

The Growing Trend for Centralised Scanning

by Ashley Keil

For many years, the scanning function within most end user organisations has lain at local, departmental or workgroup level. At the same time, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies have typically followed an application-specific approach to capture projects. Business requirements are shifting, however, and more organisations are centralising their document scanning. Ashley Keil explains why.

Traditionally, document scanning has been a departmental, application-specific function. There were multiple points in a company where documents could be scanned and then electronically forwarded for processing. This started to change a few years ago as organisations began to adopt distributed workgroup scanning. While the distributed scanning approach reduced back-end exceptions, it also created disparate, disconnected scanning systems across an enterprise. In an attempt to bring down these capture silos, European companies are now complimenting their distributed scanning with centralised scanning. As evidence, look no further than the rising interest in Digital Mailroom solutions, which allows for centralised scanning of incoming documents.

For end users considering a move to centralised scanning, advanced intelligent document recognition (IDR) and hardware solutions are available that deliver a compelling payback, with minimal risk.

The shift from task-specific solutions

About three years ago, there was a shift in attitude that resulted in a fundamental change in the way corporations administer their business. Although task-specific systems are optimised to handle the scanning and capture process as efficiently as possible at departmental level, there is a growing recognition that shifting the function into a more centralised position provides better oversight and enables cross-application leverage of technology, skills, expertise and resources. A number of operational factors have influenced this change, including:

- rapid growth in workgroup-based operations and distributed scanning, which feed centralised capture repositories
- fragmentation of operations and resources, with an increased need to serve regional offices and mobile workers
- increased need to manage costs more effectively
- increased emphasis on compliance, audit trails and central monitoring

This shift in attitude has already been reflected in enterprise-wide document and content management strategies, which are formulated to provide a company-wide platform that governs the entire information flow into and throughout organisations. Now the scanning function is indeed moving upstream, into a centralised position at or near to the point of entry. For very large organisations there may be more than one point of entry – but almost certainly there are fewer than in the past and the capture-processing procedure is becoming truly centralised.

Increasingly we're seeing the integration of department-level applications into a centralised capture and processing system. This system then feeds into an ECM infrastructure or other software application that sits on the output side of the capture process, so that data captured at point of entry can be shared with others rather than being collected discretely, department-by-department.

The benefits of this approach are considerable. Most notably, centralised scanning:

- reduces cost
- improves SLAs
- helps ensure compliance
- effectively tracks and audits document-based activities and processes
- makes best use of hardware and software
- leverages expertise across the organisation
- avoids duplication of data capture
- increases the efficiency of processing staff

Typical concerns

Restrictions on capture hardware have stunted progress towards achieving true centralised scanning. For any organisation migrating towards a centralised approach there are many critical success factors, and suppliers must effectively address their requirements before further progress can be made. The most typical concerns are:

Mixed document profiles: a truly centralised capture system must be capable of scanning any document that is fed into it, regardless of size, type, colour, thickness or fragility.

Intelligent data capture: once scanned, the software must be able to recognise data, classify, sort and index the document image and then route it electronically to the correct process or system.

Inline sorting – the scanning hardware must physically move disparate documents and out-sort them to relevant departmental or application-specific pockets into facilitate forward processing. When batch scanning mixed documents, same-type documents must be identified and grouped together automatically for long term storage and archival, or to be returned to sender (in the case of birth certificates, for example).

Speed: the business case for centralised capture falls down if cost and efficiency improvements are made at the expense of customer service level agreements. Centralised systems must be capable of handling high volumes in a short period of time in order to achieve equivalent departmental-level SLAs. A typical SLA might involve incoming documents arriving at 06.00hrs, being captured by 08.00hrs and being processed from 10.00hrs. For a centralised capture system to be acceptable these time commitments need to be the same or better than they would be using multiple departmental-systems.

Advancing Technology

Historically, the issue with centralised scanning was that the solutions lacked the flexibility to quickly and accurately process multiple document types, such as structured and unstructured documents.

The Bottom Line

Much has changed, and the concept of centralised, mixed application capture has materialised for many organisations. Best-in-class scanning technology has come of age, intelligent recognition software has evolved to become supremely reliable and a wide range of enabling solutions are in place to create robust, custom solutions that support centralised or workgroup processing. The backbone for many of these solutions remains enterprise content management, of course, but to be truly effective ECM must reside on the right side of the capture process.



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