Centralizing Content Preparation

IMPROVING QUALITY AND REDUCING COSTS

FLORICAL SYSTEMS®

Every day, broadcasters around the globe need to acquire content and prepare it for broadcast. For both independent and group-owned television stations, this task is often performed by staff using equipment and resources located within each local facility. For a popular syndicated program, the ingest process may be repeated hundreds of times for each daily episode across multiple local markets. Unfortunately, these repetitive daily tasks consume resources that could be more profitably deployed to create original and engaging content for local audiences. To help reduce these costs and free up resources, many operators of local “call-letter” television stations are centralizing their content ingest and quality-control systems.

In a centralized workflow, one location is designated as responsible for collecting content from a variety of sources, including file delivery systems and real-time satellite playout networks. The selected station processes the received content as needed to create files that are compatible with the playout systems in each local facility, including all the necessary timing data and asset labels. When the files are ready for air, they are transferred over a data network to the on-air playout systems for each local call-letter station.

A centralized content preparation workflow can reliably generate significant cost savings. In a typical deployment, the upfront costs are recouped in just a few months. Station groups that have implemented centralization have been able to take advantage of these cost savings and redeploy their resources into more productive uses, including creating more local content and providing better support for advertisers and the local community.

Centralization Requirements

A properly functioning centralized ingest and QC operation must perform a variety of tasks on each content element to ensure it is ready for playout. In the case of real-time feeds (normal procedure for satellite content delivery), the content must be checked for video and audio quality, and the exact segment start and stop times must be marked to allow for correct scheduling of commercial insertion and to ensure accurately timed playout. In the case of incoming content files, any errors caused by missing or corrupted packets must be corrected before the file is fully accepted.

In addition, a house number must be assigned to each content item that corresponds to the database entries for that content in the traffic and playout systems. Particular care must be taken to make sure files are created properly for each local station. Short-form content must be given the house number that matches the contract of the local station playout that is given by the Traffic Business System. Long-form content must be converted into files that comply with the traffic format for each local playout system. This may involve generating files using different codecs, bit rates and file wrappers to suit particular playout system requirements.

Once the files have been prepared, numbered and checked, they must be delivered to each local playout system. This is often done as a file transfer using a reliable private (leased-line) data circuit. Alternatively, internet file delivery can be used, provided that any packet transmission errors are corrected. On-site or off-site private or public cloud storage can also be option to house the files. In many cases, local stations are connected using redundant data circuits provided by different telecom carriers to prevent a single point of failure from taking a station off the air.

Benefits of Centralization

Shawn Maynard, senior vice president and general manager at Florical Systems, says, “Cost and resource savings are the significant factor for a centralized ingest model.” If a television station group has 10 stations, then it is possible that the labor required to prepare one episode of one syndicated program is expended 10 times, rather than expending the labor once to prepare the content in a centralized model. Reducing labor by 90% is a significant cost savings, which multiplies even more for a larger station group.

Another benefit of centralized content ingest and QC is fostering a consistent workflow for show preparation across all of the local stations. This provides a more uniform on-air experience for viewers and makes it easier to deliver value-added services to advertisers who want to reach multiple audiences. Skilled staff members who have experience in preparing content can be allowed to specialize in specific aspects of the workflow, thereby improving overall quality and streamlining the workflow.

Some station group managers may question whether it makes sense to centralize content prep without having centralized playout in place. The answer is “absolutely,” says Maynard, who notes, “Centralized ingest is its own workflow that is independent of playout. The process of acquiring both long-form and short-form content

