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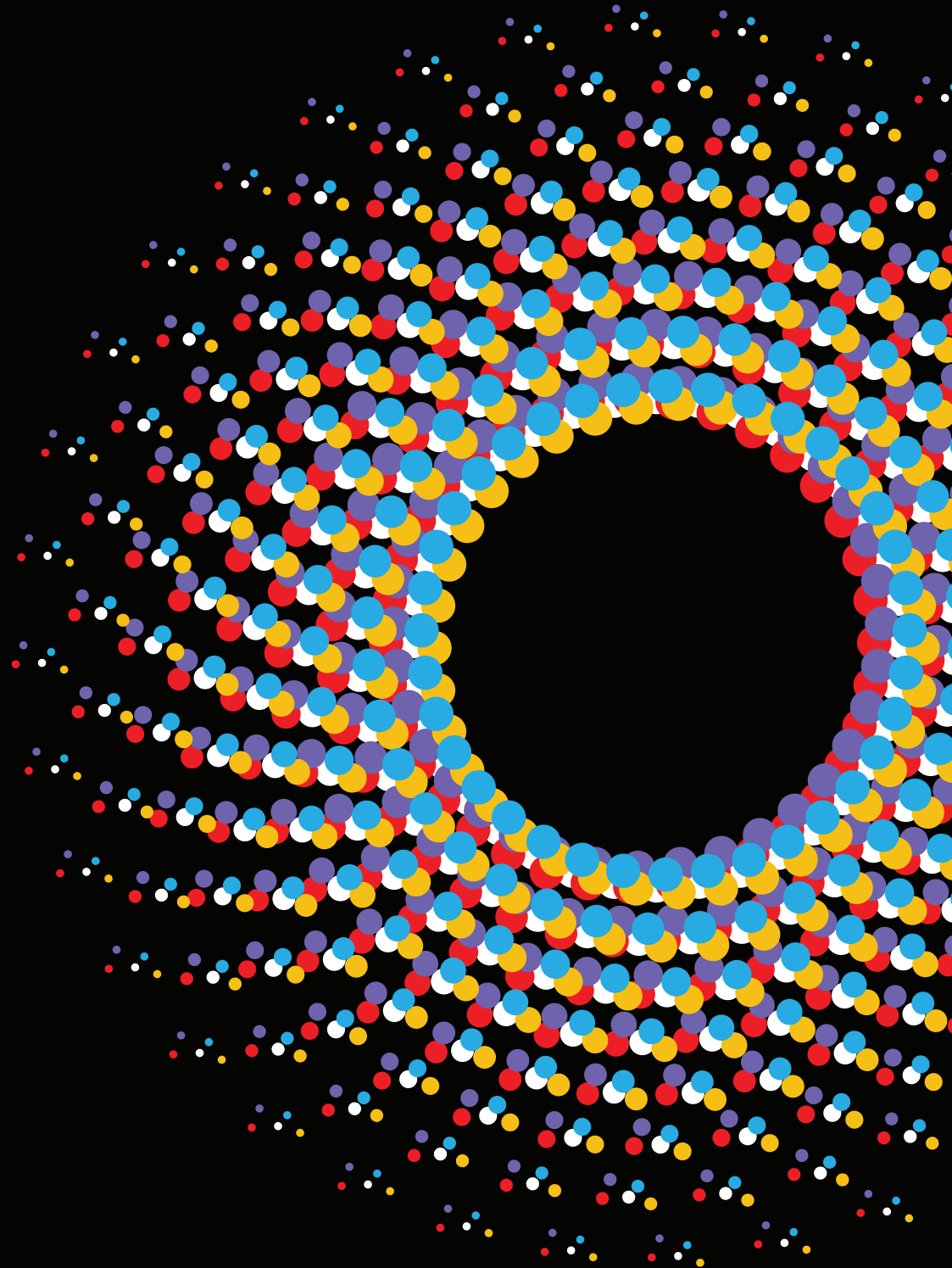
AUTOMATING PRINT OPERATIONS

