



Production Inkjet:
Automating Print
and Attracting the
Next-Gen Workforce

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INTRODUCTION

Print service providers are under mounting pressure as workforce shortages collide with growing demands for faster, more efficient production. Traditional print workflows, which often include multiple manual steps, are becoming increasingly difficult to manage amid shrinking staff levels and rising expectations for responsiveness and efficiency.

To meet these challenges, print service providers are turning to automation. Production inkjet presses have emerged as a compelling option. Their ability to streamline workflows, increase output consistency, and reduce reliance on specialized personnel offers a path to a more automated and productive workflow.

Moreover, as the printing industry seeks to engage a new generation of talent, production inkjet contributes by creating a work environment that aligns more closely with digital skillsets and expectations.

This report explores how production inkjet presses are helping print providers boost productivity, enhance operational resilience, and attract the next generation of workers.

A SHIFTING LABOR LANDSCAPE IN PRINT

The print industry is undergoing a significant demographic shift. As the traditional workforce ages, younger talent is not entering the industry in numbers needed to meet demand. According to NAPCO Research's 2024 Commercial Print Trends and Strategy Service survey, 72% of print providers report difficulty hiring production staff.

One of the key barriers to recruitment is the perception that print is outdated, labor-intensive, and lacking in technological innovation — a misconception that often discourages digitally native workers.

At the same time, operational costs are rising with 83% of respondents in NAPCO Research's 2024 Commercial Print Trends and Strategy Service survey citing rising labor costs as a top concern.

To counter these pressures, print service providers are embracing technologies that reduce dependence on specialized labor while appealing to younger, tech-savvy talent.

Production inkjet presses play an important role in this shift, acting as a contributor to automation and reflecting the industry's transition from manual processes to digitally driven workflows.

HEIGHTENED FOCUS ON AUTOMATION

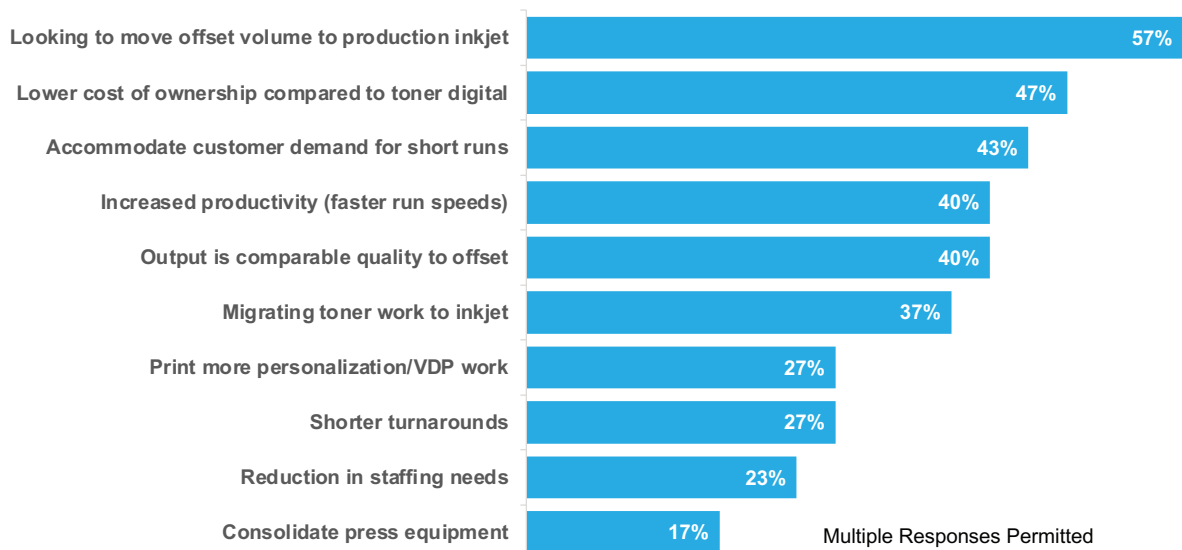
Automation isn't just a process upgrade for print service providers; it has become a strategic tool for adaptability and profitability. Investment in automation is attractive to print service providers because it:

- Removes bottlenecks in workflows that impede job volume throughput, hinder productivity, and constrain profits.
- Reduces human touchpoints so that jobs move faster through the production process while reducing the possibility of errors from human intervention.
- Lowers staffing needs, a benefit given current labor shortages.

