

System Analysis

Narrator: The traditional higher education textbook publishing process is a lengthy, linear process that in the end, produces a book. Authors write content, their work is reviewed by panels and instructors. A designer creates a layout that accentuates the instructional methods. Photos are researched, permissions requested and art programs are created. Accuracy reviewers and editors proof and finalize the content before a compositor produces the book page by page. After yet another round of proofing, it's time to set the wheels in motion for printing to begin.

At the printing plant the presses roll and the finished product emerges. In the meantime, publishing representatives call on faculty to acquaint them with the newest offerings and finalize textbook adoption decisions for the coming term. Back at the plant the finished books are cataloged, warehoused and eventually shipped to bookstores where students finally purchase the textbooks selected by their teachers for course use.

The limitation of this model is that the content and organization of each text cannot be adjusted to meet the exact needs of every course. This problem planted the seed of an idea in the mind of an editor at McGraw Hill in 1988. Frustrated with the inability to predict which content most instructors needed in their textbooks, this editor decided it was time to address the issue. His idea? Create custom publish textbooks that professors could tailor to the precise needs of their course.

It seemed simple at the time; after all, MH had years of publishing experience and plenty of textbook content. The only change to the traditional publishing process was the form of the output and the content contained in the textbook.

After some consideration, the idea for establishing a custom publishing division was approved and funded and Primus was born. Once the decision to fund Primus was made, new division team members started to outline what might be needed to make this custom publishing vision a reality.

Caroline Mattura; Manager, Custom Publishing: In order to get Primus underway, the considerations were, did we have the money to start the project and where were we going to get it from? Did we have the means, technically of delivering and doing what we said, storing the material and delivering it in a timely way? Did we have the means and the opportunity to get the revenue back in order to justify getting the business started? And the other technical challenge with any publishing company is that publishing is unique. We have many different vendors that contribute to the end product. So not only do you have authors who are developing the content and the editors who are reviewing and revising it but compositors who are creating the files – that is a technical challenge, then printing and delivering, shipping directly to the customers and then how are we going to pay royalty, how are we going to clear permissions, all these other consideration we had to resolve before we could get started.

Narrator: It quickly became apparent that having a great idea and making it happen wasn't so easy. The team had to consider the content and how to keep it current. There were concerns about the "just in time" nature of custom publishing. Could the company actually print entire textbooks on demand? What about pricing and quality? The small Primus team quickly put the systems approach to problem solving to work. The business opportunity had been defined and the general solution identified but the details had yet to be discussed. And no one really knew if custom publishing was even feasible.

Caroline Mattura; Manager, Custom Publishing: We had our first fax machine in 1987. There was only one fax machine on the floor. That was where the technology was in publishing at the time. So technologically, could we do it? Did we have the money? What was involved systematically? What thought process did we have to go through in order to get the material prepared correctly. We had to coordinate the development of the content, the storage –

which would be the technology. The printing, which was not only technology, but the quality of the print and the paper and then the shipment, coordinating and getting it out to the customer.

Narrator: At this point in the systems approach, McGraw-Hill had a big decision to make. Continue with the idea or scrap it. On the positive side, funding had already been dedicated to developing the system. Yet there still many unknowns on the path to implementing a working solution. As you consider the Primus system, consider these questions:

- What kinds of questions might McGraw-Hill have asked as part of determining the feasibility of the Primus idea?
- How well did the systems approach work for the initial stages of the Primus system?
- What could the team have done differently in the preliminary stages?
- How might this have affected the end result?
- Would you have implemented the system armed with the information the team had at the time?
- Why or why not?