Press headlines and reported hiring trends in the United States and Canada indicate a modest increase over the past few months. At PrintLink we have steadfastly believed employment would start to show moderate improvement at the end of the third quarter/beginning of the fourth quarter of 2010, and our own statistics demonstrate this is indeed the case.

While we talk in terms of trends in North America, we are intrinsically participants in the global economy. And factors impacting this encompassing entity play out in real time in the media. At any given time, media reports can say there are sure signs of economic recovery—and the next report can say recovery is either stagnant or moderately declining. All in all, this appears to translate to a very gradual incline upward. With indication the global economy is essentially headed in the right direction, the fear factor is lessening and some confidence is returning. There is considerable evidence print and graphic communications service providers are investing in cross media options to offer their clients greater impact and higher ROI on their media spend.

PRINT REDEFINED
At its heart, the printing industry is charged with the responsibility of disseminating information. And we are indeed in an information age that has escalated beyond where it has ever been before—with increasingly more vehicles available to deliver it.

Print remains strong but the definition is evolving. While ink on paper is statistically still the largest vehicle, print by definition is no longer just that. According to Daniel Dejan, North American ETC (Education Training Consulting) print/creative manager, Sappi Fine Paper, print is resizing, redirecting and evolving.

Forrester Research, a leading independent research firm analyzing technology change and its impact on business, consumers, and society, states tomorrow’s integrated marketing will blend multi-channel branded content with social media.

PEOPLE IMPACT THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PRINT
People drive technology. Great technology is of little value without great staff to propel it forward. To be fully effective, it must be expertly driven by people—people who will define and articulate its benefits—people who will keep data-driven resources in top producing form, as well as provide robust and unique solutions to fit your evolving business—people who will make a commitment to your business success.

The demand for expert human resources in traditional print and new technologies is in transition. Projecting ahead: while it may take some time for economic recovery to be deemed complete, we at PrintLink believe the industry is embarking on some complex human resource needs. In addition to redefining print, service providers need to fully identify—and also redefine—the job functions required to underpin their success.

THE NEW MEDIA
The escalating and systematic trend toward the integration of new technologies couples opportunity with challenge. Many multichannel media options have been available for some time, but industry adoption has been cautious. Other technologies, by contrast, have enjoyed meteoric integration to the multimedia experience.

Capital investment over recent years—and projected into the future—is with new equipment, advanced technologies and systems. In fact, the equipment or hardware is the carrier for software,
which is really what defines the new technologies. Assimilation of these technologies either into an existing workflow or as the foundation for a new business venture requires far more than the decision to purchase. *Attracting and keeping the right people to turn the enhanced tools of business into financial success is more critical than ever before.*

**OPTIMIZING YOUR RESOURCES**

*An successful printing or graphic communications business is a convergence of both human and capital resources.* Potential employees are not only attracted to companies that embrace current technology and value employees who facilitate it but also are more likely to stay there. Another interesting dynamic we have observed: companies who successfully implement cross media services want employees who can evangelize the technology, particularly to their clients.

Because the amortization of technology has compressed, it is important to have your infrastructure in place before offering cross media services. Determining the technology direction and investment for any company involves complex decisions that should not be made unilaterally. Even in a small organization, it is important to charge not just one individual but rather a whole team of people with making these determinations—along with establishing a defined protocol and schedule for them to follow.

**ASSESS AND DEFINE**

The challenge owners and managers face is threefold: first, they must navigate the available technology; second, select resources that best assist their business; and third, choose people to drive their initiative forward.

Part of the assessment process involves determining what services to specifically bring in house and what services to outsource. Outsourcing could be as defined as a strategic alliance or contractual relationship with a specialized service provider.
For support with these steps we recommend companies retain the services of a bona fide consultant—someone well versed with technology for graphic communications specifically. It is also important that consultants define solutions to augment your particular business, so they need to be independent—not tied to a capital equipment or vendor company. (Vendors can be a resource as well but keep in mind they are only representing their own product line.) Appropriately qualified consultants can evaluate your operations and objectives and make recommendations concerning business-related and manufacturing-based technology. They can also help define job functions and provide further expertise on staffing decisions. Additionally, we suggest the consultant assist you in the actual hiring process by helping to screen candidates.

IDENTIFY SKILLS REQUIRED AND EVALUATE EXISTING STAFF MEMBERS

The dynamics of cross media require that staff be multi-skilled, often combining job functions that were standalone roles in the past.

Managers need to identify and profile each staff member’s capability to adapt to the new workflow and then to discern the desire and ability of each individual employee to be trained. There are also resources to assist you with staff-training initiatives, including professional organizations, conferences, and trade shows.

Another excellent learning tool is the webinar. IDEAlliance provides a comprehensive line-up of resources and services to assist companies with cross media services. Vendors offer training with their product as well as provide technical support lines. Local programs can impart the grounding employees need to apply new technology effectively.

It is important to have a training policy, select programs and participants diligently, and develop a way to measure and reward implementation of newly acquired knowledge. It’s not as hard as it sounds. It just means training should be a structured discipline and supported at the senior level. Someone needs to be specifically appointed to research and select programs, select staff members to enroll in them, and monitor payback on training to the company. An ongoing syllabus could include a train-the-trainer program so training sessions can be provided on a continual basis.

GET IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT

Now is the time for printers to take the driver’s seat, to select the technological innovations that will benefit their company most and then bring staff on board through hiring and training to drive those technological innovations. Then once on the road, printers need to sustain the momentum. We feel the highest return on hiring dollars is heavily vested in this outlook. Of course, this whole process will require an astute management outlook to fuel and steer the initiative.

PrintLink is one of North America’s foremost personnel agencies for the printing industry. Managers offer discreet, confidential placement for all permanent positions in printing, publishing, packaging and document management. The objective is to make introductions resulting in productive long-term employer/employee relationships. This is accomplished by serving as a bridge between employers and job seekers. They are not headhunters and never try to recruit candidates away from their employers. Candidates seek them. www.printlink.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myrna Penny is managing director of PrintLink Canada. With a background in production and sales, she possesses extensive graphic arts experience. She is an active participant on Ontario Printing and Imaging Association committees, serves on the Digital Imaging Association Board, is a past board member of the British Columbia PIA, and is a co-founder of the Advertising Agency Print Production Association in Vancouver. She has been an instructor for the International Business Education Centre. As a long-time trainer, Penny’s understanding of the production workflow has enabled her to assist candidates and hiring managers in a variety of job placements.