No Pause in
Digitization and Content Creation
in India

For digital solution providers in India, tweaking workflows, adding new services, and thinking proactively are all about embracing business as unusual

By Teri Tan

This feature is published with the support of the vendors covered in these articles

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issue, especially since some had already relocated out of Chennai, where the company is based, says v-p Meena Prakash, whose team spent about 10 days purchasing laptops and securing stable internet connections.

Home is now where the work is

With its high internet and mobile data penetration, India is tailor-made for WFH. The country has 560 million internet users, representing the world's second-largest online market, and boasts some of the least expensive mobile data plans on the globe.

"VoIP [Voice over Internet Protocol] and web chats among staff are easy now that fast fiber-optic broadband is available in most towns," Gopinath says. "For staff who moved back to their villages during the lockdown, they may not have broadband, but fast and extensive 4G network coverage is at their fingertips."

Secure chat and VoIP-based solutions also keep the communication channels with DiacriTech's clients open, Gopinath says. "Webex Meetings, GoToMeeting, Google Duo, Microsoft TeamViewer, and AnyDesk are just some of the online meeting and web conferencing tools that our project managers use to engage clients. Some clients prefer using WhatsApp to keep in touch, and that is perfectly fine with us. What we want clients to know is that they are backed 24/7 by a team that has over 20 years of experience in publishing."

Past experiences with disruptions caused by monsoons and snowstorms have left Westchester Publishing Services, which has operations in India and the U.S., with a number of protocols and proven workflows suitable for the WFH/pandemic era. "The usage of Zoom, Dropbox, Dropbox Paper, Office 365, and other tools has been a part of our modus operandi for some time already, thus ensuring a smooth WFH transition that keeps our staff and client projects going," chief revenue officer Tyler Carey says. Westchester "is a big fan of Dropbox Paper," he adds. "The ability to replace forms-based processes, organize documentation and client requirements, confirm client project specs, control access, and embed external documents makes it a simple and nimble platform for collaboration internally and with clients."

Westchester Publishing Services also went into WFH mode before the lockdown order. Setting up hotspots and ordering laptops to facilitate WFH and ensuring business continuity and productivity were par for the course. "The critical issue lies in making sure that everyone involved in various publishing projects—including freelancers, clients, authors, and contributors—is comfortable with a digital workflow, and knows how to use the tools provided," Carey says. "We found ourselves providing free consulting to our partners, sharing how we used different

tools effectively, and we will continue to do so. We have hosted two webinars—now available free from our company website—that bring thought leaders from the industry to talk about WFH and the day-to-day challenges and solutions in publishing."

Looking beyond bits and bytes

The best technology cannot replace a dedicated and motivated staff, Gopinath says. "Communication and coordination issues at the beginning of the WFH transition were the norm. We experienced a slight backlog, but the right support practices and WFH-friendly policies have played a critical role in shoring up productivity and commitment away from the office environment." DiacriTech's staff came up with suggestions and ideas to improve workflow, including ways to better utilize production tools through VPN, obtain clients' approval to use low-resolution proofs to speed up communication, and provide deep-link emails with the option of editing content online.

"Our staff is definitely our strength, and, without them, this transition to WFH would not be as seamless," says Prakash, of Lapiz Digital, pointing out that the company's sales and business development activities took a back seat for several weeks in the early stages. "The priority was in setting up an internal system to keep in constant touch with all staff and do weekly checks on them and their immediate family's health and well-being. Now, our daily review meetings to check things like productivity and quality, customer feedback, and resource utilization, for instance, are happening virtually per normal office conditions." A program was also rolled out so that managers could get to know the families of their team members.

Keeping the operations running smoothly for staff and clients tops the to-do list at Newgen KnowledgeWorks, says Subhash Panicker, v-p of human resources. "The shift to WFH is more about a state of mind rather than any specific piece of technology or infrastructure," Panicker says. "Technology is, of course, important, but rather than using tools to micromanage working

A.R.M. Gopinath (l.) and Mahesh Balakrishnan of DiacriTech

hours or track staff activities, we prefer to give people the freedom to work when it is best for them and their clients."

Constant client engagement has seen Newgen staff at all levels forming deeper connections with clients and international colleagues. "For a copy editor to sit face-to-face, albeit via a video screen, with their editorial counterpart on the other side of the world has fostered more collaboration than we ever achieved through email alone," Panicker says.

Keeping business on an even keel

When it came to managing a whole WFH team at Lapiz Digital, "the first few days were rather confusing," Prakash says. "But videoconferencing glitches were surprisingly few, and we quickly got used to the household noises in the background. Online audio/video meetings are now the norm, despite the initial skepticism on its usage and effectiveness. Going forward, even if things go back to pre-pandemic times, virtual meetings may replace some of our business travels."