According to NAPCO Research's 2024 Commercial Print Trends and Strategy Service, 77% of respondents are automating workflows to reduce costs, address labor shortages, eliminate production bottlenecks, and improve profitability. Reinforcing this finding, [NAPCO Research's 2025 "Next Generation Inkjet Investment"](#) study highlights the automation and productivity benefits of production inkjet technology. As shown in **Figure 1**, survey respondents planning to invest in production inkjet cite a combination of productivity gains and automation capabilities as key motivators.

Figure 1: Reasons For Considering Production Inkjet Investment

Q. Why is your company planning to invest in production inkjet devices?



n=30 Print Providers that Plan to Add Production Inkjet Presses
Source: Next Generation Inkjet Investment, NAPCO Research 2025

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Inkjet Technology: A New Foundation for Print Automation

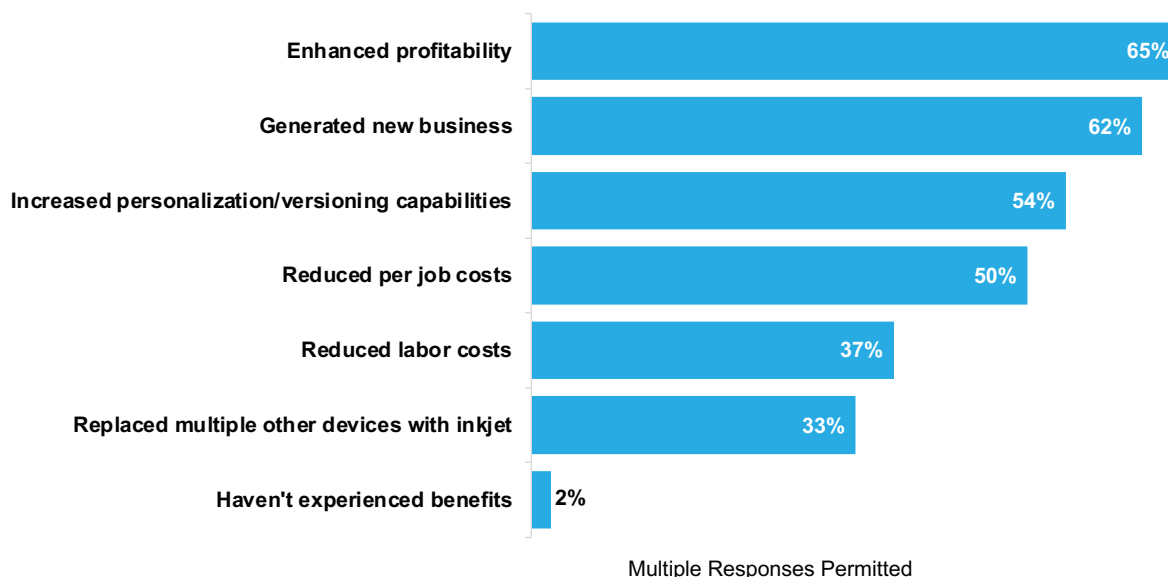
Production inkjet presses deliver measurable advantages to print operations. On average, respondents participating in NAPCO Research's inkjet study who operate production inkjet presses reported a:

- 10% decrease in production waste
- 9.4% increase in profits
- One-person decrease in press operating staff

Production inkjet is a key factor in workflow automation as it requires minimal setup, eliminates the need for plates, and enables quick changeovers between jobs. In addition, it delivers a broad range of benefits, as shown in **Figure 2**. For 65%, the technology enhanced overall profitability, while 62% said it helped generate new business opportunities. Other advantages included lower per-job costs (50%) and reduced labor expenses (37%). These results support inkjet's value not just as a production tool, but as a practical solution for improving operational and business performance.

