

PAPER SHORTAGE, WORKFORC

The publishing industry faces continuing supply chain issues and paper shortages, while another set of challenges has



**Westchester
Publishing Services**

appeared in early 2022, in the form of employee resignations and work-life balance issues. These topics were the focus of the webinar “Publishing Now ‘22: Driving Business Forward,” presented by *PW* with support from Westchester Publishing Services on March 22.

After two years in which book sales did surprisingly well despite problems posed by the pandemic, the industry faces more uncertainties in 2022 because of inflation and rising costs that are eating into companies’ operating margins, said Jim Milliot, editorial director of *PW*, who acted as panel moderator: “It’s safe to say things are a little more complicated.”

Jim Fetherston, president and CEO at the printer Worzalla, was quick to point to the root cause of printing delays that are again plaguing the industry: the steady closing of printing plants has resulted in “North American print capacity being at historic low levels,” while demand for books remains extremely high. For the first time in many years, “demand exceeds capacity, which causes prices to rise,” Fetherston said. Though he was quick to point out ongoing issues overseas, particularly with yet another Covid surge in China threatening even more destabilization of the printing process, Fetherston focused more on what has happened to mills stateside. With mills converting their machines from manufacturing paper needed by publishers to producing much more lucrative packaging materials, printers and publishers are all having trouble getting the amount of paper then need, he said.

The paper shortage has been made more severe this year than in 2020 and 2021 because most printers and paper merchants have used up their paper reserves, Fetherston said. The expanded paper inventories of the past are no more, he noted, and there is little ability to rebuild those reserves at the moment.

Fetherston said there is no quick solution to solve the printing crunch, but he did offer some suggestions publishers can take to deal with the situation. “We all need to be flexible in ways we have not been in the past,” Fetherston said, stressing the current need to plan printing projects well in advance. “We’re talking six to 12 months in advance for large projects.” He also suggested publishers bring in print and paper suppliers early in the production process, perhaps even as early as the book design process. “The more complex the book project,

the more stages there are,” he said. Giving printers more notice and additional communication can only help. To emphasize the need

for publishers to reach out as early as possible to printers, Fetherston explained that he receives calls on an almost daily basis asking if Worzalla can squeeze in a job for the summer or fall. In most cases he has to turn the job down because the company can’t guarantee it will have enough paper on hand.

Given market conditions, Fetherston believes the print industry is moving quickly to a long range model “that’s locking in capacity one even two maybe even three years into the future.” Neither publishers or printers currently have the luxury to procure paper on the spot market to meet a project, something Fetherston doesn’t see changing through at least the end of this year.

Jessica Ryan, editorial production manager for books and journals for Duke University Press, said that she has been in constant contact with Duke’s printers and the press’s marketing colleagues about that status of different projects. “Supply chain disruptions have been my departments biggest challenge; setting and keeping warehousing publication dates has been a struggle,” she said. Pre-pandemic, Duke could be sure that a book was due in its warehouse in three to four weeks would be there. But now, she said, even as Duke has lengthened printing schedules to as long as 16 weeks for some books done on offset presses, it is hard to know when books will be delivered. Duke has also needed to revamp its vendor relations policies, since, Ryan acknowledged, “there weren’t systems in place at the press or at our printers for this level of fluctuation and printing schedules and paper availabilities.”

All these concerns led Duke to move to more short-run and digital printing when the pandemic hit. “The pandemic didn’t significantly affect the areas we had already targeted for growth, such as digital printing, POD, and institutional sales strategies, among others,” she said, “but the pandemic and remote work just compelled us to move faster than planned.” She noted that while Duke’s journals program was already positioned to take advantage of POD, its book program was not, something she viewed as Duke’s biggest challenge, and biggest opportunity. “We had to work hard and fast on the book side to get books out to customers” Ryan said. During the first months of the pandemic, Ryan said, Duke put almost 95% of its inventory into Ingram’s Lightning Source POD platform. Once things were in place, Ryan said, “the

THE ISSUES TACKLED IN WEBINAR

ability to fulfill backlist orders without access to the warehouse and the ability to keep low stock titles in print broke down any reticence to fully embrace short-run digital printing and POD.”

With today’s paper and printing crunch, Ryan said Duke has built “multiple pathways” for giving its customers ways to access its content. “One thing we have really done well over the last several years is to plan, not only the first printing of the book, but to plan for the lifetime of that book,” she said. Ryan said that while e-book sales enjoyed an uptick during the pandemic, authors, professors, and individual readers “really wanted print versions,” something that made it imperative to find the most efficient way to keep books in print.

A Winter of Discontent?

Employee satisfaction has been an issue for years, but in 2022 it has quickly become a challenge in need of addressing, said Lorraine Shanley, president of Market Partners International. Low pay, particularly for early-stage industry professionals, is not the only reason for employee unrest, Shanley said. “It is also an enormous increase of work over the last two years.” The influx of social media discussions about work-life balance has put the issue of burnout in the publishing spotlight, she said. “People found themselves working longer and longer

hours just to keep up.”

Shanley pointed to a number of other issues that have led to growing dissatisfaction in the workforce during the pandemic. The combination of a sense of striving for perfection and no clear boundaries between tasks make many people feel like they are on a constant grind with no end in sight, she said. The pandemic has also reduced employees’ ability to build social networks among their peers that can translate into career contacts and friendships, she said, adding that such perks as attending conferences and fairs have been largely eliminated because of the pandemic.

Ryan said one way Duke is looking to attract and retain employees is to create a culture of inclusion where the entire workforce can be united in the press’s mission. Two years into the pandemic, Ryan said, “we may be just starting to see its impact on staffing,” and pointed to the potential to open up its potential talent pool by hiring remote workers.

Abrams CEO Michael Jacobs, who spoke from the Bologna Children’s Book Fair, said the company has taken such steps as implementing half-day Fridays to give employees a better work/life balance. “We focused on cohesion in our company,” said Jacobs, who stresses that communication with his employees is imperative, which has led to “Ask Me Anything” meetings, weekly online sessions, and a “Monday Kudos” session. But he acknowledged the industry faces new challenges such as higher inflation, and that the war in Ukraine “feels very close here in Europe.” Given these new factors, it is hard to predict how 2022 will unfold, Jacobs said, adding that given the value of books, he believes sales growth in 2022 is possible despite the headwinds—though he wasn’t sure where the growth would come from.

In providing ideas on how to create a better workplace environment and stem the number of resignations, Shanley said beyond higher pay, some of the answers lie in creating hybrid workplaces with employees allowed to work remotely part of the week, more flexible work hours, and more dialogue with supervisors. In addition, Shanley said, “we need to evaluate workflow,” and noted that it has become clear that publishing still has too many repetitive tasks that can be streamlined. Jacobs agreed with that recommendation, saying when Abrams shifted to remote work the company did streamline some of its processes. “Now that we’re coming back to the office, slowly but surely, we want to keep those process improvements and keep getting better at taking some steps out of that process,” he said.

Biggest Barriers to Work-Life Balance