The lack of differentiation between WFH and WFO (work from office) is proving to be a major advantage at Lapiz Digital. "Our productivity and quality benchmarks remain the same whether we work from home separately or within the same office building together," says Prakash, whose remote team recently transitioned a complex project on online training sessions. "We

do not ask clients for longer turnaround time or leniency in meeting their requirements. In fact, with our staff being able to operate in flexi-shifts and spend less time commuting, we actually see our turnaround time improving across projects when compared to WFO."

The tweaking of tools and solutions to suit the WFH environment was minimal, says V. Bharathram, president of Lapiz Digital. "Over the years, we have developed and refined workflow solutions for specific journal and book publishing, and as these solutions reside in the cloud, they are accessible from anywhere at any time," he says.

Now that employees are working remotely, finding the best ways to support publishing clients is crucial for digital solutions vendors. "Some publishers relied on their vendors to ship paper proofs, but now everything has to be digital whether the publisher is going fully digital or not," says Carey, of Westchester Publishing Services, whose team had put a client portal in place and utilized Dropbox and digital proofs long before the pandemic started. "But not all clients are as conversant with these types of tools or in working in a digital-only distributed environment, and these have prompted us to provide training to some clients so that they could adapt these tools for internal use or adopt these for their author collaboration. We continue to provide such training whenever it is needed with new clients."

DiacriTech Embraces New Norms to Forge Ahead

Recent months have seen numerous updates to XEditPro Publishing Suite, DiacriTech's unified editorial and production platform, including extensive support for InDesign's typesetting system and the tracking of all project-related changes down to chapter level. The enhanced XEditPro equation editing feature, for instance, enables autoconversion of mathematical equations in an input Word document into editable MathML. XEditPro's equation editor also accepts LaTeX code as input and converts it accordingly. "We have built in the capability to create links to assessments from a chapter and insert video links—such as YouTube—aside from the usual MP3, MP4, and HTML5 assets," executive v-p A.R.M. Gopinath says.

XEditPro, a single cloud-/browser-based platform for all processes from receipt of manuscript to final delivery, suits the WFH environment to a T. It brings authors, editors, and layout specialists together in one secure workflow-enabled platform for seamless collaboration. Increased automation, AI, and natural language processing (NLP) tools further enhance user experience and productivity.

Client-designated freelancers and editors can work on specified titles securely and independently on XEditPro. A typical user in the editorial and production processes can use the publishing platform effectively without specific technical know-how. "The familiar Word-like editing interface lends comfort to all users," executive v-p Mahesh Balakrishnan says. "These and

many automated features eliminate the need for in-person training, which supports the WFH environment and physical distancing." He adds: "XEditPro, which allows tracking of key performance indicators of a project, specifically addresses the performance metrics and motivation challenges inherent in the WFH environment."

Meanwhile, the Internet of Things and Web Augmented Reality, or Web AR, beckon. "We are working on one innovative project that allows video communication between a HoloLens wearer and a PC user in factories or industrial zones," Gopinath says, adding that the app can be used in areas such as basic maintenance service. "For instance, instead of deploying a service technician, an engineer can now use this app from home to provide step-by-step guidance to a customer who has problems using a particular device or appliance," he says. "It supports the need for distancing during these pandemic times."

Immersive Gaze—DiacriTech's product for augmented reality (AR)/virtual reality (VR)/mixed reality (MR)—continues to evolve. "Publishers are pushing back on VR/MR mostly because of the pandemic, and not merely to cut costs," Balakrishnan says. "The usage of virtual headsets is not viable because the same headset is used by multiple students and may then spread the coronavirus. However, some publishing clients find the AR apps perfect for home-based classes to make learning more interesting and less isolating, and so we are set to roll out more AR projects this year."

Digital Solutions in India

V. Bharathram, president of Lapiz Digital Services

Paying attention to social issues

Two topics have come to the fore in recent weeks, Carey says: "One is about addressing the questions of racism and representation raised by the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. The ongoing discourse, hopefully, will result in better representation in publishing companies, as well as within the content produced by our industry. For now, many publishers are requesting statements from their vendors on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and are working within their own organization to better address these issues as well."

Then there is the issue of empathy within the workplace. "Most companies operating nine-to-five have to adapt to the new realities of WFH, including blurred personal and professional barriers, remote supervision, and social isolation," Carey says. "It is up to the employer to empathize on these challenges and work to make WFH viable through a collaborative way and not in a top-down manner." Carey says his team has seen productivity improved in numerous ways despite working remotely.