**A Pathway to Success for
Print Service Providers**
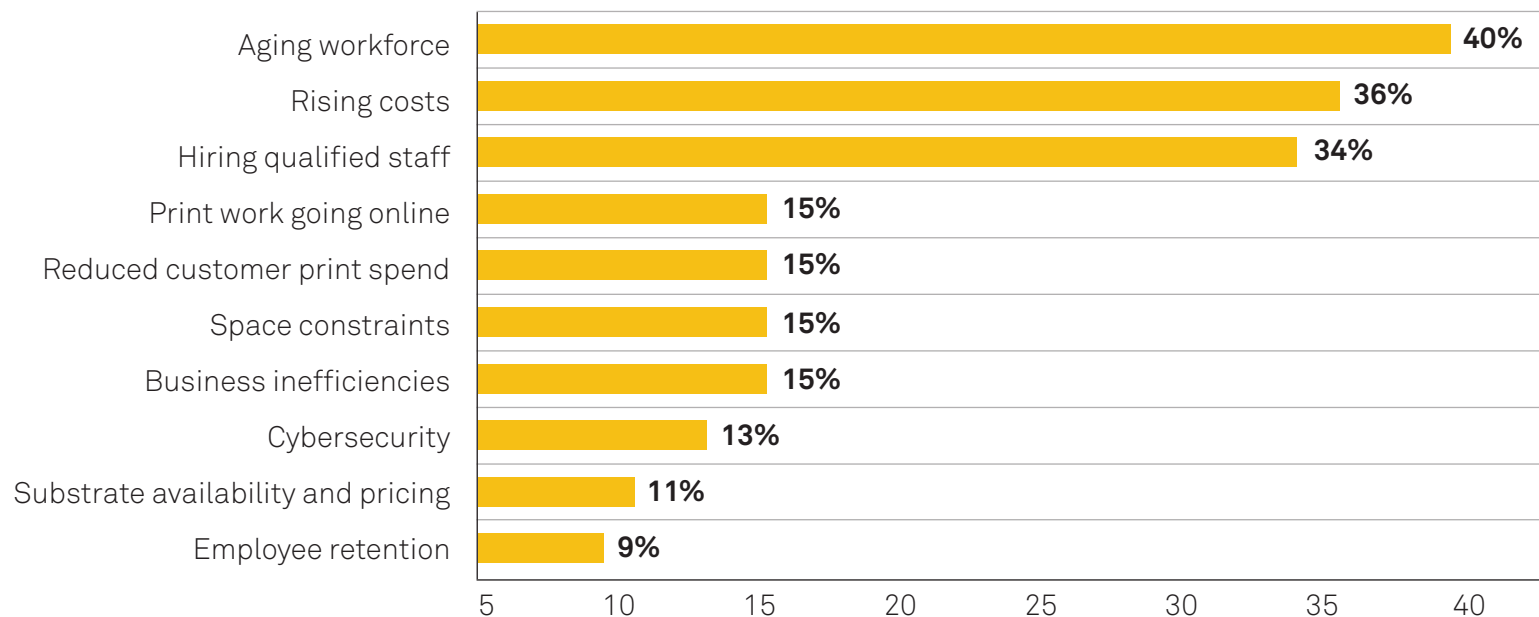
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INTRODUCTION

Automation is no longer a luxury in the printing industry; it is now a necessity. Print service providers (PSPs) that embrace automation can enhance their operational efficiency, reduce costs, and maintain a competitive edge. According to Keypoint Intelligence's most recent data, North American print shop owners and in-plant managers expect to experience a modest increase in revenues (3.4%) in 2024. Despite this anticipated growth, business owners face many challenges. The top three business concerns included an aging workforce, rising costs, and hiring qualified staff.

THE NEED FOR AUTOMATION

Top 10 Business Concerns

Which of the following would you consider to be the top business concerns for your printing operations?
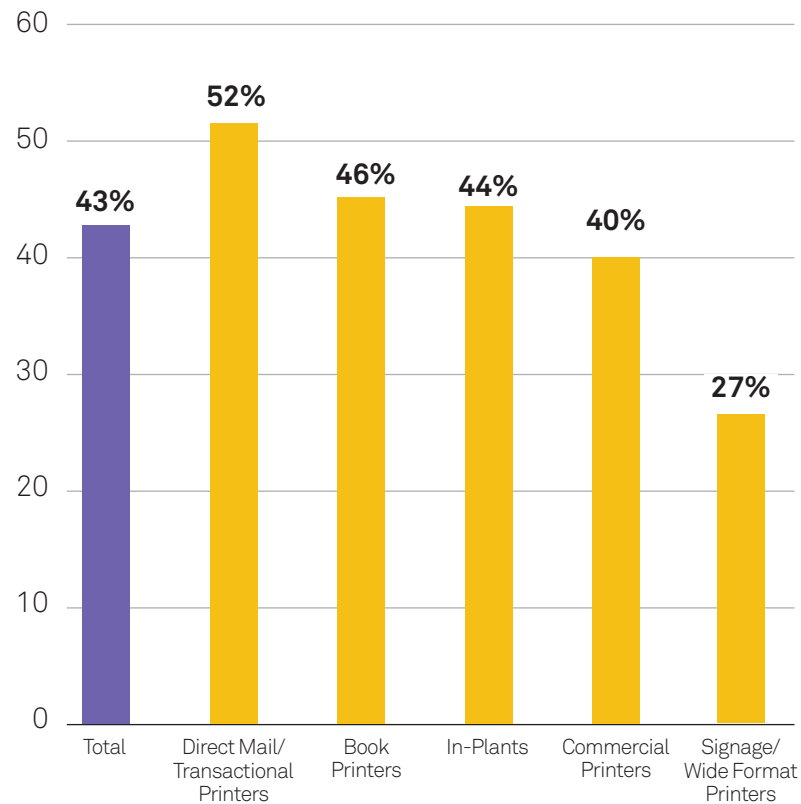
Concern	%
Aging workforce	40%
Rising costs	36%
Hiring qualified staff	34%
Print work going online	15%
Reduced customer print spend	15%
Space constraints	15%
Business inefficiencies	15%
Cybersecurity	13%
Substrate availability and pricing	11%
Employee retention	9%

