

IN THIS ISSUE

We look at the latest software releases from both our Data Capture and Business Solutions divisions. We have used a mirror image front page for both announcements so that prominence is given to the appropriate release on the selected web site. Other items include an article on the merits of OMR technology versus Image technology plus the myths of OMR form printing and a case study by a charity using the 'Analyser'

PRINT & SCAN AND MULTITEST V8.20 RELEASE ANNOUNCED

The new Windows7 compatible version of both Print & Scan/MultiTest examination, survey, monitoring and assessment system will be released on the 30th August. It incorporates a number of major changes, mainly in the form design functionality as the interface on the current version (V7.22) was first used in Version 4 some fourteen years ago. In line with the new SQL database screens introduced in Version 7.22 in 2007 the user interface has been made easier to use and utilises many common features found in standard packages available from Microsoft. Added to this is the ability to design forms, with automatic paging, in any language, subject to system configuration, using a rich text format. A wide range of scanners will be supported and will include a number of approved OMR and Image scanners subject to demand.

We will also be introducing, by the end of the year, a new low cost image option based on an image engine developed in-house and which will be integrated into the main Print & Scan/MultiTest system. Features on the new system include -

Scanning options include the facility to correct forms on the screen in OMR only mode (only available with the image option until now) plus the long awaited routine to allow Print & Scan to access the Scantron Scantools utility so that OMR and Image data can be extracted at the same time.

Form Design

- Improved and modernised form design format with new, easy to use toolbar.
- Continuous paging without the need to start a new page each time.
- Improved question linking and grouping to allow more flexible export of data.
- Rich Text format with multi language support and a new spell check option.
- Paragraph and Line insert options (both horizontal and vertical).
- Page scrolling plus Insert, Merge, Extract and Delete page option.
- Up to four predefined reference grids allowed.

Projects/Database

- Improved and modernised screens with easy to use layouts.
- New remote print module that will allow remote form printing.
- Ability to scan mixed batches of examination forms without the need to enter department, module or exam code .
- Improved facility to correct forms on screen and store an audit trail of changes.
- New Export facility with SQL query facility, which allows data to be sent as either one long horizontal string or in page format (similar to the present system).
- Ability to mark projects as inactive and not show them on screen.
- Improved reporting, SQL search facilities and data analysis.

Form Design/Scanning Only Option

A further option has also been introduced, which allows users to design and scan forms without using the Project database and then generate a .CSV file, which can be imported into MIS systems for data integration purposes as well as for marking and production of results.

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Data Capture using Optical Mark Readers or Image Scanning

With the rise of internet evaluations, companies are now claiming the that paper is 'dead' . However, the advertising seems to forget to tell potential customers that, in order to safeguard against the ever growing and continually evolving phenomenon of system 'hacking', those same evaluations, tests and exams must be carried out not on the client's premises but in a specially controlled and dedicated facility.

The 'hacking' problem has meant that we have seen a drift back to paper based options in Educational, Training and other organisations. This has meant that users intending to automate data capture for examinations, surveys, assessments, monitoring etc. often make enquiries about Imaging products (OCR/ICR) and the advantages/disadvantages of the same when compared to Optical Mark Reading (OMR).

The advantage of both technologies is that they can be used to gather large amounts of data quickly and easily without the need for keyboard data input, which not only reduces the workforce needed but also gives a higher degree of data accuracy when compared to manual entry. Another factor is that most survey prospects on the street and students/candidates taking exams/tests are familiar with the marking techniques used (for OMR) due to the advent of the National Lottery.

A drawback seen by potential users of either OMR or Image technology has always been the need to produce third party pre-printed questionnaires, which some organisations have found to be inflexible, costly and incapable of meeting design change requirements in a limited time frame. This situation has eased with the introduction of software that enables users to design/print their own forms at relatively low-cost and which can meet short notice design changes quickly and efficiently.

When comparing the two technology types (Image/OMR), potential users should look carefully at the task they wish to undertake before selecting their proposed system. Put simply, anyone intending to undertake Multiple Choice examination questionnaires or gather survey data, where no complex image capture other than marks on the paper are required, should consider OMR technology, which can be faster and more cost effective. This is best explained by the fact that OMR processes forms 'on the fly' in real time (as a sheet is scanned it is checked for errors and either accepted or rejected by the software immediately). This makes it up to one hundred times faster than manual entry.

On the other hand, should users wish to undertake other types of data collection such as dates, handwritten numbers or text then pure OMR cannot undertake this task type easily (if at all) whereas Image scanners can, (still within certain constraints even though the recognition software is improving all the time) but at slower speeds. This process is not carried out in 'real time' and involves the image being recognised and checked for errors and, if needed, sent through a verification stage. Thus it is only about 4 to 5 times faster than manual entry when using alphanumeric hand-print fields although it does climb to about 20 times faster than manual entry if only capturing the same type of marks used for OMR systems. The main advantage of Imaging as seen by users is the ability to undertake OMR and OCR/ICR data capture using one low cost machine, but user beware, as there is always a downside, and the task should be carefully assessed first before deciding to opt for what may be an empty hope and therefore an unfulfilled dream.

An elegant alternative worth considering is the new high-bred scanners, introduced by Scantron, which can undertake both OMR, in real time, and Image data capture thus overcoming the shortfalls of both technology types.



New Scantron iNSIGHT4ES Combined OMR/Image Scanner

The Myths of OMR Form Printing

A number of potential users are often worried about OMR form printing especially with systems, such as our own Print & Scan/MultiTest software, that allow them to laser print their own forms. This normally arises when other companies have advertised or advised the taboo against customers printing their own forms. What they forget to tell the client is that they, the supplier, generate additional income and profit from both designing and printing forms (a good example are the OMR manufacturers whose print business makes up 25% plus of their total revenue).

The myth regarding printing always normally involves accuracy and how specialised the printing process must be to ensure that forms can be properly read by the OMR scanner. From both this company's perspective and client experiences of large volume output of laser printed forms and with the advent of even more powerful and accurate laser printers, this argument should be viewed in the context in which it is given to users.

Put quite simply, it is a sales ploy to cover not only the inherent weakness of inflexible software, whereby the customer is reliant on the supplier to make changes, but also an additional and continuing revenue stream that ties the customer to the supplier indefinitely. Hence the reason that some clients often consider Image scanning as an alternative technology because they can design their own forms in other packages. If needed, we can also print forms for customers and guarantee the print accuracy but, in addition, we also offer users the ability to print their own forms with the standard caveat of taking care to ensure that forms are printed within the tolerance guidelines supplied.

Last Word - New Business Solutions News

Please go to our Business Solutions newsletter at www.traxuk.com for further information on the new 'Analyser' software release plus the user case study. For more information call Barry Snashall or email him at barry@traxuk.com