WFH has certainly created challenges with childcare while changing the ways that busy households are organized, says Panicker, of Newgen KnowledgeWorks. "One of the most important changes we made in moving to WFH mode was to increase our infrastructure capacity so that we can guarantee a productive and responsive system whenever our staff need to work," Panicker says. "Our people understand what is expected of them, and we work hard to have simple and well-defined processes that are supported by good and intuitive technology so that we can focus entirely on good business outcomes for our clients."

Recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and training programs have to be reengineered to support the new reality, as well.

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"Long-term support for flexible working hours and WFH is crucial to our future success," Panicker says. "We are, and will continue to be, a 'work from anywhere' employer. In fact, many of our staff in India and other sites have relocated to be closer to family and away from urban areas."

Tweaking for better efficiencies

The need for collaborative and agile processes during WFH mode is undeniable. Newgen KnowledgeWorks' end-to-end journal-management system, PubKit, meets such criteria. "PubKit enables not only collaboration between various stakeholders in the publishing process but also integration of systems," says Jo Bottrill, managing director of operations in the U.K. and U.S. "As an inherently flexible and open platform, PubKit allows us to move content and metadata to various tools and then push them to our publishing client's in-house system as well as those from third-party suppliers as the project moves along," Bottrill says. "This helps to ensure that everything is kept up-to-date, rework is reduced, and efforts are not duplicated. Ultimately it supports a more timely and effective publishing program."

The marked increase in demand for digital development services—from repurposing K–12 content for online learning to building an automated e-book-only workflow—requires a different platform. "Facilitating faster digital content production is an essential factor in shoring up publisher revenues," Bottrill says. "They need to monetize content quickly, but also to bring valuable scholarly and education information to the international community faster. Our ResearchPad tool, for instance, helps disseminate quality open access content to the global community in a user-friendly and multiplatform environment."

Though there is less demand, particularly from trade publishers, for services related to print products than there had been before the pandemic, there has been little change in the type of services sought by educational publishers. "In general, publishers want more automation to increase efficiencies by reducing the amount of manual work, the number of handoffs, and other dependencies within the publishing workflow itself," DiacriTech's executive v-p Mahesh Balakrishnan says. "They are looking into automated publishing tools to support content authoring of different formats, including formulaic math, interactivities, and animations. They are also interested in creating online educational apps that provide access to lessons, which are most relevant to these times of virtual learning and uncertainties pertaining to classroom reopenings."

The DiacriTech team is monitoring and assimilating client requirements that arise from pandemic-related restrictions

Online Products Are Growing Fast at Lapiz Digital

Though a reduction in business is inevitable during the pandemic, there have been no project cancellations at Lapiz Digital so far. "Overall, our publishing business is doing well," says president V. Bharathram, whose team has continued to provide VR/MR and niche analytics services to several health-care clients. "We have added two European university presses and several small- and medium-sized journal publishers from the Middle East and Africa to our client roster recently. We have not, however, offered niche analytics services to publishers yet. But, going forward, we are expanding our capabilities in software-related services for both health-care and publishing verticals."

The team saw an uptick in e-book conversions in recent weeks. "Traditional typesetting for educational publishing is down," Bharathram says. "But there is a surge in inquiries for development of online products, including lessons, assessments, app developments, responsive HTML, and conversions to XML, Power-Point, and e-book formats." He adds: "Quality and turnaround time are the major differentiators during this WFH environment, and we are going all out to deliver on both."

With classrooms going digital, Bharathram is seeing a significant increase in demand for online testing and assessments from both the overseas and domestic markets. His team completed a large lesson and assessment project—designed and cost-effectively built using open source software—for one U.S. client just prior to the shutdown in March. "But, even before the pandemic outbreak, adoption and integration of IT in education was already there," says Bharathram, who reports huge demand for online training courseware from corporate clients. "This pandemic essentially accelerates the implementation of online education."

"As far as full-service publishing projects are concerned, we have benefited from our internal workflow solution," Bharathram says. "The shift to WFH has necessitated minor modifications and tweaks to the software and workflow, mostly to accommodate and better allocate resource availability. So we now have a fully collaborative tool that is integrated with our production management system."

Executing complex software projects is particularly challenging in this WFH situation. "Understanding client requirements is crucial to the success of any project," says Bharathram, who is focused on marketing current services to regions where Lapiz Digital does not yet have a major presence instead of launching new initiatives during this economic slowdown. "But it is also equally crucial for the development team, working remotely, to pass the correct and relevant instructions to team members who are carrying out the work from different locations. Without in-person meetings, clear communication and precise coordination take on even greater importance. More thrust will be given to online digitization services while we continue to help clients with cost effective solutions for their projects."

