News

STUDIO MANAGEMENT - Reinhard E. Wagner

Helping hand for facilities

Everyone, from technicians and secretaries to journalists and managers, can benefit from pieces of software that make life easier. The software packages described here are ones that can fit into any film or video facility. They are designed to help make the daily lives of every employee and executive more controllable and more productive.

Dedicated to film and video production companies of any size the Studio/Facility Management Software (SMS or FMS) is a relatively new tool. Many American companies are already using such packages and benefit from their features. Others, especially in the European market, have not heard of them yet. The SMS/FMS will help to increase control over equipment, rooms, human resources, tapes, cars, deliveries, billing and invoicing. Inquiries and requests from employees -- What will my next job be? Who I am working with? -- can be answered easily as well as requests by clients looking for availability of studio facilities, edit suites, camera crews, or just dry equipment hire.

Almost every piece software solution in this particular area consists of at least four different modules. Every module has access to one single relational database. This database is the heart and exchange server of the SMS/FMS. It can be an SQL-database coming from Microsoft, Centura, Claris, Oracle, or any other software programme company. It can run on a Novell (3.x, 4.x or 5.x), MS Windows NT (3.x, 4.x or next generation), Macintosh EtherTalk or any other network (with a Thin Ethernet, Fast Ethernet, 100BaseT, STP or UTP, Token Ring or Fibre back-bone).

To make such software system run you might need a consulting company which is familiar with relational databases. Alternatively, as long as you have your own 'brain trust' in-house, you could set it up by yourself. It will take at least 12 to 18 months to make a system run reliably and conveniently for anyone concerned.

Personnel training is required to get the most out of the investment. The amount of money you spend ranges from prices starting as low as US $349 for a two user version, and it can go up to several thousands US$ for a multi-user installation. This is only the cost for software. It is also necessary to include the hardware costs, if a suitable system is not already installed. A client machine should have a Pentium 100MHz installed, whereas a server needs a minimum of a Pentium II/266MHz processor.

At a real-life facility where a system was recently installed , there are 25 clients locked to a single Windows NT4.0. Each one can access the relational database at almost the same time. This server is also used as a bridge between a Novell 3.11 network installation and the Windows NT4.0 network.

To fulfil all network requirements, NetBEUI over IPX/SPX-protocol is used and performs quite well. Data refresh rates are acceptable and all users are satisfied. The total cost of investment, including software and additional hardware such as routers, wiring, and new PCs was around US$ 60,000. However, that did not cover the programmers' work and administration during set-up of the system.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Manufacturers provide different modules for different applications. Resources of any kind (machines, cars, personnel, dubbing facilities, etc.) are covered by the Resource Manager. This module gives access to all the information that customer might require. From this module booking and quotation is possible with an overview of the whole complex (facility, studio, car park, editing suites, stage, outdoor activities, etc).

The Finance Module can create the invoice. This module converts approved work orders by using client-specific rates, keeps track of deposits, and manages payments, credit notes, and adjustments. It also cumulates the clients' yearly work orders or the company's annual statement of accounts.

The Personnel Manager makes it easy and effective to quickly establish and fill staffing needs, helping to avoid overtime and ensuring that enough staff with the right skills are on duty. It manages rotating shifts, vacation times and even penalty solutions. Anyone who is familiar with the pain and frustration of preparing a staff schedule knows exactly how useful such a system can be.

The Service Module is another feature that helps to make life easier for everyone. With one mouse click, everyone can get information about any status of any piece of equipment. No questions about whether machines are under maintenance, spare parts ordered, and so on. Blocking of machines and regular routines are monitored and the fault reports can be typed in by any technician or operator who encounters a problem with any piece of equipment.

With the Archiving Module, the company stores and retrieves detailed records for all media. It prints labels with SMPTE/EBU barcode information, containing delivery notes and necessary packing slips. The entire headache over questions such as 'Where's the tape, when will it be back, who rented it?' are removed. The set-up of this module is not that complicated because it works in conjunction with the relational database as well. The operator and editor type in all necessary information with a new tape directly from their remote client PC. Then it is processed within the system and can only be changed by the administrator or supervisor.

During my research, I found four companies who supply such Studio/Facility Management Software solutions. All of them have their own philosophy. To work with any of them did not produce big problems for me. Even setting up different software was not that difficult.

Some manufacturers deny access to their fundamental database and software set-up. They think that 'novice' users might mix things up and cause a total breakdown.

That is true and the recommendations offered sound as if they are good advice for novice users: send us your request, whatever it is (different window appearance, new databases, etc) and we will implement it into your system. Other manufacturers say that, on request, they will send in a consultant who will solve all problems.

I would be surprised if any user did not appreciate the convenience of this software. Think about

the investment that has to be made. Compare it to the time and money savings that will come, and then there is no question -- it was the right decision!

Facility software systems

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