Figure 2: Production Inkjet Benefits

Q. What benefits, if any, has your organization experienced as a result of adding production inkjet?



n=52 Print Providers with Production Inkjet Press(es)
Source: Next Generation Inkjet Investment, NAPCO Research 2025

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Beyond the printing process, inkjet connects into a broader end-to-end workflow automation ecosystem. The benefits of inkjet automation extend beyond simplifying operations and directly impact the bottom line. With features like intelligent job onboarding, built-in color management, and inline finishing, inkjet workflows help eliminate common production bottlenecks. This results in faster turnaround times, reduced waste, and greater consistency. These advantages are especially important as print providers aim to operate with leaner teams. Because inkjet presses can be intuitive and self-monitoring, a single operator can manage multiple systems, reducing overhead while maintaining or even increasing output with fewer staff.

Inkjet Offers Benefits Beyond Automation

While production inkjet is widely valued for its speed and workflow efficiency, it also expands the range and flexibility of printable applications. It enables print providers to produce a broader mix of jobs with shorter turnarounds, greater customization, and fewer production bottlenecks.

According to the [NAPCO Research study "The Production Inkjet Application Revolution"](#), print providers are increasingly using inkjet to produce direct mail, marketing collateral, transactional documents, books, and catalogs.

Inkjet is no longer limited to a few niche categories. It is becoming a key part of printing operations and capable of meeting today's demands and adapting to whatever comes next.

INNOVATING OPERATIONS TO ATTRACT TALENT

While production inkjet solves many operational issues, it also has the potential to solve a perception issue, by positioning the print industry as digitally adept and innovation driven. Younger generations, especially millennials and Gen Z, are drawn to career paths that intersect with technology, creativity, and purpose. Inkjet presses, paired with web-based workflows and data-driven tools, offer a working environment that feels far closer to a tech startup than a traditional print shop.

This technology-driven evolution allows employers to recruit from a wider talent pool, including individuals with backgrounds in IT, automation, and digital media. And with simplified and automated processes, new hires can become productive faster.

Attracting the Next-Gen Workforce: Gen Z Alignment

The workforce challenge facing the print industry is not just about replacing retiring workers; it is also about engaging a new generation that approaches work, technology, and values differently. Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, now comprises a rapidly growing portion of the U.S. labor force. Their entrance into the job market comes with expectations that are markedly different from those of previous generations.

In a recent [NAPCO Media webinar titled "Preparing for a New Generation of Workers,"](#) Adriane Harrison, Vice President of Human Relations Consulting at PRINTING United Alliance, shared that Generation Z is the first generation to grow up entirely in a digital world, meaning they don't just use technology with ease, they expect it to be an integral part of their work environment.

Production inkjet technology, built around digital workflows and data integration, makes printing companies more appealing to the tech-fluent next generation of workers. In contrast to analog presses that demand mechanical expertise and manual adjustments, the digital nature of inkjet systems makes them more accessible to a generation accustomed to smartphones and cloud computing.

But the appeal goes beyond technology. Gen Z is mission- and values-driven, placing high priority on sustainability, diversity, and social impact. As Harrison [pointed out during the webinar](#), "This is a generation that wants to know not just what a company makes, but what it stands for. They care about your environmental footprint, your community involvement, and how you treat people inside your organization."

Production inkjet helps print businesses speak to these concerns in tangible ways. Inkjet presses typically produce less waste, require fewer chemicals, and consume less energy than offset equipment. This eco-efficiency becomes a selling point not only for customers, but also for potential employees who see sustainability as a key factor when choosing where to work.

Companies adopting inkjet as part of digital transformation are better positioned to attract new talent. Production inkjet can play a vital role in reshaping the printing industry's image, presenting it as a forward-thinking, digitally enabled industry where the next generation of workers can envision a meaningful future.

ACCESS DIRECT: DRIVING INNOVATION AND TALENT ENGAGEMENT

Access Direct, [honored as *Printing Impressions'* Innovator of the Year](#), exemplifies how combining technology-driven operational transformation with proactive talent engagement can help print service providers address today's industry challenges. By adopting high-speed inkjet presses and comprehensive workforce development programs, the company is positioning itself as both a production leader and an employer of choice in the evolving print landscape.

