



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

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Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

From the Golden Zone

The true role of voice-directed picking technology

By René Jones

Vendors of voice-directed picking (VDP) systems will tell you that these systems are great. As a consultant, I tell all my clients that the system will only be as good as the people running it. Running a warehouse is not rocket science, but the wrong people working the right system will produce the wrong results.

Many distributors want any “Joe” off the street to be able to walk into a warehouse and become productive with-in minutes — not weeks or months — whether they speak English, French, Japanese, or Spanish. This is one of the benefits of VDP; it can be used by people who speak different languages within the same warehouse.

Other benefits of VDP are its hands-free and eyes-free features. Eyes-free means the user is focused on the product or location and not on reading an instruction, keying digits into the RF device, or reading or writing a pick ticket.

Eyes-free is a significant feature because most picking errors happen in RF environments when the device is being returned to the holster. For example, the picker scans the first location, returns the RF device to the holster, and then looks up and picks the product from the second location. Nonetheless, most warehouses that use RF devices have more than 99 percent picking

accuracy rates. The slight percentage increase in accuracy when converting to VDP will only have a recognizable impact on the bottom line in high-volume distribution centers — not in a warehouse with a mere 300 orders per day.

Training, not technology, is at the root of performance

VDP — like scanning — will only be as accurate as your receivers force the technology to be. It doesn't matter if your pickers have their hands and eyes “free” if they get to the location where an item should be and the wrong product is in that location.

Industry experts will tell you that the time it takes to train warehouse personnel on voice technology is much less than training them to work in a paper or scanning environment. This is true, but these experts are really speaking in terms of training the system, not the individual. Individual pickers still need to be taught the warehouse layout, just as in a paper or scanning environment. And you still have to teach them about the product.

Unfortunately, very few warehouses actually have training programs. Most use the “follow-Jim-around” training method. The new picker is told, “Follow Jim around, and he will show you what you need to know.” But how did Jim learn?

In other words, who knows what Jim is teaching the new guy? Just because Jim is the best picker doesn't mean he is a good trainer.

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Technology is often the catalyst to other improvements

When comparing voice technology with RF scanning, improvements in productivity are the biggest benefit mentioned by industry experts. But here are a few stats to consider: In an RF scanning environment, pickers spend approximately 15 percent of their picking time using an RF terminal. Fifty-five percent of a picker's time is spent traveling to and from product locations.

What does this tell you? What I hear is: "Focus on the layout of your facility, and don't be so quick to buy the newest thing."

Purchasing any technology for your warehouse is only the beginning of your continuous improvement process. Once software is purchased, managers begin to realize just how messed up the warehouse actually is. Then they begin making improvements to layout and to training the staff. When the vendor comes back and asks, "How is the system we sold you doing?" the response is, "Great!" In actuality, the system may

Listen to your people — the original voice technology

Television commercials intrigue me. I want to watch them not just for the laughs, but because they often reflect a version of reality. Among the commercials that intrigue me are those that extol the reliability of the Verizon Wireless network — the ones with the guy walking all over the world asking, "Can you hear me now?" Every time I see one of those commercials, I picture warehouse personnel talking to anyone in the company that doesn't work in the warehouse, such as people in sales and purchasing, or even a supervisor. Often, warehouse folks talk about ways to improve productivity in the warehouse, but no one listens.

Your warehouse folks may not be as articulate as the "experts." They may not be able to quote facts and figures. But they know something more important than any industry expert, including me: They know your product. They know your warehouse. And most important, they know your customer.

Voice technology is going to be around for a long time and warehouse management systems are here for the long haul as well. More important, your people are here to stay. You may *hear* what they are saying, but are you *listening* the same way you would to a hired consultant?

very well have been the catalyst to the start of improvements that could have been made without the new software.

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