N=95 Business Respondents
Source: North American Sofrware Investment Outlook; Keypoint Intelligence 2024

Automation can alleviate all these concerns by addressing rising operational costs and labor shortages, streamlining operations, and improving bottom lines.

Average Industry Automation by Printer Type

Printer Type	Automation %
Total	43%
Direct Mail/ Transactional Printers	52%
Book Printers	46%
In-Plants	44%
Commercial Printers	40%
Signage/ Wide Format Printers	27%

N=95 Business Respondents
Source: North American Sofrware Investment Outlook;
Keypoint Intelligence 2024

Automation in print operations uses technology to perform tasks that would have previously been handled manually, such as file preparation, prepress, and finishing. According to Keypoint Intelligence's survey data, the overall industry automation level averages 43%, with direct mailers and transactional printers leading the way.

The good news is that automation is rising, and overall printers project a level of 61% automation over the next two years. Automation benefits print service providers by enhancing operational efficiency, reducing manual intervention, speeding up production, and lowering labor costs. Automated preflighting and file conversion processes prepare jobs quickly, which is crucial for meeting tight deadlines. Automation improves quality and consistency by minimizing human errors. It also addresses labor challenges, such as an aging workforce and hiring difficulties, by taking over repetitive tasks. This enables PSPs to focus human resources on strategic activities.

Ricoh's advanced automation solutions are pivotal in addressing these needs. Ricoh's state-of-the- art software and professional services streamline workflows and optimize productivity. Its tools help print service providers implement e-commerce4print, print management information systems (MIS), and other workflow solutions to automate processes and reduce manual touchpoints. By analyzing current workflows, Ricoh can identify hidden challenges while proposing solutions to boost efficiency and productivity.

Ricoh's expertise includes color management services, digital press optimization, and workflow automation. Its solutions integrate seamlessly with existing systems, ensuring minimal disruption and maximum benefits. This integration makes it possible for PSPs to upgrade their operations without overhauling their entire infrastructure. Through these advancements, PSPs achieve higher automation levels, improving operational capabilities and maintaining a competitive edge.

TYPES OF AUTOMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Automation technologies can significantly enhance print operation efficiency.

Workflow automation tools automate preflighting, file conversion, proofing, and customer approval processes, drastically reducing job preparation time. Business and production management solutions such as print management information systems and enterprise resource planning (ERP) efficiently manage workflows and integrate various print production aspects.

RICOH Automated Color Adjuster (RACA) optimizes color management processes, ensuring consistent and accurate color output while minimizing manual intervention.
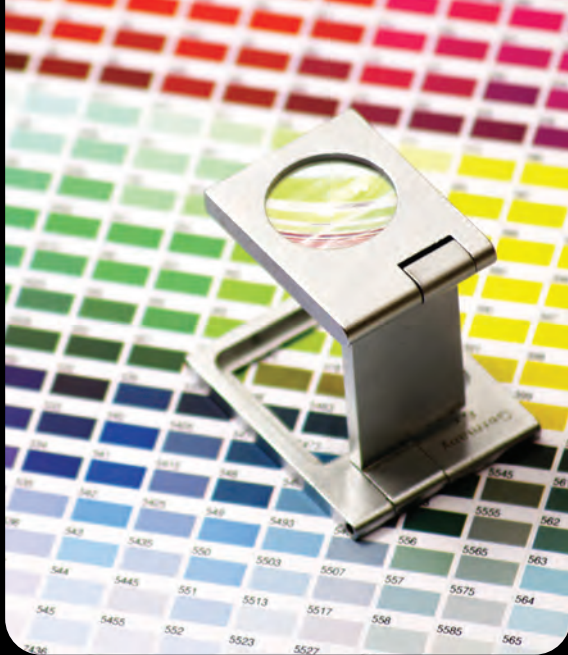
RICOH ProcessDirector can reduce costs, minimize errors, and achieve output integrity by automating manual tasks.

