

# Why Isn't Your Print Shop Automated Yet? What Are You Waiting For?

*How to grow revenue without increasing overhead*



*by*

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## Is Your Print Shop Automated Yet? What Are You Waiting For?

*How to grow revenue without increasing overhead*

**Let's begin with a question.**

**Have you recently found yourself in the unenviable position of losing business to a competitor who offers an advantage in some aspect of his or her print production operation? If you said, “yes” the bad news is that you're not alone. The good news is that there is something you can do about it.**



And that gets us to two more questions:

- What is your competitor offering (or promising) that constitutes a challenge for your company?
- And, how can you match or exceed that capability?

Chances are, some of what your competitor is offering has its roots in automation, especially a process called web-to-print, and if that is an area you've been reluctant to delve into, the time to make a change has arrived.

In addition to some competitive concerns, you may also be seeing the number of incoming orders increasing—which is good—but

noticing that they are often shorter runs, many of which require more customization. This emerging mix of work may be highlighting weaknesses in your operation because the manual processes that once worked so well are not always aligned with the demands of many shorter customized jobs.

Addressing this challenge and adopting a web-to-print strategy is not as intimidating as you may think. It requires planning and working with your team to refine your internal processes, but it is not quantum physics.



### Begin with workflow

The key challenges of print production really haven't changed much over the years. The core parts of the process are still job submission and pricing, pre-press, customization, and production. These, plus connectivity with accounting, CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and shipping, all constitute a "workflow," a broad term that has acquired buzzword status and come to mean automation of previously manual processes through the use of computer software.

The big concerns are first, how these core functions are handled, and second, what they mean to your business and your customers. How your competitors are handling these functions is also important because a local customer may be going to a competitor simply because the other shop has made something basic, such as job submission, into a painless process. Meanwhile, you may still expect customers to bring jobs in on a thumb drive, or even worse have your sales rep visit the customer to pick the job up. And no, simply offering email job submission is not enough!

But wait. It gets worse. Your biggest competitive threats may not be the print shops in your surrounding zip codes but the ones whose addresses end in dot-com. Why those guys? Because every one of them has implemented end-to-end workflows that enable print jobs to go all but untouched by anyone until they are prepared for shipping. It is *that level* of automation (and not just lower ink and paper prices) that lets online print providers undercut you on price, service and delivery. The virtual shops have trimmed labor costs with extensive automation and are leveraging it against you as a competitive advantage. So even though these companies are not down the street, they are your archrivals, and to compete with them—as well

as the locals—you have to up your game. And you can do it with a smarter, faster, more agile workflow that is fine-tuned to the needs of your business and your customers.

This pressure is building by the week, so you have to act quickly because automating and streamlining your operation are key to the success and survival of your business.

### Think Big, Start Small

Still, web-to-print can be a complex process with many moving parts, and automation certainly seems a little intimidating. So where do you begin? Start with the hard parts, the pain points, the bottlenecks; those places where work slows down and may sometimes even grind to a halt. These are often the small parts of a bigger picture, but they are also the details that matter. You already know where these places are because you encounter them every day—and wish some of them could be a bit easier.

The first reaction of many print providers is that automation means giving up control, but the best workflow automation suites actually *enhance control* by helping ensure all necessary steps are followed on each job and that they are aligned as closely as possible with your established and familiar processes. This eases the transition from physical to automated workflows for employees and customers alike and helps ensure the continuation of valued processes.

For example, different applications are needed to address the issues surrounding job submission and pricing, pre-press, customization, and production. Several related apps should be able to automate these requirements as well as variable data printing, customization



and online design while providing handoffs to the next step in the workflow. Moreover, each individual application should be modular, able to operate both independently and in cooperation with other parts of a workflow automation suite to provide a comprehensive integrated solution that adds value and productivity to your business.

It is easy to find software that addresses individual print production tasks, but many are either standalone tools or are part of a much more sophisticated and costly software suite that can be difficult to master and integrate into typical commercial print operations.

#### **Automation 101**

Streamlining your operation once meant optimizing manual and physical operations. Most print providers have done a very good job with the physical part of this, but today—when everything that can become digital is becoming digital—old-school streamlining of manual processes is merely the foundation of a truly efficient and profitable automated workflow. And while the idea of broader automation can seem a little intimidating, it does not have to be an all or nothing change in your organization. Here are some ways you can take charge of your workflow and begin removing pain points today.