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Jo Bottrill, managing director of Newgen KnowledgeWorks in the U.K. and U.S.

and new norms. "We are customizing the tools and outputs from our XEditPro publishing platform to match rising demand for digital products and new marketing needs," Balakrishnan says. "For instance, authors will benefit from a complete electronic workflow with reduced manual intervention, while publishers will need metadata that is captured at a granular level and rendered automatically in EPUB to enhance content discoverability."

With new tweaks to XEditPro, Balakrishnan and his team are also making it easy for publishers to use the platform to meet the needs of their end users. "One client who previously had no inclination to create online resources is now generating a whole new revenue stream within a short period of time using XEditPro," Balakrishnan says.

Monitoring business needs and trends

Cybersecurity is the topic du jour in the pandemic era. "It has gained momentum after a series of breaches," says Bharathram, of Lapiz Digital. "With WFH the new norm and people connecting to business networks from home, multifactor authentication practices are required to identify and allow access. Add rising hacking activities, and it becomes imperative to have in place a foolproof security infrastructure. Implementing solutions such as Zero Trust, VDI infrastructure, and adaptive authentication to manage remote users is essential."

When the initial lockdown occurred, WFH security options

Newgen KnowledgeWorks Offers Enhanced Collaborative Tools

The rollout of Newgen KnowledgeWorks' end-to-end workflow management system, PubKit, is now complete. "Projects across different segments are benefiting from its improved efficiency," says Jo Bottrill, managing director of operations in the U.K. and U.S. "We continue to drive further automation in handovers between teams, metadata processing, and the addition of dynamic autoscheduling. New file management functions, autoingestion of projects, and freelancer management are some of the recent enhancements."

Clients are now able to run files in various formats right from the browser using RedShift. "This publishing platform has new autostyling functions, in-browser editing, and the option to output templated covers and marketing assets—all from one single source of content and metadata," Bottrill says, adding that an upcoming release will incorporate additional support for accessibility standards, including alt-text processing.

The disruption to the print supply chain has seen heightened interest in Nova, the company's e-book distribution platform. "Nova allows publishers of all sizes to monetize their digital content across books and journals," Bottrill says. "Its flexible interface supports content delivered in book, issue, chapter, and article formats, enabling publishers and subscribers to customize collections and collect valuable consumer data. Nova's ability to allow users to flexibly consume content across all formats, as well as its support for note-taking, easy citations, and offline reading, make it a one-stop shop for many publishers."

All Newgen KnowledgeWorks' platforms allow users to access the tools and content from anywhere, Bottrill says. "Increased automation supports not only the new WFH reality but also enables publishers to respond to print supply chain disruption," he adds. "Now, more than ever before, publishers need to respond quickly to a rapidly changing situation. PubKit's dynamic autoscheduling feature, for instance, helps to keep the content workflow on track and cuts out unnecessary slack in schedules. Our automated composition tools also put the publisher in control of the corrections process by removing the need for lengthy rounds of correction."

Deeper integration of tools and platforms to further shorten production times while improving consistency and efficiency is the company's goal for the next 12 months. "The deployment of automation will continue to play an important role, and tools such as our newly updated online proofing system, Impact, will drive that even further," Bottrill says.

With technology has come a shift in workflow and mindset. "Our goal to produce content from a single source often requires editorial and production staff—as well as publishers and their authors—to work in different ways," Bottrill says. "So we are focused not only on technology, but also on supporting publishers in redesigning their workflows."

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were one major issue that Lapiz Digital faced. "We used third-party cloud-based tools to maintain data integrity and confidentiality," Bharathram says. "The first week was a challenge in setting up the IT infrastructure for team members, especially in getting the right internet options. Thus far, everything is working well and we have met all delivery schedules for our projects despite the lockdown and ensuing WFH confusion."

Automation continues to be a hot topic in content creation and production at Newgen KnowledgeWorks, Bottrill says. "Boundaries are blurring as digital solutions vendors take on more of the product development and creation process while editorial staff—from vendor's and client's side—become increasingly equipped with the tools to drive the production process as well as editorial functions," he adds. This, Bottrill says, has brought "a renewed focus to user experience to make sure that all our tools are intuitive and that the entire workflow depends only on those processes that truly add value for the end user."

Revenues from audio content have been a particularly important lifeline to publishers facing market disruption, says Bottrill, whose team offers recording and production services. "These

Tyler Carey, chief revenue officer at Westchester Publishing Services

audio services support digital learning content for K–12 educators, as well as more traditional audiobook publishing," Bottrill says. "By combining print, digital, and audio production together, Newgen KnowledgeWorks is able to provide a truly end-to-end service, which is not only efficient but also ensures that content hits the market sooner."

