Overcoming Production Inefficiencies
through Systems Redesign

A CASE STUDY IN

Operations + Workflow Design +
Process Improvement + Production Management

by Casey Auvé

Background Summary

For ten years, I worked with Journal Newspaper Group, a regional publisher serving communities from north Seattle through south Everett, across King & Snohomish counties.

During that time, the operation grew from seven monthly newspapers to thirteen, eventually reaching more than 150,000 households. The company also produced twelve annual business directories, more than thirty festival & special-interest publications, & a steady stream of client projects including brochures, branding materials, & websites.

As the organization grew, its production model became increasingly difficult to sustain. Work relied on fragmented documents, manual handoffs, inconsistent file practices, recurring clarification, & significant overtime.

My role evolved from production & design into broad operational leadership. For roughly seven years, I oversaw the full production cycle & worked closely with editorial, sales, administration, outside vendors, prepress teams, & press operators.

The Challenge

The monthly production cycle required a large group of employees & contributors to work extended hours under significant deadline pressure.

At the beginning of my tenure, production regularly involved approximately 8-12 designers along with editorial staff, ownership, & other contributors, many working 20-30 hours of overtime during each monthly production cycle.

By the time the redesigned system was fully implemented, a substantially larger publication network could be handled by a much smaller production team, typically 2-4 designers working roughly ten overtime hours per month.

The issue was not simply workload.

The underlying system created unnecessary work through:

- Unclear production handoffs
- Inconsistent file naming
- Font & link conflicts
- Inefficient press sequencing
- Excess plate changes
- Fragmented master-layout documents
- Repeated manual ad placement
- Difficult-to-track revisions
- Limited production-cycle visibility
- Inconsistent team + vendor communication

The result was unnecessary labor, higher printing costs, preventable errors, & recurring deadline pressure.

The Approach

Rather than address each problem separately, I redesigned the system around a single goal: Make the production cycle easier to understand, execute, & get right.

I rebuilt the production architecture around standardized workflows, shared operating rules, better visibility, & clearer team handoffs. Changes were introduced incrementally while production continued on live monthly deadlines.

Workflow Standardization

I established a consistent page-design system using shared Character, Paragraph, & Object styles & trained the design team to work within the same visual & production framework. This reduced inconsistencies & made pages easier to review & correct.

I also redesigned the advertising approval workflow. Previously, designers frequently copied native ad elements directly into publication files, creating font conflicts, missing links, color problems, & revision-management issues.

The new process converted approved advertisements into standardized print-ready PDFs stored in a shared system. If a client later requested a correction, the original file could be updated & replaced while the production system automatically identified the revised link.

This turned a recurring source of production errors into a controlled, repeatable workflow.

Information + Client Management

I developed a Salesforce CRM database & trained sales, design, & administrative staff to use it. The system improved client information management & helped reduce communication gaps between departments.

The broader goal was the same throughout the operation: information should live somewhere predictable, follow a consistent structure, & be accessible to the people responsible for acting on it.

Master Production Planning

One of the largest improvements involved redesigning the master publication layout, or “mockup,” used to coordinate hundreds of pages across multiple newspaper editions.

I rebuilt the system so each publication page was represented proportionally & each advertising block contained the information needed to produce it, including placement requirements, edition assignments, color requirements, & other production details.

The redesigned documents reduced the need to cross-reference multiple sales & production files & created a shared visual operating map for the entire production cycle. I introduced:

- Standardized color coding
- Uniform file-naming protocols
- Page-assignment documents
- Zoning & page-planning grids
- Clear production instructions for outside vendors

These systems allowed our staff designers and the press vendor’s customer-service, prepress, & press teams to work from the same underlying production logic.

Press + Vendor Optimization

I studied how advertisers purchased space across neighboring editions & used those patterns to redesign the order in which publications were printed.

By grouping editions with greater advertising overlap, we could reuse more press plates & reduce unnecessary changeovers between runs.

This reduced material use, press time, & external production expense while simplifying the printing process itself.

I also created simplified Page Grid & Press Grid documents so outside production partners could clearly see page configurations, zoning changes, & required plate changes throughout the run.

The publisher later credited these operational changes with helping extend the life of the company by approximately five additional years during a period of declining print-advertising revenue.

Estimated annual operating savings: **$750,000**+

Based on cumulative reductions in labor, production, press, materials, & related recurring operating costs.

The Larger Lesson

This project was not primarily about newspapers.

It was about taking a recurring system that had accumulated years of workarounds, inefficiencies, & hidden dependencies & making the structure visible.

