

A White Paper From Vocollect

It Always Comes Down to People

*Addressing the human side of the equation
boosts the success of a voice deployment.*

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Remember the human factor

Voice-Directed Work has been proven to significantly – and relatively quickly – boost productivity, accuracy, safety and job satisfaction in distribution centers around the globe. But such results are most easily realized when organizations simultaneously plan for the *people* side of a voice deployment.

Successful organizations take many approaches to address the human factor of the equation in their voice deployments. For example, they involve front-line and union management up front. They give supervisors the necessary background and training so that they can model and coach the new skills. And they actively elicit, and thoughtfully consider, employee feedback early on, recognizing that front-line workers are closest to the work being done.

Conversely, when organizations overlook crucial people issues, any new type of implementation can run up against employee resistance, union roadblocks, training inefficiencies and delayed ROI. And *this*, in turn, can damage employee trust, destroy management credibility and waste financial resources.

Companies that carefully consider their human resource issues achieve impressive results from their voice deployments. Take United Stationers, for example, North America's largest broad line wholesale distributor of business products. The Deerfield, Ill.-based company was facing a common supply chain challenge: how to boost efficiency

When you have 33 distribution centers responsible for more than 20,000 resellers, the incremental improvements you gain in efficiency with voice create a tremendous bottom-line benefit.

Bill Stark
Vice President of Engineering
United Stationers

in a distribution network that was already operating at an extremely high level of productivity and accuracy.

“With 33 distribution centers (DCs) responsible for more than 20,000 resellers, even incremental improvements in efficiency would create a tremendous bottom-line impact,” explains Bill Stark, vice president of engineering.

After extensive research and analysis, in 2003, the company began to phase in Vocollect Voice, implemented by Dematic, the world’s leading supplier of automated material handling systems, into its distribution centers. The goal? To boost order selection accuracy and productivity. The voice deployment, which was implemented company-wide by 2005, has generated eye-popping results. Productivity is up by over 20 percent. Selection accuracy has jumped to 99.7 percent. Operating costs have been reduced, and the training time required for new employees has plummeted from one week to less than two days. Better yet, the company fully recouped the cost of its investment in less than nine months.

How was United Stationers able to quickly generate such extraordinary results from its voice effort? “By thoroughly planning all phases of the implementation,” Stark explains. “Not just the technology side of it, but the people side as well.”

Crucial steps to take

While the deployment approach and internal issues can vary greatly between countries, companies, distribution centers and individual workers, there are some general guidelines that companies can follow in order to avoid potential “people issues.”

We surveyed Vocollect managers around the globe who have been involved with everything from single-site installations in small companies to extensive, multi-location installations in international firms. Using their suggestions and expertise, we’ve devised this 11-step process to guide companies through the people side of a voice deployment.

Step 1: Identify a project champion

The development of a voice implementation team typically starts with identifying a champion – someone to spearhead the project. In large companies the champion might be a corporate-level operations employee; in smaller companies, perhaps the distribution center (DC) manager. But regardless of what title that person holds, the champion must be someone who understands the strategic benefits of voice and has the cross-functional authority and responsibility to manage the installation, training and deployment. The champion should also be an effective communicator who is not only respected by DC personnel, but also has the ear and commitment of the executive management team.

Step 2: Create an implementation team

A cross-functional approach is essential when deploying voice. In addition to having a high-level voice champion, an ideal team includes:

- ***The distribution center operations director or manager:*** This individual needs to understand the impact of a voice implementation on DC production and how to prepare for the changes it will create.
- ***The IT director:*** This person should help to ensure the readiness of the site for installation, as well as to assist in any logistics necessary to support voice.
- ***Local IT support:*** Ideally, on-site IT personnel would be responsible for the network infrastructure, managing and configuring the system hardware, maintaining and supporting the deployment, supporting the site acceptance testing, ensuring adequate RF coverage, and acting as a liaison with the system provider. Wherever possible, organizations will want to involve programmers who understand the warehouse management system (WMS), plus wireless and local area network specialists.
- ***Logistics personnel:*** Electricians should be involved early in the process, to determine the electrical needs of battery charges and terminal cradles and to install the proper amount of outlets in the equipment storage location.
- ***Trainers:*** Many companies have corporate or on-site facility trainers that can help roll out a voice deployment. But typically, these trainers are best used in a Train-the-Trainer capacity. Ultimately, companies will want on-site personnel to conduct the hands-on training for their employees and co-workers.

Regardless of the size and scope of the deployment, the voice supplier should provide extensive service and support options to address client needs.

Step 3: Recruit front-line supervisors from each shift

Supervisors from every shift must be involved in the implementation and roll-out team. Why? Because when supervisors from every shift are involved, the entire DC operation is equally represented – which is important in gaining employee acceptance. Not only do supervisors have a greater ability to “sell” the concept of voice to their employees, but they are also the ideal people to train workers on how to use the new system.

It’s especially important to involve front-line supervisors early, because most DC personnel involved with monitoring production are not inherently pro-voice. Often, they believe that the changes will not benefit their production, and because of this, they may make it difficult for voice providers to train the trainers. By identifying the least resistant supervisors – and training them first – usually companies can overcome objections.