#### *Job Submission & Pricing*

One of the easiest processes to automate is job submission. This used to mean accepting a job on a disc or a thumb drive from a customer, manually entering all the specs for the job into an internal system that created a job ticket, obtaining a price quote, and passing the job to prepress. The interim step, still followed today by many (perhaps even most) print providers is accepting jobs attached to emails. This provides an illusion of efficiency but offers no real

advantages. Entering the job into a shop's system is still done manually, slowing down the process and leaving room for errors. In most shops, the Customer Service Rep (CSR) still has to make sure the job coming in via email actually has a job file attached, gather, verify and enter all the specs of a job to create a job ticket, ensure the attached file is in a usable format (such as a high-res PDF), enter the delivery date and shipping info, provide a quote, and pass the work along to pre-press. It is not uncommon for this to require up to a couple of hours for anything more than the simplest jobs.

Automated job submission splits the process up, making the customer responsible for specifying quantities, paper stocks, finishing requirements, providing data files for variable content jobs, specifying a delivery date, shipping and delivery requirements, providing a printable file, including billing information, plus any unique or special information needed for production. This all takes place on a customer's internet-connected computer where they enter a "digital storefront"—a restricted access area of a printer's website where they fill out a form that is essentially a job ticket. Your company can define all the info a customer should provide, even including the type of press to be used. For instance, based on job specs a customer with a variable data job may be able to specify an inkjet or toner-based press. The choices available to the customer rely on the same info your CSR would gather but now your customer does that work. This way, instead of doing work that can quickly become tedious, a CSR can add more value to your operation and incoming jobs can begin their journey through your workflow faster, at a lower cost, and with greater profitability.



A valuable tie-in to job submission is the eCommerce step of providing a price quote based on the job specs. This adds significant value for customers and helps build relationships because it improves your company's responsiveness. Providing clear, online pricing is an ability many print providers were long reluctant to embrace—until it became commonplace at several dot-com shops. Now, customers expect it, and an automated workflow makes it easier to provide.

These front-end functions are what your customers see first, and in many instances may be the sole interaction a customer has with your business. Automating these processes may seem to distance your company from its customers, but access to a digital storefront, the ability to provide exact job specs, and the immediacy of response (albeit automated) from your system actually enhances relationships with customers. This makes automation a valuable CRM tool that fosters greater reliance on your operation and helps garner a larger share of a customer's business.

Once job submission is completed on your server, the application automatically verifies that all the necessary fields are filled in, provides a price quote, requests approval of the quote, and the job is routed to prepress. Depending on work volume, job complexity and how your system is configured, this entire process can take as little as a few seconds or maybe a few minutes.

Now think for a moment: With your present workflow, how much time is required to handle all the incoming jobs on an average day? Suppose twenty, thirty or fifty percent of that front-end time could be

spent doing more for existing customers or bringing in new business. How might that change your operation?

### *MIS & ERP*

Even though a customer can take advantage of a cloud-based application, there's more to creating and distributing electronic or physical mail than just the names and addresses. All of the set up elements, whether handled by your sales team or your customers, should work quickly, be easy to navigate, track inventory, provide instant pricing that includes shipping and payment information, and enable placing orders from any device. And, because your customers use a variety of software to manage their own operations, your MIS & ERP systems must integrate with as many of your customers' applications as possible. For instance, being able to automatically provide estimates and pricing directly to a customer's email streamlines processing and demonstrates your responsiveness.

Doing all this requires a rock-solid, yet simplified, MIS & ERP solution that ensures no parts are inadvertently forgotten so you and your customer can work without worry and know that every static and variable content communication is completely accurate. Ensuring all these steps are done consistently for every print or mailing project is a mission-critical component that must be tightly integrated into your operation.

Having a simplified yet powerful MIS/ERP solution built into the automated workflow that powers your operation can help differentiate your company from competitors with capabilities that let you do more with and for your customers.



### *Making electronic documents work*

It's time for a couple more questions:

- How many of your customers take advantage of variable data printing (VDP)?
- How can you add value by helping customers use VDP in their communications?

Customers who know how to use VDP are probably already submitting jobs that require variable information. Others are still unsure how to take advantage of this technology and it can be hard for them to implement and support. So they come to you. But training customers to use variable data in conjunction with a standard design program such as Adobe® InDesign is beyond the scope of most print providers. With automation, though, you can take variable content to a completely new level.

You can streamline this process with cloud-based document personalization and customization that are part of your automated production system. For example, an online design tool can let your customers create personalized and customized documents that are seamlessly connected to job submission, prepress and production operations. This strategy provides you and your customers optimal control and ease of use while helping ensure the VDP documents landing on your servers will work as intended.