Expanding Business at Westchester Publishing Services

The pandemic has added a sense of urgency to the continued development of the cloud-based portal used by Westchester Publishing Services to best suit clients and internal needs, chief revenue officer Tyler Carey says. "Clients can use the Dropbox interface within the portal to see all versions of each asset, engage with the project and schedule, and share direct Dropbox links to content with their staff and authors," he adds. "We are actively customizing it to specific client workflows as needed, making it more versatile than many off-the-shelf tools—and available to our clients at no cost."

Westchester's client roster is growing despite the slowed economy, with 2020 set to be the company's biggest year yet, Carey says. West Margin Press, RosettaBooks, Berghahn Books, Stonesong Digital, and educational content providers such as CareerPath and Lorenz Educational Press are some of the new clients. "We are seeing growth with existing partnerships—Macmillan, Princeton University Press, MIT Press, for instance—that go beyond the type of work we had historically done together," Carey says.

The demand for quality editorial services is rising. "Even trade publishers that normally keep copyediting in-house or have a limited number of freelancers are moving work to us in order to achieve a reliable and steady resource at a time when not all

contributors and freelancers are able to support a digital workflow," says Carey, whose team is creating more digital learning content for publishers and edtech providers.

"We provide additional lessons and assessments to expand the offerings that our clients already have," Carey says. "Some clients are adapting to new platforms like Learnosity, which we have extensive history in helping publishers migrate their content to. Others, upon finding themselves selling an existing library of content that may not have been updated in a long time, are asking us to review the currency of their backlist, as well as to ensure that the older content addresses emerging needs on diversity, equity, and inclusion."

The digital tools and processes implemented have made the WFH transition painless for 51-year-old Westchester. "We proactively pursued a partnership with Dropbox a few years ago because we saw the need for a client-centric platform with easy asset-management options, and to add publication-specific information and functionality on top of that through our client portal," Carey says. "This enables us to easily ramp up for projects with our larger clients and establish variant workflows with the nearly 250 publishers we now serve. It means that we have alternate options in place to serve each new client instead of making them adhere to an off-the-shelf solution that may not solve the issues they face during these trying times."

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The demand for engaging and interactive content for online educational curricula is rising. "The same uptick is also seen for apps that incorporate digital learning assets, practice assessments, content authoring system, and e-book reader functionalities," says Gopinath, of DiacriTech. "Growing requests for educational web portals that offer PDF e-reader apps compatible with mobile devices—that allow students to view allocated subject PDF pertaining to their grade—are indications of an urgent shift towards online content."

Some publishers are busy incorporating hub-based content on dealing with the pandemic and its consequences. "LMS training materials, content porting, and testing on platforms is on a surge," Gopinath says. "The same goes for content creation and modifications to existing products. We have been providing videos to support surveys and GFX content—incorporating infographics with video—to support research relevant to the current pandemic. Assessments, work sheets, and additional learning materials that are suitable for offline deployment but are electronically delivered in a secure environment are in now."

More Westchester Publishing Services clients are delving into their backlists and putting together print-on-demand files, or adapting older academic content into XML and HTML5, Carey says. "Whether it is straight text or fixed-layout EPUBs, cookbooks or children's titles, there is a much higher demand for digital conversion," he adds. "Our teams have been working with different and less-common types of incoming files, and we even established a partnership with a scanning operation should a publisher have only hard copies available."

Which brings us to this: business (and life), whether in WFH or WFO mode, does go on. Recent acquisitions, such as HighWire (by MPS Limited) or Cenveo Publisher Services/Cenveo Learning (by CJK Group), highlight the ongoing tech-centric strategy to expand digital platform offerings, diversify distribution channels, and increase resources. For vendors and publishers, digital competencies and transformation make all the difference to the bottom line during this pandemic waiting game—and beyond. S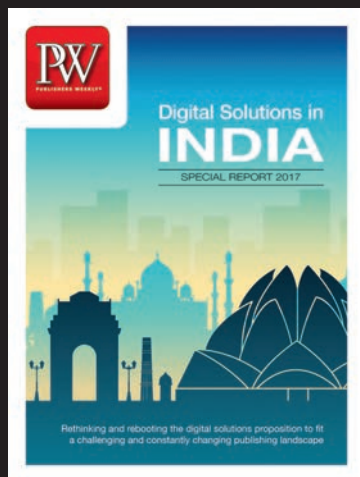o stay agile and adopt digital, or go broke. ∎