Step 4: Involve end users in the process

Organizations can potentially face employee resistance in any change effort including a voice deployment. Employees can be fearful of losing their jobs, they might worry about safety issues, or it could be simply that they resist change in general. To counter this resistance, one or two front-line workers from each primary shift should be included in the implementation and roll-out team.

Three months prior to implementation, we began to let people know voice was coming. We put up posters, showed videotapes to employees, and displayed the voice devices so people could start getting excited about the new way of doing business.

Richard B. Vastine, Jr.
Corporate Director of
Industrial Engineering
Associated Wholesale
Grocers, Inc.

Ideally, these would be influential employees who adapt to change easily and can talk up the benefits of voice to their peers. By recruiting workforce opinion leaders and convincing *them* that voice will allow them to do their jobs more easily and accurately, they will naturally spread the word to other end users.

Here are some of the messages you want to communicate to workforce leaders to help counter employee objections:

- ***For employees fearful of losing their jobs due to increased productivity:*** Instead of stressing the *productivity* benefits of voice, emphasize how easy the system is to use, and how it will make their jobs easier and more enjoyable – they will work smarter, not harder.
- ***For employees fearing for their safety:*** Emphasize the number of workers who use voice comfortably – there are, for example, hundreds of thousands of workers using Vocollect Voice around the world every single day. You'll also want to talk about the safety *benefits* of voice, and how the headsets free up both hands and eyes, allowing employees to pay more attention to the surrounding environment.
- ***For employees who are uncomfortable with change and new processes:*** Before conducting employee training, be certain employees are aware of the training and mentoring that will be available to help them adapt to the change. Also, convey that voice is easy to use, and that many employees also find it enjoyable to operate.
- ***For bilingual workers who do not understand or speak the company's main language very well:*** Reassure them that the voice deployment will not put their jobs in jeopardy; in fact, because of the many text-to-speech languages that voice can be heard and spoken in today, it will help them be even more effective and successful on the job.
- ***For employees showing resistance after a voice system has been installed:*** Perhaps the team might be concerned that the voice system will prevent them from talking to their co-

workers, or that all their actions will be monitored. In that event, tell them you aren't going to stop them from talking with each other – that there are ways of putting the system to sleep temporarily. From a management perspective, the primary goal is for employees to meet their accuracy and productivity levels. If they accomplish that objective, give them some freedom in their on-the-job peer relationships.

- ***Truly listen to what employees tell you about the system.*** These are the people who work with it on a daily basis, and their concerns and enhancement ideas should be carefully considered. It could be a major concern or even something as minor as in one company, where some of the employees didn't like some of the intermittent "beeps" in the system, and felt that some of the information given through the headset was excessive. Demonstrating that you are listening to them and willing to take their issues seriously can go a long way toward combating post-deployment resistance.

Step 5: Get support from the human resources department

Although human resources (HR) professionals are not typically heavily involved in voice implementations, it's wise to keep the corporate HR staff apprised of the implementation and determine, early on, whether the HR department has any services that can help smooth the transition to voice.

Potential areas of HR involvement include Train-the-Trainer efforts as well as assistance with change management. Especially in large multinational corporations, the HR operation has a treasure-trove of tools and tactics for bringing employees on board with change. This is one area where it makes sense not to reinvent the wheel. Also, companies will want to make sure that HR understands the many health and safety benefits of voice.

Step 6: Collaborate with union representatives

In unionized companies, it's crucial to involve union representatives early in the process in order to gain their support and commitment to voice. Typically, unions will have the same concerns about safety, change and job loss as do employees. It's important to address those safety concerns up front, to communicate that employees will not lose their jobs because of increased efficiencies, and that production credits won't be lost in the transition from paper to voice. If unions and employees do not receive adequate communication – both early in the process and throughout the deployment – they may fill their information gaps with erroneous perceptions instead of the facts. And many times, they don't have overt objectives; they just want their questions to be answered.

In fact, many times union leadership embraces the extreme fairness of a voice system, because there is no favoritism – voice clearly identifies the high performers so that they receive their fair share of merit for strong performance.

Step 7: Communicate early and often with employees

Once an implementation team has been created and while the system is being installed, companies should begin to inform employees about the changes that are on the way.

At Associated Wholesale Grocers, Inc., a large grocery wholesaler based in Kansas City, Kan., Vocollect Voice has been deployed in seven DCs, and productivity has improved between 4 and 15 percent, depending on the work area. Richard B. Vastine, Jr., corporate director of industrial engineering, says two people-related issues contributed to that success: 1) the company had buy-in from the operations people early-on; and, 2) employees readily accepted the new system. And both of *those* factors, Vastine says, were greatly helped by the fact that the company did a lot of up-front advertising to alert DC teams to the upcoming changes.

“Three months prior to implementation, we began to let people know voice was coming,” he says. “We put up posters, showed videotapes to employees and displayed the voice devices so people could start getting excited about the new way of doing business. Instead of springing the new voice system on people, we allowed them to get used to the idea and become curious about it.”