Once the work could be seen clearly, it became possible to:

- » Remove unnecessary steps
- » Standardize repeatable work
- » Make information easier to find
- » Build systems others can run
- » Clarify ownership
- » Improve team handoffs
- » Reduce errors & rework
- » Reduce labor & vendor costs

The tools were specific to publishing. The operating principle wasn't:

Understand how the work actually moves, identify where effort is being wasted, & redesign the system so good outcomes become easier to repeat.

Scale + Results

13 monthly publications
Managed within a recurring multi-edition production system

250+ pages per cycle
Coordinated through structured assignment & production systems

150,000+ households reached
Across the regional publication network

55%+ overtime reduction
Through process redesign & clearer production structure

30% recurring production-cost reduction
Through operational review, vendor changes, & process improvement

$750K+ estimated annual savings
Through press optimization, vendor coordination, & production-system improvements

~5 years additional operating runway
Publisher-attributed impact during declining print-advertising revenue

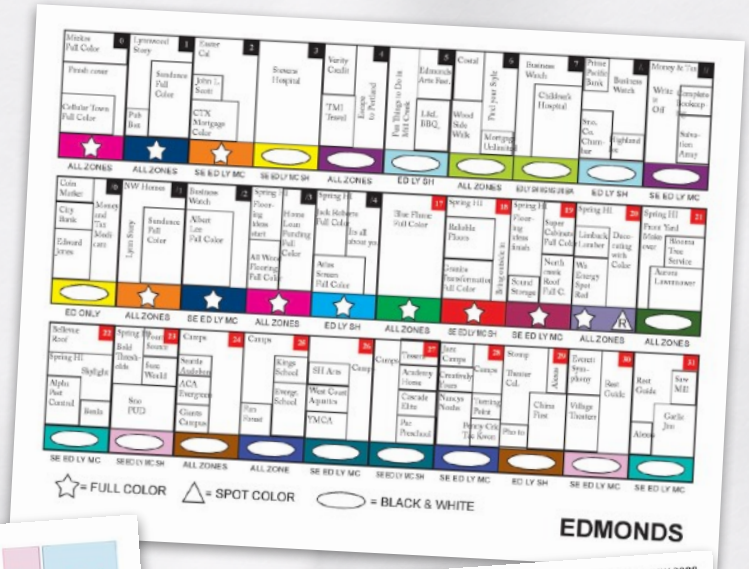
Examples from the System

Selected examples shown. Additional supporting production documents are available separately.

The production redesign replaced a fragmented master-layout process with a shared visual system for planning, assigning, tracking, & communicating hundreds of pages across multiple editions.

Inherited Master Mockup

Dense, manually interpreted production layout





Redesigned Master Mockup

Proportional page planning, standardized color coding, & production information in one shared view

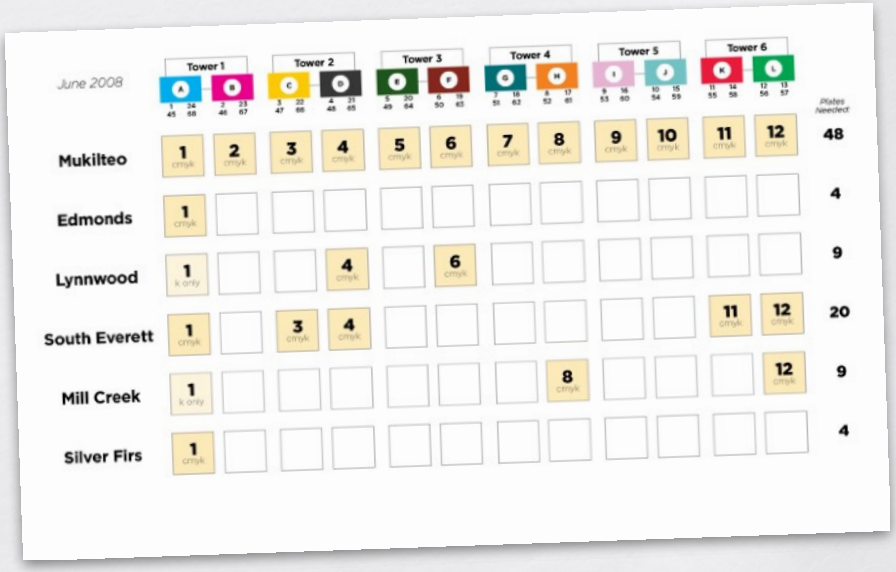




Edition + Zone Mapping

- Page Grid -

Tracks edition-specific page requirements shared content, & zoning changes



Press Run Mapping

- Press Grid -

Translate the production plan into clear plate-change & press-run instructions