### *Prepress*

With multiple jobs arriving in a shop on any given day, a job coming out of an automated submission process may “sit” in a prepress queue for one or more hours. Then the job begins to move again, but

much sooner than it would in a manual workflow where it could languish for hours or even overnight.

In an automated environment the file is opened and examined by prepress software instead of a prepress person. This is not unlike the older technique of a CSR manually placing jobs in a “hot folder,” but the automated process is much faster. Based on information provided in the job ticket, each job is immediately pre-flighted to ensure it will print correctly. For example, are colors set to the appropriate color space? Are the fonts embedded in the PDF? Are all images of sufficient resolution for printing? Can the paper specified by the customer be used on the press intended for the job? The list goes on, based on job specs and your business's specific needs. This can include automatic file “repair” (when possible), and sending a corrected file to the customer for approval. For issues the software cannot resolve—such as inclusion of a low-res image—the prepress team is alerted so they can investigate and possibly correct the issue or contact the customer. Once a job is opened for inspection, the entire pre-flighting process may take several minutes but is usually much shorter. By comparison, a manual pre-flighting and inspection process can easily eat up 30 minutes to an hour or more of a prepress technician's time, sharply limiting the number of jobs that can be handled and sent to a press in a single shift.

As the old saying of printing goes, “You only make money when the press is running.” *Automation accelerates the flow of jobs from submission through prepress to help keep both offset and digital presses making money.*



Depending on how the workflow is configured, pre-flighted jobs may make a brief stop in scheduling and then move to either the platemaking system (for offset work) or directly to the print queue of a digital press. The exact sequence or business rules for this process can be customized to your operation and be adjusted for each type of press based on your business needs.

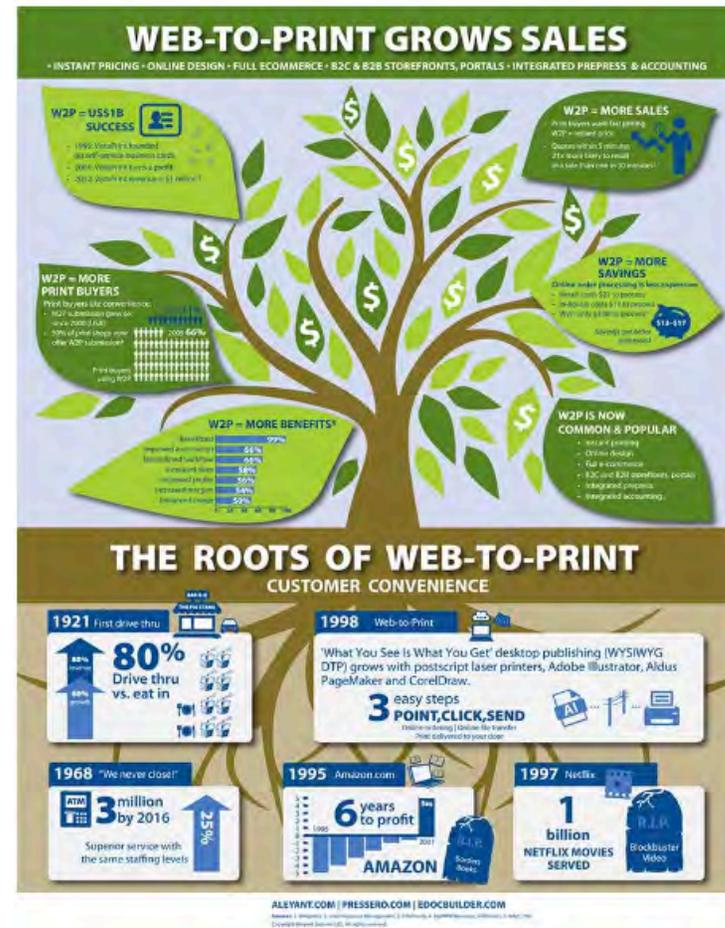
Again, user control is built in so you and your team can fine-tune all automated processes to work in your system. And no matter how your individual workflow is set up, automation dramatically increases the number of jobs that can be submitted, priced and pre-flighted in a day or shift, which in turn places more jobs in the print queue of your offset or digital press. That provides a faster, more productive workflow that moves jobs through your operation faster and more accurately, helping accelerating delivery and delighting customers.

### Follow the value. And the money.

The value of a web-to-print automated workflow comes from the integration of all the moving parts. Some of this is not the “heavy lifting” of job submission and file preparation, but other elements that are “backroom” activities like accounting and invoicing.

