. Folsom finds it “hard to believe, in this world of too many standards, we’re still facing issues... equipment that meets a connectivity standard should work flawlessly with others, but that’s not the reality.” Wilson notes, “We have the standard MOS protocol for news, but lack true IP integration on the broadcast play-to-air side—serial VDCP technology is



Keith Bland, senior vice president, technical operations, Barrington Broadcasting Group

dead; the parties need to come together on Internet protocol so that automation can fully leverage the video servers and other gear.”

Bland would like the advertising, programming and content stakeholders to settle on a manageable subset of file exchange formats. “I’d prefer not to have dozens of codecs just because some one-man ad agency’s editor happens to output that,” he said. “It’s even more important with automated workflows where there’s no human to ‘flip the selector switch.’”

Our anonymous contributor adds metadata standardization to the mix, “This might include program segment, as well as bug and snipe in/out times, AFD, aspect ratio, audio track info, PSIP data, and information to allow selective airing of different segments; having metadata that travels with the essence files and goes directly into the presentation system’s database would certainly reduce media prep work.”

Capital “A” automation is becoming just another cog in the broader media distribution, monetization and content life-cycle workflow. Agile, end-to-end and IT-based solutions will eventually rule the day.