RICOH Supervisor can monitor production trends, optimize operations, and simplify multichannel communications personalization and management with real-time dashboard insights.

Online design and e-commerce4print solutions enable customers to design and order print products online, expanding market reach and improving customer satisfaction. Ricoh's integration with workflow solutions automates tasks, saves time, and minimizes errors.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO AUTOMATION

Despite the clear benefits, implementing automated workflows can be challenging for print service providers. The initial costs of acquiring and implementing automation technology can be significant. However, the long-term benefits, including substantial cost savings and increased productivity, can often outweigh these expenses. Conducting a thorough return on investment (ROI) analysis can justify the investment by highlighting the long-term financial gains and operational efficiencies that automation brings.

Transitioning to automated systems requires extensive staff training and effective change management. Employees must adapt to new technologies and processes, which can be daunting. Effective training programs are essential for staff to properly operate new systems. Ricoh's professional services offer ongoing support and training, helping PSPs manage the transition smoothly and minimize disruptions. This support ensures that employees are well-prepared and confident in using new technologies, enhancing overall productivity and efficiency.

Integrating new automation technologies with existing systems can be complex. PSPs often use various software and hardware solutions that may not seamlessly communicate with each other. Choosing scalable and flexible solutions that easily integrate with current workflows is necessary for a smooth transition. Ricoh's vendor-agnostic solutions integrate with existing systems, reducing data silos and leveraging prior investments. In addition, Ricoh's cloud subscription models minimize upfront IT investments. This ensures that PSPs can enhance their operations without overhauling their entire infrastructure, reducing costs and implementation time. By addressing these barriers through strategic planning, thorough training, and selecting the right partners, PSPs can successfully implement automation technologies and reap their numerous benefits.

FUTURE TRENDS IN PRINT AUTOMATION

The future of print automation is promising, with emerging technologies set to revolutionize the industry.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly being integrated into print operations, enhancing graphic design, marketing, and operational analytics. AI-driven solutions improve customer service by providing personalized experiences and automating interactions. Additionally, AI optimizes job scheduling by predicting efficient workflow paths and identifying potential bottlenecks.

Predictive maintenance capabilities significantly reduce downtime by anticipating equipment failures and scheduling timely maintenance.

Predictive analytics can forecast maintenance needs, optimize workflows, and predict customer demands. By analyzing data trends, predictive analytics enables PSPs to proactively manage operations, efficiently allocate resources, and address potential issues before they escalate, improving operational efficiency and customer satisfaction.

These advancements drive innovation in the print industry, bringing print service providers new opportunities to enhance capabilities and maintain a competitive edge. To start the automation journey, PSPs should follow the three steps that are outlined on the next few pages.

STEP ONE:

Assess current operations

Begin by thoroughly evaluating current operations to identify areas where automation can bring the most significant benefits. Focus on repetitive tasks that consume substantial time and resources, such as file preparation, prepress, and finishing. Prioritize these areas for automation to achieve quick wins and demonstrate the value of automation to your team and stakeholders. By targeting high- impact areas first, you can build momentum and support for future automation initiatives.

STEP TWO:

Select the right tools and partners

Choosing the right automation tools and partners is critical. Seek solutions that fit the specific needs of your operations and offer scalability to grow with your business. Partner with reputable vendors that provide ongoing support and updates. Ricoh's broad suite of services and technologies offers a tailored approach to meet these needs. Its vendor-agnostic solutions ensure seamless integration with existing systems, eliminating silos and leveraging existing investments. Ricoh's professional services include expert guidance and training to help navigate the complexities of automation implementation.

STEP THREE:

Build a business case for automation

Presenting a compelling business case for automation is crucial to secure stakeholder buy- in and funding. Emphasize the potential return on investment by demonstrating how automation can lead to significant cost savings, increased productivity, and improved operational efficiency. Use data from similar print service providers that h ave successfully implemented automation to illustrate tangible benefits. Highlight long-term advantages, such as enhanced customer satisfaction, reduced labor challenges, and the ability to stay competitive in an evolving market.

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CONCLUSION

Automation drives success in the printing industry. By embracing automation, PSPs can enhance operational efficiency, improve quality, and address labor challenges. Ricoh's advanced solutions and professional services can help PSPs navigate the automation journey effectively. Start your automation journey today to secure a competitive edge and ensure long-term growth and success in the print industry!

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