High-Speed Inkjet as a Productivity Engine

Access Direct, based in Farmingdale, New York, was a strategic early adopter of production inkjet technology. In a recent [NAPCO Media webinar "The Skills Solution"](#), Eileen Leogrande, Access Direct's human resources manager, highlighted the workforce impact of the company's investment in high-speed inkjet technology. She noted that Access Direct operates high-speed inkjet presses with 1200 dpi resolution and full-color capabilities, supporting the production of over 1 billion pieces of direct and transactional mail annually. "This new technology increases speed and quality," Leogrande explained. "Not to mention, our investment in advanced technology such as inkjet and finishing has reduced our labor needs or reallocated labor to other activities that support our company goals."

These gains reflect how automation and digital innovation can reduce manual labor dependencies and address staffing shortages while enhancing performance.

Internship Program as a Talent Pipeline

In addition to investing in advanced technology, Access Direct is actively nurturing the next generation of print professionals through a structured internship program. [As Leogrande explained during the webinar](#), interns rotate through every department, from the production floor to the executive offices, gaining a comprehensive, end-to-end understanding of the company's operations.

Leogrande noted that at the end of their internship, participants present their experiences to company executives, offering insights into what the company does well and where there is room for improvement.

A Culture of Innovation and Engagement

[The *Printing Impressions* article also credits](#) Access Direct's CEO John DiNozzi and President Lori Messina for fostering a culture of innovation. Their commitment to artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and industry collaboration underscores the company's dedication to continuous improvement and innovation.

Access Direct's approach illustrates how strategic investments in technology and talent can help print providers address structural labor challenges, boost production efficiency, and inspire the next generation of print professionals.

DSG | UW COMBINES INTERNSHIPS AND INNOVATION

DS Graphics | Universal Wilde (DSG | UW) is advancing both its technological infrastructure and workforce strategy through the adoption of high-speed production inkjet systems and forward-looking talent development initiatives. These parallel investments enhance the Lowell, Massachusetts-based company's adaptability and competitive positioning within a rapidly evolving print landscape.

As highlighted in *Printing Impressions'* article, [“DS Graphics | Universal Wilde Expands Inkjet Footprint with ProStream 1800.”](#) DS Graphics | Universal Wilde's adoption of the Canon ProStream 1800 production inkjet press has significantly enhanced its operational capabilities. This high-speed press enables the company to transition longer-run jobs from offset to digital, providing clients with faster turnaround times, greater production flexibility, and consistent high-quality output.

Chris Wells, DSG | UW executive vice president, [noted in the article](#), “The ProStream 1800 has helped us eliminate the need to stop production when switching between different page lengths, thus ensuring a seamless changeover.” This investment supports the company's broader strategy of maintaining a highly automated, efficient workflow that aligns with shifting customer expectations.

Internship Program: A Gateway to Talent Engagement

In comments shared with NAPCO Research for this report, Wells emphasized that DSG | UW's summer internship program is central to attracting young professionals and expanding their exposure to the print business. “Our summer internship program has proven to be a great success in attracting younger professionals to our business,” he said. “We ask our interns to select a person or position to shadow during slower periods of their normal intern work. This exposes them to multiple areas of the business.”

Wells also highlighted a deliberate hiring strategy that fosters community and retention among early-career hires. “One of the things we really try to do is hire younger professionals in groups of at least two or more, so they have counterparts to socialize with,” he says.

This approach creates a more connected and appealing workplace culture, two essential factors in competing for staff.

Creating a Seamless Print-Digital Customer Experience

Further insights from *Printing Impressions'* [article “DS Graphics | Universal Wilde Creates Digital Engagement Experience”](#) underscore how the company is modernizing customer interactions through online portals and templated workflows, which allow clients to streamline job ordering while reducing manual touchpoints. Wells explained, “We want to build a better path for the customer.”

DS Graphics | Universal Wilde's strategic alignment of inkjet adoption, workforce development, and customer-facing innovation illustrates how traditional print providers can evolve into digitally fluent, talent-attracting, and client-focused enterprises.

CONCLUSION: INKJET AS A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

Production inkjet is more than a tool for operational improvement; it's a catalyst for industry transformation. It enables print service providers to automate, scale, and diversify their offerings while creating work environments that resonate with younger, tech-savvy professionals.

In a time of generational workforce shifts and evolving customer demands, production inkjet presses help bridge the gap between legacy processes and future-focused operations. By aligning with Gen Z's values and expectations and delivering efficiency and sustainability, inkjet positions the printing industry as a dynamic and viable career destination, powered by innovation and inspiration.

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