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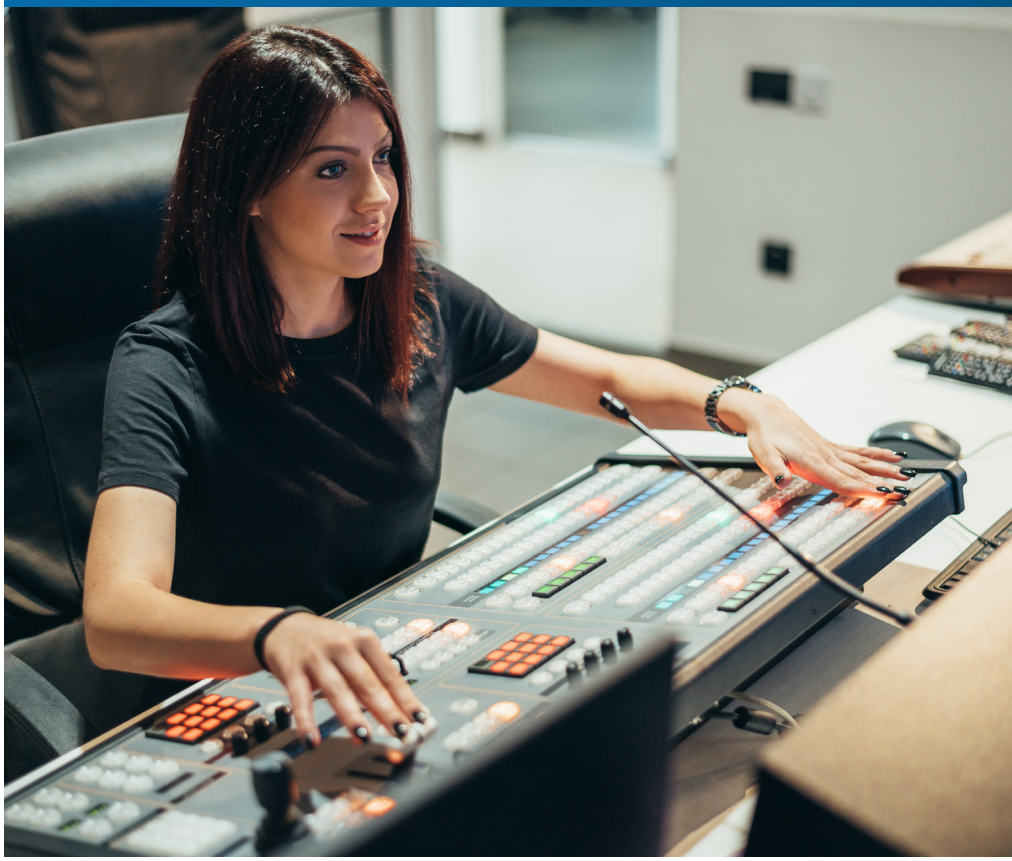
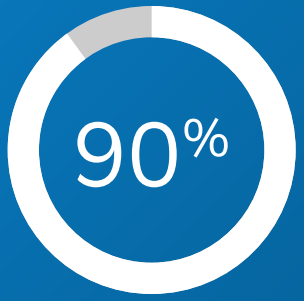
> Florical Systems





Labor Reduction

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is the most labor-intensive workflow in comparison to playout. Whether playout is local to the station or centralized in a hub doesn't make a difference in the justification of centralizing the acquisition workflow."

One other consideration for centralization is facilitating a more robust backup strategy for ingest and QC. When each local station is responsible for its own content prep, it is often cost-prohibitive to create a redundant workflow system with the necessary trained staff available to take over in times of need. In contrast, for a centralized architecture, it is much easier to cost-justify a standby facility, particularly if a large number of stations are being serviced.

Fortunately, many of the skill sets required for implementing and operating a centralized content ingest and QC operation are already in place. Most technical staff have become familiar with file-based workflows over the past two decades, and IT networking knowledge has become far more prevalent today than it was as recently as five years ago. Of course, there are always new behaviors to learn — probably the most critical ones revolve around network and data security. By establishing a solid foundation of security processes and procedures, coupled with a workplace cultural focus on vigilance, most organizations find that they can securely and safely operate sophisticated network interconnection schemes.

Migration Strategies

Moving to a centralized content preparation architecture is not an all-or-nothing proposition, nor does it require an abrupt cutover. Once a basic amount of infrastructure is in place, the centralized facility can begin operations on a designated subset of the incoming content. In some cases, it may make sense to temporarily duplicate local and centralized operations during a period when the central facility is coming online. Processing coverage can be expanded as the workflow proves itself, which allows any kinks to be worked out before new tasks are taken on. Deployment can be incremental, on a station-by-station basis, on a title-by-title basis or on any logical combination of the two. The goal is to certify the correct operation of each aspect of the centralized system before making corresponding adjustments in the local station workflows.

One important management step that can be taken before beginning the centralization process is, according to Maynard, “standardizing syndicated show formats and House Numbering systems for content across the station group. Short-form commercial content must be different for each market to ensure no file name conflicts. Show house numbers and formats must align to the content being sent from the centralized facility to ensure maximum efficiency.”

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Smoothing the Path to the Future

Centralizing content preparation and QC is a major step toward implementing a totally cloud-based playout system. Files generated by the prep system can initially be stored on premises and later migrated to a cloud storage model. Either storage method can feed into facilities-based or cloud-based playout systems. Once content acquisition has been centralized, it becomes significantly easier to migrate toward a totally cloud-based workflow.

About Florical

For over thirty-five years, Florical has been the leader in television automation and our products have been deployed at some of the biggest names in TV and cable. From high-profile cable networks, network-owned and operated stations, individual network affiliate stations and PBS stations, Florical has been the company broadcasters and cablecasters have turned to for solutions and software.

Florical is a division of RCS, headed by President/CEO Philippe Generali. RCS is the world's leading provider of broadcast software, used by thousands of radio stations, television stations, cable companies, satellite radio networks and internet stations worldwide.

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