For instance, all pricing information that was determined during job submission can be passed to your accounting department and be incorporated into invoices that can automatically be printed and mailed to customers, including charges for shipping and delivery. Because all job ticket information, including any additional charges was compiled in a single job file that was defined and approved by the customer, billing is accurate and can be produced in a timely manner. So as more jobs are produced each week, automating

these parts of your accounting system accelerates cash flow back to your business without changing staffing requirements. From job submission through invoicing, automation makes your operation faster, smarter, leaner, and more profitable.





In short, the business benefits of an automated print production workflow include:

- Simplified and streamlined job submission with reduced manual touches and errors
- Faster prepress and accelerated customer approval
- Increased throughput for both standard and custom jobs
- Seamless and accurate invoicing to streamline cash flow
- Enhanced customer relations and retention

#### **One more thing: Affordability!**

One of the big barriers of adopting new automation technology in print shops is the perceived cost of customizing workflow solutions to a shop's needs. Between initial acquisition costs (which can be only the tip of the iceberg), ongoing support costs, training, and transitional issues, it can sometimes be hard to recognize value.

Aleyant provides an affordable entry cost, superior ease of use, a short learning curve and accessible, professional support. Although there is no such thing as a "typical shop" or "typical time to implement," Aleyant recommends customers take small steps. Begin by identifying key challenges and adopt the software module that addresses that specific issue, bring it onboard and get completely comfortable with it. That may take between 30 and 60 days, at which time a customer can repeat the process with another challenge and another module. Not only does this help control costs, it makes the learning curve easier to climb and helps ensure each Aleyant product is properly understood and fine-tuned to a customer's requirements.



