



Softly softly

DM Editor David Tyler catches up with ibml's Ashley Keil after the company's recent DM Awards win for its SoftTrac Capture Suite software offering

David Tyler: At this year's DM Awards ibml won the Data Capture/Recognition Product award for the SoftTrac Capture Suite - how significant is it that you're winning awards for your software now, after years of cleaning up in the hardware categories?

Ashley Keil: We were delighted to see the market recognising ibml as a software provider as this is key to the company's strategy going forward. Right now there are three clear strands to our product portfolio. Your readers will doubtless know us best for our 'traditional' high end scanner offerings, as well as our move into the desktop scanning world that has taken off so well for us over the last year or so. And it's important to remember that our traditional scanner manufacture business remains very healthy for us indeed.

But at the same time, software isn't a 'new thing' for us; it's an area we've been successful in for many years - what is making people sit up and take notice now is the very mature end-to-end

solution approach of the Capture Suite. In the past software has been seen as 'wrapped around' the scanner: how to run the scanner, how to clean an image post-scan, how to deliver an image into some third-party product, etc., so businesses have ended up with layers of scanner-centric software. What we are now able to offer is a truly end-to-end approach that we believe is unique - and highly appealing not just to BPOs and bureaus but also to scanning operations of almost any size.

DT: Can you explain how the Capture Suite approach works in practice for potential users?

AK: Historically there have been two basic profiles of software in the capture market. One is the capture software itself (driving a scanner, looking at an image, cleaning it up, releasing it and so on) and the other type is around recognition and classification - IDR. For some while now these have been largely separate components. This is partly historical, and partly because the market doesn't

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necessarily want to buy one 'shrink-wrapped' ready-made product that might not suit their needs.

Users want different things from a capture solution, to build something that fits their specific requirements. At the same time they need that solution to be fully integrated, fully transparent and fully connected. Our componentised approach gives that flexibility, and also - crucially - allows users to scale it to their needs. Different businesses have different capture 'profiles': a bank's scanning requirement is totally different to an NHS department scanning prescriptions, for example. Some users may need lots of virtual Quality Control stations, or lots of OCR servers but no classification. Our approach lets a user say not only which components they want, but which ones will need to scale.

We've joked internally about the approach being based on the Lego model: it's about building what you want, by choosing the right shaped pieces from a large selection - but all the pieces are made to fit together, to connect. And crucially there are no gaps between the components.

DT: Is ibml's past record - of very high volumes and high speed capture - important to the development of your software offering?

AK: Because of where we've come from in terms of the ibml pedigree and history, you can imagine our solutions are designed by definition to handle thousands of physical documents an hour, to process thousands of OCR

instances an hour - so we know that our software has to be equally scalable to sit behind those processing levels. That level of capability is equally vital to our SME users, of course.

So what we've done over the last couple of years is taken all of these components of our capture environment, and expanded them, connected them more comprehensively, filled in any functionality gaps in specific components, and perhaps most significantly, we've added in a lot of IDR capability within the software - standalone of the scanner environment itself.

Our market has changed in recent years - we're not necessarily always driving our own scanners with our software any more, so it's no longer enough for the scanner itself to be able to, say, recognise a cheque and send it to a specific hopper. We've made a significant number of software sales in recent months in fact, none of which are connecting to ibml scanners. That's why it is important for the software to have IDR capability of its own, irrespective of what scanners you use.

DT: As well as being effectively hardware-agnostic, it seems that another key benefit of your approach is the commercial model. Tell us a little more about this.

AK: Our software - connected to Kodak, Canon or any other scanners - can handle fixed structured forms, semi-structured content, and even non-structured documents such as correspondence. With full OCR we can

spot a change of address letter, for instance and deal with it appropriately.

What all this adds up to is a single truly end-to-end environment, which can be built to suit your requirements, with full recognition capabilities built in, and - as you've just touched on - a commercial package that is extremely attractive to customers. With most competitive software approaches, the recognition capabilities that are included in their license are still chargeable by use - click-charges, effectively.

Our perpetual licensing approach means that there are no click-charges - so our customers can use their OCR/IDR to their heart's content!

For many potential users that can be the single point that swings a sale for us: that we can offer a far more cost-effective way of doing what they need to do. This is what I mean when I describe our software approach as 'commercially attractive'.

Our target market is probably 'everybody', but our focus right now is mostly on what I would describe as medium-sized users of capture. A lot of the very large users will of course have existing investments in products that might be ten years old now and there would be a cost for them in simply replacing their systems with ours - even if ours is now equally capable, and potentially more attractive commercially. So while they might look at a project to investigate our software, maybe over a couple of years, for us the sweet spot right now is likely to be that middle market.

More info: www.ibml.com