BRINGING BROADCAST AUTOMATION INTO THE FUTURE

Real-time integration, mobile capability, and ease of use are all keys to success

Presented by:

RCS Sound Software®

A RADIOWORLD Partner

Broadcast automation is an essential part of any modern radio station. The automation systems that may have sufficed for a station's needs a decade ago don't necessarily meet the many new demands of today's broadcast and streaming environment.

Today's top automation systems must be compatible with traffic and music scheduling software, work with a variety of mobile platforms, and be easy for both technical and non-technical personnel to use. At the same time, they must be flexible enough to meet the challenges of new signal-distribution platforms and whatever else the future of radio may hold.

BRINGING AUTOMATION INTO A NEW DECADE

It has been more than 20 years since the first fully digital automation systems entered daily use in the radio industry. From the initial limited uses of these systems—primarily replacing tape-based analog carts to play music, spots, and liners—automation quickly became indispensable for almost every on-air function in radio. Modern automation systems allow for airshifts to be voice-tracked, either on-site or remotely, thus reducing personnel expenses. They also provide improved operational efficiency, permitting a smaller operational staff to handle music scheduling and traffic for multiple stations or program streams within a cluster, including HD multicast channels.

The automation systems in many stations no longer meet all the needs of today's radio environment. That's the situation Neerav Patel inherited when he took over as COO when Empire Broadcasting bought a station cluster near Albany, New York. "I knew I needed to change what was here," he says. "It was kind of a hodgepodge. There was no rhyme or reason to why certain things were done the way they were done. There was a line to use the production room—how is that efficient? It was never set up correctly."

Across the country at McKenzie River Broadcasting in Eugene, Oregon, chief engineer Chris "Ichabod" Murray was still running the Computer Concepts automation that he'd originally installed at his cluster back in 1996. But aging software and hardware prompted him to look for a new solution for his four stations. Murray's criteria for a new automation system included easy configurability and robust support from the automation vendor. Most important of all, he needed a system that would be easy for his staff to learn.

"If your announcer has to spend his mental energy figuring out how to put his next element on the air, he can't be thinking about what he's going to say. The mechanical part has to be just automatic," Murray says.

MAKING IT EASY FOR THE STAFF

Murray auditioned several automation systems for his stations in Eugene before settling on the RCS Zetta system. "You want to involve your announcers," he advises other prospective automation customers. "Have the vendor set up a demo for you in your conference room. Get it on the big screen. Show them what it can do. Let them make the decision because they're the ones who'll have to run it."

One set of features Murray's announcers wanted from their new system was the ability to make the screen their own.

Neerav Patel, COO, Empire Broadcasting

"Where do you want your logs? Where do you want your audio editor? Each announcer has his own preferences," he says.

Chip Jellison, RCS executive vice president, technology and development, says flexibility played a big part in the design goals for his Zetta team. "Users can resize things any way they want. So rather than having hard-coded buttons that stretch or don't quite fit, they're automatically recalculated so they look right no matter what the user is trying to do," he says.

INTEGRATING TRAFFIC AND MUSIC SCHEDULING

"Integration is the most important thing," Patel says of his cluster's mission to make staffers more efficient. That meant tying in both music scheduling and traffic systems to the Zetta automation, which was designed to work with RCS's GSelector scheduling and Aquira traffic software.

Earlier automation architecture worked with traffic and scheduling systems by importing logs once or several times a day. In developing Zetta, Jellison says RCS wanted to create a tighter link. "There's real-time sync between systems," Jellison says. "You can make a change and it will show up immediately. Adding a song in Zetta and having it immediately available to be scheduled in GSelector. Real-time reconciliation—if a song doesn't get played in one hour, you can move it to the next and still follow all the rules."

RADIO FROM ANYWHERE

"I'm wearing the COO hat, the engineering hat, and the IT hat," Patel says of his role at Empire. "You have to wear multiple hats because this industry is running lean. So for me, monitoring Zetta, GSelector, Aquira—it can be done while I'm here, or it can be done if I'm sitting on a beach. Just give me an Internet connection and I've got it."

Patel recently did just that, taking a vacation to Mexico while continuing to keep an eye on his stations back home in New York, using TeamViewer to control his PC back at the stations and also trying out the Zetta2Go functionality that allows much of the system to be controlled directly from a mobile device.

In Oregon, Murray also uses Zetta2Go to make it easier for one of his jocks. "Our afternoon DJ at Mix 94, she's in Texas,

and she voice-tracks her show from there every day," he says.

Jellison says Zetta2Go is designed to work across multiple platforms, without requiring specialized hardware or software plugins at the user end.

"If you know the address of your Zetta2Go and you have the right credentials, you just open up your browser and you go to town," he says. "Hotkeys, voice-tracking—it's all styled exactly like Zetta, so you open this up and you're ready to go." Putting more functionality in the browser also provides more flexibility at the user end, where a browser-based remote system can work just as well on a Mac or a Linux machine as on a PC.

In a world that's increasingly moving to the cloud, Jellison says modern automation systems need to be much more flexible

than their predecessors. Zetta's design removes the limits earlier systems imposed on the number of stations that could be supported, for instance. And instead of forcing a playback module to be on the same machine that houses an audio card for playout, today's audio-over-IP (AOIP) world allows for much more creative overall system architecture.

"In AOIP, that playback module can be anywhere on your ecosystem and it's going to make sure the audio machine gets the audio," he says. That can include machines at remote locations for backup, or a "hot sparing" setup where two simultaneous feeds of the same audio go to two different playout devices at the same location to prevent audio failure.

Patel, for one, appreciates that stability. "If something happens to the radio station, before it was, 'What could it be? Most likely it was a problem with the automation system.' But now I know it's not the automation system. I don't have to focus on that," he says.

"The integrity of our product is paramount," says Murray. Making the leap to a new automation system was a big budget item for his locally owned cluster, but he says it was worth it for an ownership group that understands quality is worth paying for.

At Empire, Patel says the upgrade paid for itself in increased efficiency. "Infrastructure deteriorates over time," he notes. "It gets old, it gets outdated, and efficiencies go with it. If you don't bite the bullet, what's your staff going to lose in terms of efficiency? If you have 20 people on staff and they each save just five minutes a day, that's 25 days of increased productivity at the end of the year." ■