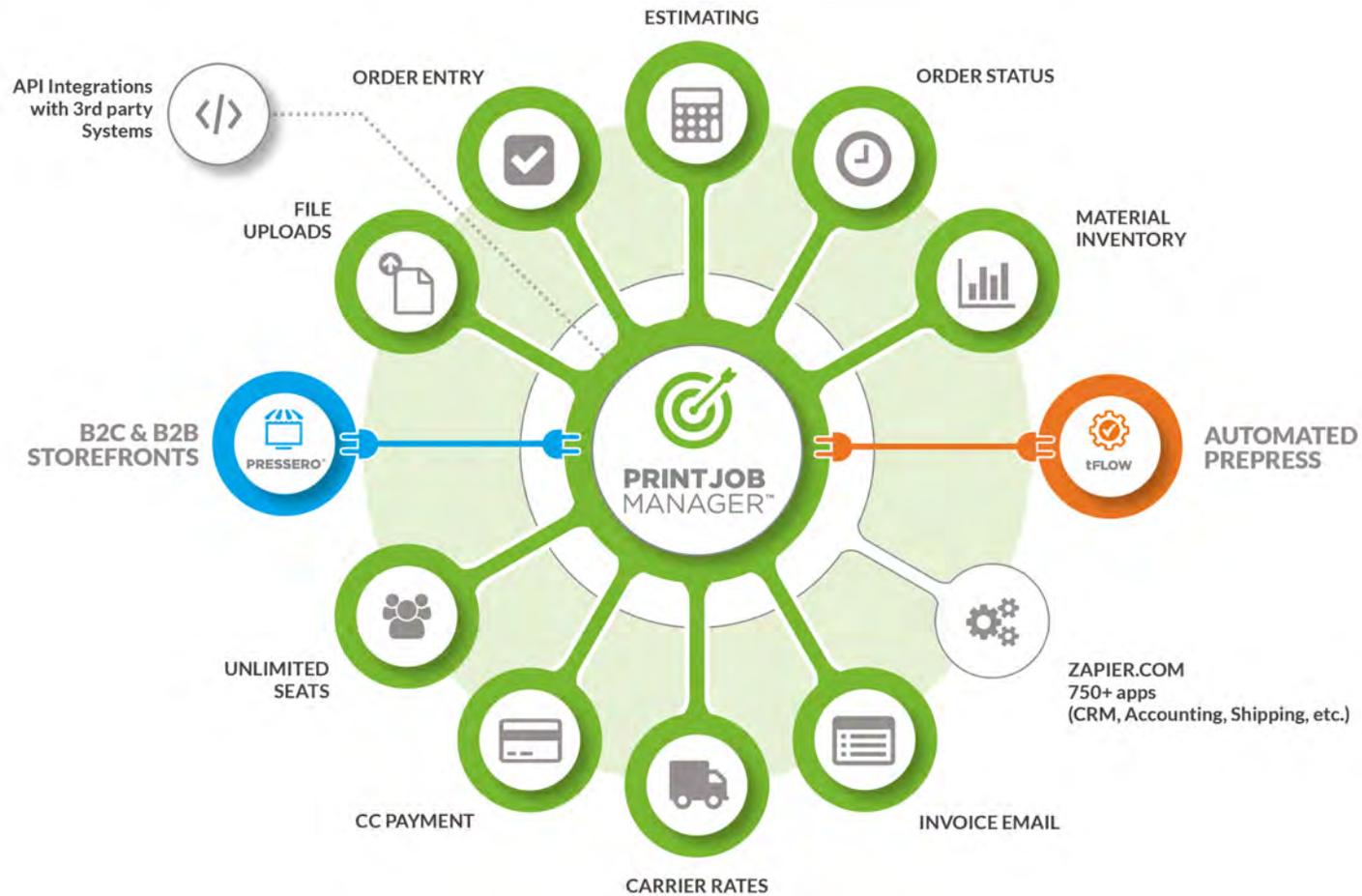
#### **Micro and Macro**

In a practical sense, all web-to-print functions work at two levels, a "micro" one that includes the specialized tasks of job submission, eCommerce, pricing and job management, VDP and online design, prepress and approval, and the handoffs between each. Tying it all together is a "macro" view, which integrates the individual apps into a full-fledged automated web-to-print workflow.

Here's how it works.

