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### **Guest comment: The interoperability challenge**

The broadcast industry is becoming bogged down by a growing number of incompatible tools along the production chain, from filming to editing and production. Scott Allen, Vice President of Marketing, AmberFin, looks at how traditional broadcast firms can make the leap to a digital workflow.

The broadcast industry today is in the throes of change. Broadcasters are faced with the need to transition from standard- to high-definition services and, as they begin to do so, they are finding themselves faced with a host of new challenges. Not least of these challenges is the need to move from their traditional tape-based infrastructures to today's file-based workflow.

There are many reasons for the change that is happening. First is the inevitable fact that archived tape content will degrade over time; companies that do not change to a file-based system will ultimately face losing valuable content.

Today's technology means that a file-based system is both cost-efficient and more flexible than older systems; it can enable better-quality product and more automation capabilities, saving valuable staff time that can be redeployed in other key areas. It minimizes the risk of human error and, crucially, it creates a strong link between the different islands of the production process, from production to post-production (editing and effects), to promos and playout.

This development is highlighting another of the industry's challenges - interoperability. For the file-based workflow to really impact the profitability and effectiveness of the production cycle every part of the chain must be able to talk to every other part; broadcasters cannot afford to lose data, whether it is audio and video, timecode, closed captions or descriptive information.

There are several standards now appearing on the market to help solve this problem. Foremost among these is MXF, developed by SMPTE and including a number of industry experts. Most manufacturers now support MXF including both Sony and Panasonic's latest tapeless cameras. AmberFin, with its Snell & Wilcox heritage, is ideally positioned to help broadcasters deploy MXF within their organisation. It eases interoperability between systems and enables the easy re-deployment of existing content onto new platforms. Rather than requiring a broadcaster to rework their entire workflow from scratch, AmberFin's iCR software applications can easily be molded to a company's existing workflow, making the transition as easy and straightforward as possible.

The market is changing; it is no longer enough to produce content that will be aired on a fixed schedule. Customers increasingly want to consume programmes whenever they want, wherever they are, and broadcasters must address the interoperability question if they are to deliver their content onto new platforms such as the internet and mobile devices.

This evolution can happen as part of a wider strategy, especially for those broadcasters who exist within a larger company with a broader media portfolio. For these companies content creation is becoming more important than television signal broadcasting itself. One of the best examples of this is the BBC which now outsources its playout services in order to better focus on content creation.



In today's market, almost anyone can broadcast some form of media content. It is no longer only the broadcasters who are putting content in front of the consumer. The internet is open to all, and the least technically-minded consumer can upload their own videos to Internet sites such as YouTube. But here, as with the professional world, content is still king. Broadcasters have access not only to the best of today's content but also to their full back catalogues; the question is how and when they will be able to translate that content to the new platforms that are gaining so much traction with the consumer.

Perhaps the biggest question around the new platforms is one of money. Although some companies have budgeted for the move to HD, this is only the tip of the iceberg, and broadcasters are now asking themselves which other media platforms they should be building into their development strategy, what results they can expect and where there is revenue to be made.

It is clear that there is revenue earning potential and the demand is there. The industry needs to realize the value of the content it already owns, and the potential to deliver that content to consumers through these new platforms. There are millions of media assets archived today that could be repurposed for online, on-demand or mobile channels to generate new revenue streams through subscription, pay-per-view and advertising-based downloads.

But the challenges of interoperability between workflow solutions throughout the production chain of media content are different for every company and there is no right or wrong way to deal with them. Every company in the TV, film and broadcast industry is now learning how best to apply new technologies to their production and digitisation work to make it easier, faster and more cost-effective, and as is inevitable with a learning curve as steep as this, no one can be certain what the most successful methods will be.

Once these questions have been addressed, the file-based system can truly come into its own. It can then become a true networked group that can interact effectively within both new and traditional distribution channels in a way that is consistent and straightforward across the board. There is no serial chain from television to web. Instead, the industry must start to create studios that can do it all at the same time, taking content and outputting it to the right format for any platform. It is about having an end-to-end content repurposing solution for multiple revenue-generating platforms, maximizing the full potential of content by focusing on creativity without the need for specialist technicians.

The key factor is delivering archived content successfully on new platforms and being able to provide the optimum picture quality both at speed and cost effectively. Broadcasters must be able to repurpose their content quickly to meet consumer demand, but at the same time the process must be cost-efficient in order to generate the right returns. This is where AmberFin comes in by supporting that process with their iCR software to digitise new and archived content, breaking the bond between editing systems and storage, and enabling collaborative editing and content production.

There are already some great examples of prestigious content owners and providers using AmberFin's iCR technology. Sony Pictures is one of the first companies to take a proactive step towards reevaluating their processes. When they transferred to a digital workflow and turned their tapes to files (dumping copy, adding the right metadata, distributing globally to their partners) their processing and distribution costs fell significantly. There is an enormous amount of potential in the content that already exists in the film and broadcast industries thanks to the growing consumer demand to access that content whenever they want, on whatever device they are using at the time. Ultimately, those content owners who plan to make their archived content available to their customers, in the way and at the time that they want it, will be the ones who benefit the most from these emerging revenue streams.

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