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Apple's Automator Allows Workflow Shortcuts

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By Robyn Weisman

Chuck Sholdt, vice president of weather services at Weather Central Inc., credits Apple Computer's scripting language AppleScript for making his job—supplying daily weather maps to some of the largest newspapers in the country—feasible.

"I wouldn't be in the newspaper business if it weren't for AppleScript. We bought Weather Central 11 years ago this March. Back then we needed nine people for our 13 daily clients. Today we use seven people for our 160 clients every day, putting out 200 pages of content," Sholdt said.

Sholdt's statement would seem hyperbolic if it weren't for the fact that so many in the publishing industry depend on AppleScript to streamline their workflows. In Sholdt's case, AppleScript takes the one national map that the graphic artist at Weather Central draws each day and personalizes it to fit a given newspaper's layout and design standards.

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The map "goes out to the network, opens a client's template—either Quark or InDesign—finds and loads files and graphics, handles typesetting changes, style-sheet creation, charts, colors, icons and other presets. On the front end we are adjusting and [working with] 575,000 files every 24 hours, [including] National Weather Service Maps, pollen levels, ski reports, tides, national, regional and local maps, five-day forecasts and so forth," Sholdt said.

Despite Sholdt's love for AppleScript and its simplicity relative to other programming languages, he understands that it still requires a learning curve, one that his designers don't have either the time or inclination to learn. And there are plenty of repetitive tasks that, as Sholdt said, "can be done better by a computer than a human being."

When Apple first launched Tiger, it caused problems with some creative workflows. [Click here](#) to read more.

That's why Sholdt finds Automator, which made its debut in Mac OS 10.4, aka "Tiger," such a boon to his employees, he said. Automator is a tool that enables users to build automated workflow processes using prebuilt "actions." The process is largely drag-and-drop, and actions allow for customization without any handling of code.

"Automator is not a huge innovation the way AppleScript was, but for annoying little things, my employees don't have to wait for me to fix them. If I'm on the road, I can put together some Automator actions, so my staff can go through and assemble them" to take care of certain tasks, "such as when the company needs all of a sudden to do a complete page assembly for a new client," Sholdt said.

"There's an obvious relationship between AppleScript and Automator, but Automator provides designers with a much

easier to use interface around this same core logic," said Susan Prescott, vice president of Pro Markets at Apple.

"They can use it on the desktop level to tune up and tweak certain specific actions," Prescott said.

Ben Waldie, president and CEO of Automated Workflows LLC and author of the **Mac OS X Technology Guide for Automator**, also said he sees Automator being used more on the client side to automate time-consuming actions that take away from creativity.

"An obvious example is converting images from one format to another. One of the things with digital photography is I don't think photographers anticipated the number of files they were going to have. Photographers now have hundreds of thousands of files that need to be renamed and get catalogued into an image database and put into a folder structure to help them stay organized," Waldie said.

Apple's Prescott listed a number of other Automator actions that designers would find useful.

"Converting RGB to CMYK in the print file, renaming files, placing images and text in documents in an automated way, managing color profiles in a workflow—you can auto-associate an ICC profile with an image," she said.

[Click here](#) to read about how to build a Weblogging widget in Tiger.

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block to widespread use of Automator is simply that users are slow to adopt it, Waldie said.

"People aren't sure what kinds of tasks they can automate, and people don't always see, 'Oh, this is a very repetitive thing. By writing a script or creating a workflow, I can automate this and save myself five hours of time a week,' which over time can add up to a lot," Waldie said.

"Automator is going to help people start to realize that these tasks that they are performing now that are really time-consuming can be automated without a whole lot of trouble," he added.

Apple ships Automator with over 200 actions for renaming files, moving files between different folders, creating folders, opening images and converting them from one format to another, resizing images, and more.

However, Waldie said that Automator's effectiveness will depend on whether its actions can interact with publishing professionals' core applications, like Adobe Systems Inc.'s Creative Suite 2.

"Third-party developers like myself are creating Automator actions for things like Photoshop and InDesign, and I'm planning to have some things out for Quark soon. Neither Adobe nor Quark have started implementing their own actions, although I imagine that they will before too long," Waldie said.

For his part, Weather Central's Sholdt said, he believes designers, photographers and others in the publishing sphere will find Automator, like its forebear AppleScript, addictive.

"Once you get into it, you'll be looking for ways to [automate] other tasks," Sholdt said.

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