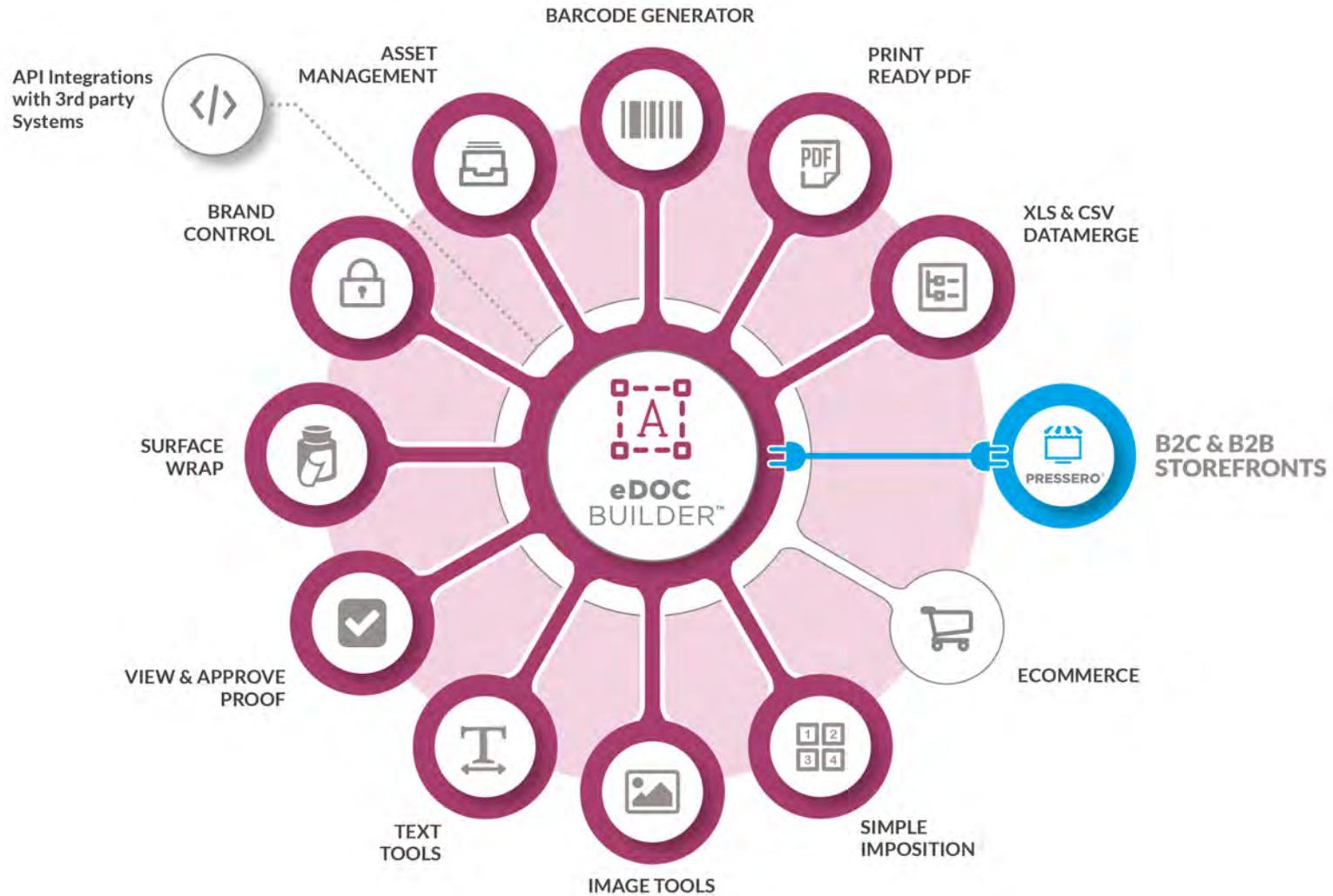


**At the Micro level**, this and the following three pages show how several specialized applications can handle key automated workflow functions including pricing and job management, variable data printing and online design, job submission and eCommerce, and file checking, repair and approval.



