

IWCO Direct Stays on Top of Application Versions with Compart Software

By Compart North America Inc.



Document applications can have long lives. Some start out on a mainframe system, and then transition to midrange computing. As marketers accumulate database information and fine tune communications strategies, they may add personalization to legacy applications. Along the way, subtle differences work their way into the different versions. The changes can be minor and deeply hidden, but they can bring production to its knees. Finding them all is immensely time consuming if possible at all.

Newer applications face similar problems. Direct marketing applications can go through a new variation with every mailing. The changes may be as understated as a new hyphen, or as prominent as a new font. With good composition software, designers can easily modify documents as needed. What is difficult is knowing how differences across versions will affect the quality of the printed pages. Small changes in formatting can throw off the layout of an entire letter. Differences in old and new versions of composition software can puzzle production professionals for days as they try to figure out why the seemingly same application isn't.

Small Differences Drag Down Productivity in a Big Way

For direct mail powerhouse IWCO Direct, problems like these were impacting productivity. IWCO Direct is one of the nation's largest and most



advanced integrated solutions providers for direct marketers. They run about 1,200 different composition programs a month, usually relatively simple letters and solicitations that may be duplexed and personalized.

As applications run through development and quality control, they often need revisions. Someone checks and verifies the changes, but the modifications can impact something else in the layout.

Compart Best for Service Bureaus

An extensive review of the market led Rodger Smith, IWCO Direct Enterprise Architect, to DocBridge Delta software from Compart. "Compart is best in the space for service bureaus," said Smith. DocBridge Delta is particularly suited to high-volume production environments like IWCO Direct.

"Other products were DocBridge Delta is a fraction of the cost of other products that are not anywhere close in capabilities," Smith noted.

"I saw everything we needed was there, and it was easy to work with. Those were key selling points the robustness of the solution and the potential to use it in many ways. We are collaborating with Compart to add even more usability. Compart is open to making a better product through collaboration with customers. We worked together to have something we can build on going forward."

Graphical Comparisons Allow Quick Application Analysis

Users typically update a given document with the help of a composition tool or other application. They can check that the content and its presentation still correspond to what was intended.

It's difficult to determine if content and layout are identical across versions at the bit level, even when files have the same size and name. DocBridge Delta solves this problem either by displaying the differences visually, or by producing a list of the differences. It outputs the equivalent of a virtual light table to compare the outputs superimposed, with any differences pointed out. "DocBridge Delta shows all the places where two versions are different, so we can make the right changes and proactively manage the impact," Smith explained.

DocBridge Delta takes two files in formats such as AFP, PostScript and Metacode, compares old and revised output and finds differences in the composed versions. Pixellevel comparisons identify changes and their locations. Comparisons at the structural level evaluate text strings, font attributes and other considerations that affect output.

DocBridge Delta has guided them to sources of problems within application versions, and to greater productivity and savings. "The most obvious ROI is that we avoid a production issue from an unintended change in a mail piece," said Smith. "When you have to reprint, it involves reworking costs, explaining to clients, and recovering your credibility."

Customers Expect Quality Personalization

"The direct marketing model of the past was to create a persuasive offer and send it to five million people. If you got a two percent response, you made money. Now customers aren't satisfied with that return ratio. If it can be more personalized, you will have better response rate, and now customers are asking us to do more variations."

"Today we have as many as 1,200 different versions of a piece a month, up from 600 to 700. In the next few years, it will be 5,000 different versions a month, and at that rate, we will be in big trouble if we can't manage the variations. There is an opportunity to handle a higher scale of variation, but we have to be confident we do it correctly. If we can't guarantee the right results today, imagine the difficulty when personalization variations increase that by five or ten times what is possible now."

As high volume, digital color devices become practical from a cost of operation perspective, Smith says that will also drive more demand for personalization. "Then we will need to compare images as well as text. Instead of standard letterhead, you may now have an image of a family in winter or on the beach or of a specific age or race."

Regression Testing

DocBridge Delta has also proven itself for regression testing to uncover technical differences and potential problems across versions of software. Regression testing is important when changing any part of a system to ensure that no unintended differences were introduced with the change.

"We did regression testing between versions of our composition software and found a change in the default setting for hyphenation. In another case, we ran a test job and found a minor difference in punctuation applied to the address field. One version applied periods to abbreviations, the other did not," Smith explained. "Punctuation may seem minor to an outsider, but it is a matter of providing the customer with exactly what they need." DocBridge Delta exposes the differences so clients and CSRs can make the choice.

"Before, we would do a fairly small number of tests because we couldn't physically review a large number of files for each application. Even if we do just a few dozen test cases, we can't catch all the changes. Now we will spend the time we have more productively. We can work more effectively and more confidently."

Eventually DocBridge Delta will support about 100 comparisons per day. "We are trying to do that many by hand now. With DocBridge Delta, we increase the effectiveness of the whole process. And in the end, the testing we do will be much more rigorous," he said.

Customer Service Tool

"We have an online webbased proofing tool, OneProof, that lets everybody see what will happen in various versions and what will be produced. But we can't easily see and compare to the old version. We have



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to print the previous version and compare hard copy to what is on the proofing screen. It's a very labor intensive way just to know that something changed. With DocBridge Delta, we can automate the comparison and go right to any differences between the current and previous versions."

After the comparisons are assembled, nontechnical users in customer service use them to evaluate jobs on behalf of clients. A report summarizing the differences is used internally by about 40 CSRs. A graphical view of differences makes it fast and easy to make decisions.

"Imagine a letter that appeared okay, but a crowding address box threatens to shift content down," said Smith. A graphic comparison shows you how this impacts the layout. It graphically represents how layout is affected and narrows in on where content changed. You can quickly determine if the text is the same, does break the same, is rendered in the same font. We could compare all text strings and see that the text was the same, but it just got moved. Or if the text was different, we could immediately see exactly where it differed."

Going forward, core Compart products DocBridge Mill and DocBridge Pilot will be important as IWCO Direct pursues the digital transition. "We continue to be impressed with Compart as a working partner who is very open to what is needed and what can be done," declared Smith.