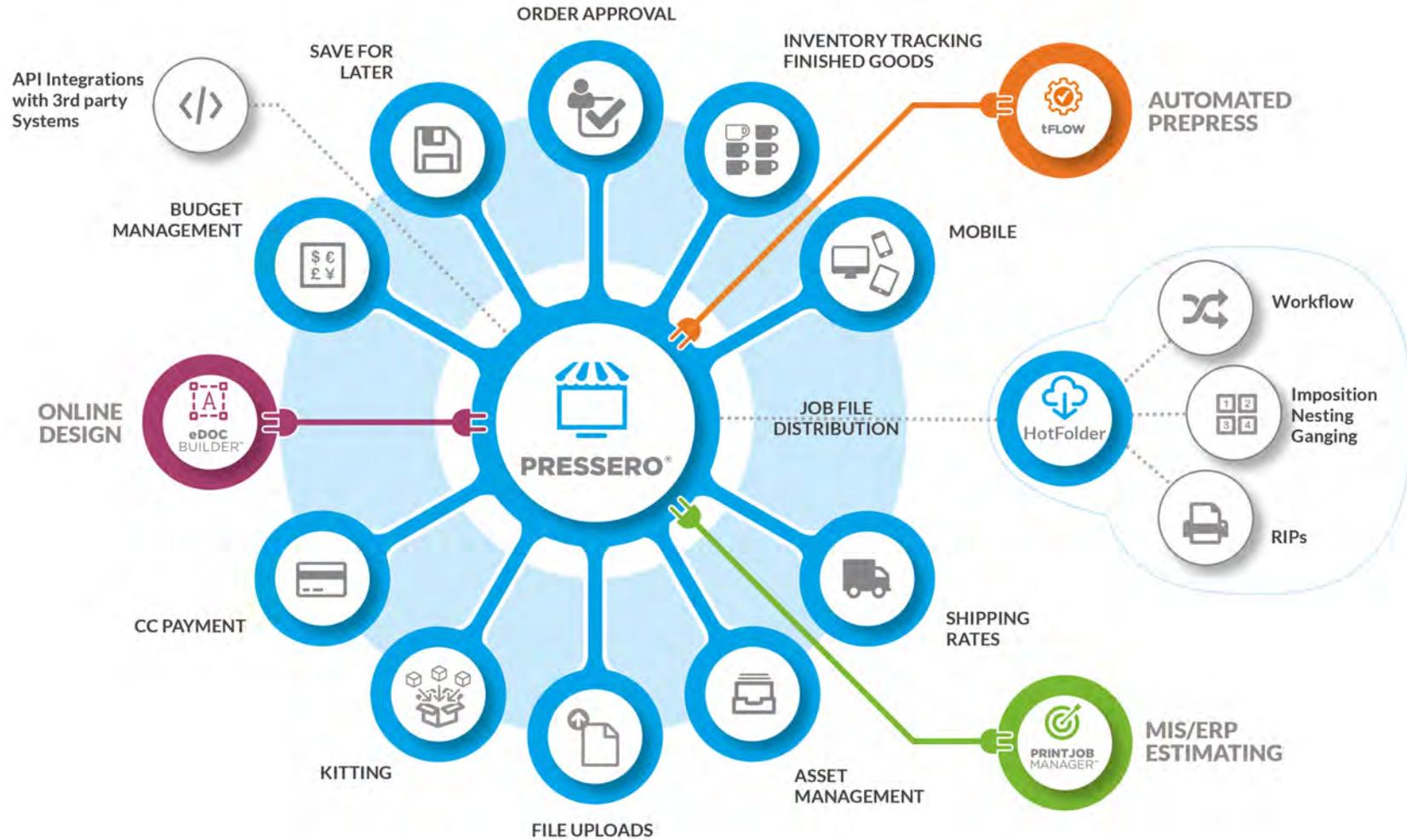
Pricing & Production Management



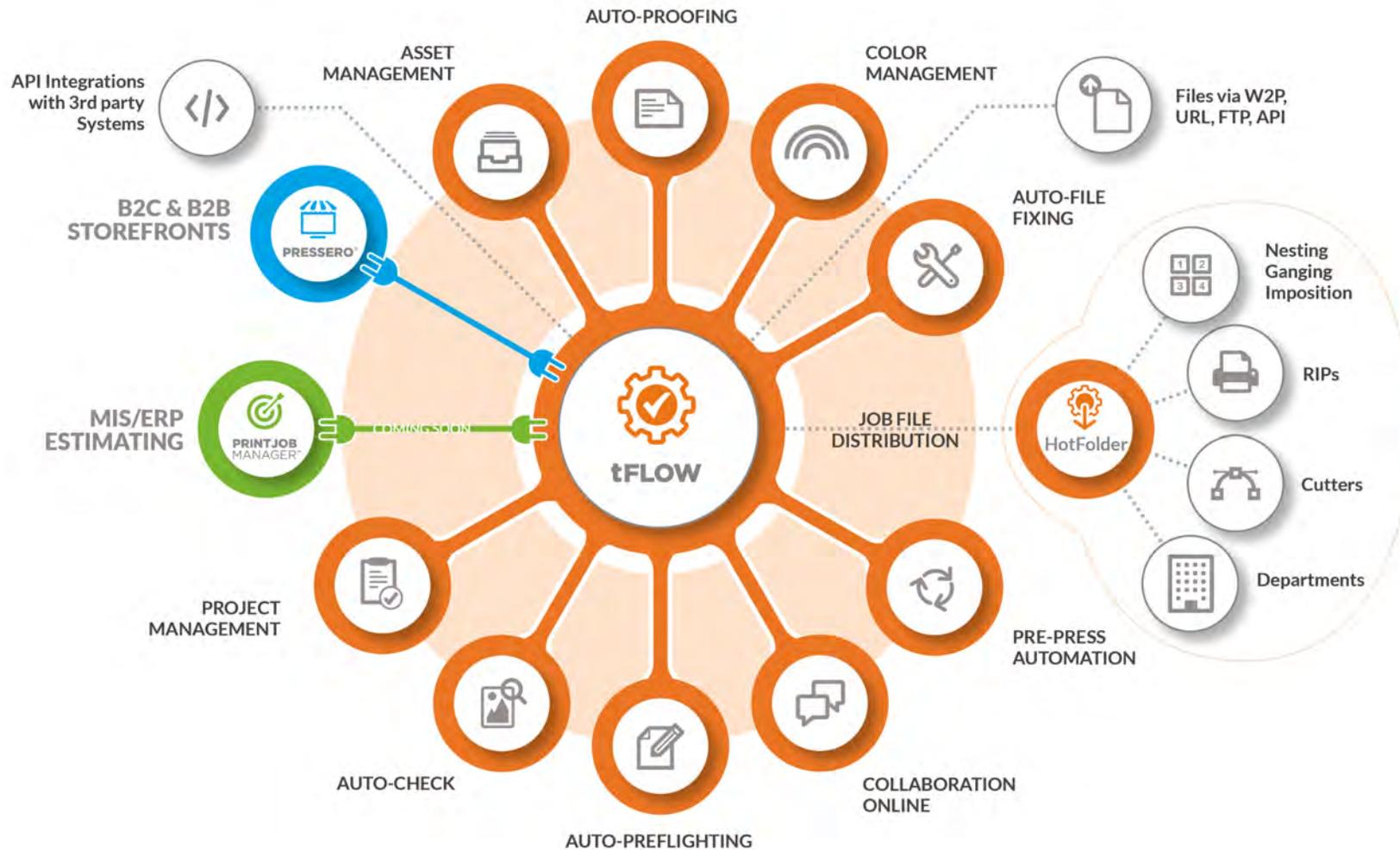


Online Design & Personalization for Variable Data Printing





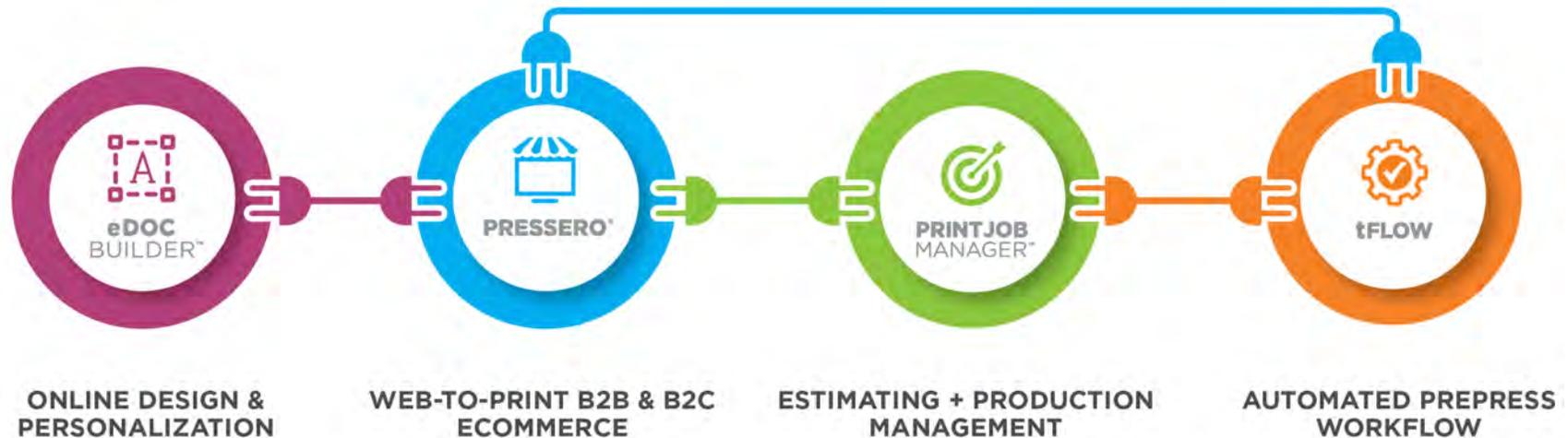
### Web-to-Print Job Submission with B2B and B2C eCommerce



**Automated Prepress Workflow for File Check, Fix & Approval**



**The Macro level** unifies and connects the micro applications to ensure a smooth workflow and maximize flexibility. This helps ensure that data and job files move seamlessly and automatically from one step in the workflow to another. Minimizing touches dramatically reduces the likelihood of errors while speeding work through a print shop.



Aleyant creates web-to-print, estimating and production, and prepress automation workflow software that is designed and engineered to meet the needs of graphic arts professionals. Using a modular approach that unifies production processes, Aleyant expands customers' ability to be more available, efficient and profitable.

**Aleyant Pressero™** is an affordable and easy-to-use cloud-based B2B or B2C online storefront solution that can quickly and easily be customized to individual client needs. Pressero includes a library of responsive designs for branded sites to ensure proper display regardless of the viewing device being used. Pressero's highly customizable digital storefront interface has enabled many clients expand their reach into online print sales.



**Aleyant eDocBuilder™** provides web-based variable data publishing, personalization and online design system. Originally developed as a module of Pressero it is now provided as separate product that can be integrated in other eCommerce web-to-print storefronts and portals including commercially multiple MIS and web-to-print solutions. eDocBuilder is a powerful, cloud-based document personalization, online designer, and variable data publishing system for integration into an existing e-commerce or online ordering system featuring advanced typography control, imposition, scripting support, PDF workflows, rapid template creation, InDesign plug-in support, Excel merge capabilities and more.

**Aleyant PrintJobManager™** is MIS/ERP simplified. A cloud-based print job manager solution, PrintJobManager uses a new mobile, cloud-based approach to MIS to quickly generate market-driven pricing, job management, inventory tracking, real-time job planning and estimating across a wide variety of print production technologies and applications. It includes a Zapier account for connectivity to over 1,000 apps.

**Aleyant tFLOW™** is a powerful digital workflow automation and customer service solution for commercial, large format, label, and specialty graphics that simplifies difficult file management tasks and processes to optimize efficiency and production throughput. tFLOWS modern and open architecture easily integrates with any Web-to-Print, MIS/ERP and Output Systems.

tFLOW eliminates redundant manual touch points and provides team communication tools for today's workplace. Customers, sales representatives, prepress operators and production teams can collaborate in real-time 24/7 with complete visibility, eliminating lengthy email chains, text messages and calls that cause missed deadlines and costly mistakes and delays.

#### **About Aleyant**

Aleyant provides mobile ready, cloud-based solutions for web-to-print storefronts, online design and personalization, print job estimating and pricing, as well as automated preflighting workflow. Workflow automation from the customer-facing storefront to prepress to production is a hallmark of our software, as well as with "playing well" with third-party software systems.