Step 8: Train employees using a Train-the-Trainer approach

After employees are aware of the changes that will be created by a voice deployment, organizations can begin to train them on using the system. Typically, system providers will cover the basics of system operation in their client orientation, and they will train the training staff. But ultimately it is a customer’s responsibility to make sure there are enough trainers in place to roll out the training in a timely fashion.

Some questions to consider about the training include:

- How much training is required?
- How will it be offered? Monthly? On demand?
- What are my options for training? Should the roll-out be gradual or all at once?
- How long will it take for my team to reach the productivity levels I'm expecting?

Of course, the answers to these questions will depend upon the size of your organization. Large organizations may have corporate staff to manage their Train-the-Trainer efforts, whereas smaller companies must rely on their DC management team and on-site voice champions. Either way, after you train the trainers, you'll want to verify that they are comfortable with the training approach and can handle any issues that might arise.

Says Vastine, "At AWG, we trained the supervisors on the system first to make sure we had their buy-in. Then, *they* conducted the training for the end-users."

Step 9: Partner with your voice provider

The best voice suppliers have proven expertise with voice deployments and experience with hundreds, if not thousands, of installations. Many years of working closely with customers on diverse implementations has given them a strong sense of what works and what doesn't. Providers like Vocollect have a time-tested methodology

that incorporates many tools, templates and processes to help companies with their implementations. These services can include posters, DVD training materials, quick reference cards and other items to communicate the upcoming change to employees, as well as Train-the-Trainer programs packaged to meet specific customer requirements. Be sure to ask your supplier about what on-site implementation services it offers.

Step 10: Train managers/supervisors on how to use voice data as a management tool

Managers and supervisors will also need training on how to maximize the use of the new voice system. This is because voice systems provide real-time individual and team productivity data, which allows supervisors to manage work flow much more proactively. If productivity is lagging in certain areas, they can use system information to reassign workers. They can track performance of individual workers and/or work teams. They can also track performance across multiple DCs. All of this allows DC leaders to make better decisions about how to use and reassign labor throughout the shift.

However, supervisors will need coaching on how to do this. Although voice systems and their information dashboards are fairly intuitive, management should not assume that DC leaders will know how to use the data without training.

We have had a gainsharing program for many years, whereby employees shared in the financial rewards created by increased productivity. However, once voice was installed, it helped us monitor individual performance even more accurately.

Danny Payne
Vice President of Operations
Southeast Frozen Foods

Step 11: Reward and reinforce performance improvements

In the past, many companies have been frustrated by their inability to orchestrate fully equitable incentive programs because they didn't have accurate individual employee performance data. Clearly Voice-Directed Work in the DC affords the opportunity to change this situation, from Day 1 helping organizations to measure, monitor *and* reward employee productivity – often for the very first time.

Because companies can track employees from assignment to assignment, as well as from task to task, they are better able to monitor employee progress, share improvement data with them and create performance incentives.

As you might expect, such incentive programs come in many different forms. One Vocollect customer calculates each employee's "fair share" per shift. Once users complete their fair share of workload for the day, they can go home with eight hours' pay. In another organization, the employee with the best productivity that day does not have to stay and perform clean-up activities. And at Southeast Frozen Foods (SEFF), a successful *financial* incentive program uses voice as a measurement component for rewarding high performers.

The Miami-based company, which has five DCs across the southeastern United States, implemented voice in an effort to address accuracy problems caused by lost labels, incomplete orders and a

lack of clarity about whether or not an order selector was in the right location.

“We have had a gainsharing program for many years, whereby employees shared in the financial rewards created by increased productivity,” according to Danny Payne, vice president of operations. “However, once voice was installed, it helped us monitor individual performance even more accurately.”

Here’s how the program works: SEFF requires each employee to maintain an 85 percent productivity rate against the labor standard. For example, if an employee is given 10 minutes to pull a 70-piece order, he or she must complete that order within 11.5 minutes to meet the performance expectation of 85 percent. When an employee performs better than that 85 percent rate, the hourly rate rises accordingly. “The faster they pull, the more money they make,” Payne says. Employees who pull at an accuracy rate of 99.8 percent or higher receive an additional 70 cents per hour.

Vocollect Voice has been so successful that Southeast Frozen Foods has seen productivity rise more than 10 percent and the error rate plummet more than 50 percent. Furthermore, the voice implementation, in conjunction with employee financial incentives, has increased job safety and lowered the company’s workers’ compensation charges significantly.

Other tips and tactics

Ask people who are experienced with voice for advice about how to ensure a successful implementation and you'll get a wide range of responses.

Voice has been a real value-add in our employee recruitment and retention efforts. You don't need any special skill set in order to use the system, which makes it easier for us to attract employees and keep them on board. Our people were fine working with paper labels, but now they would rather have voice than any other system in the DC.

Randy McConnell
Director of Information Systems
Smith Drug Company


- If corporate employees are involved on the implementation team, make sure that they work *with* the individual regions. Typically the local management has to own the system for it to work optimally.
- Don't regard voice as an IT project – it is fully an operations strategic initiative. Voice implementations are most successful when they have people throughout the business driving the project.
- Get any new labor standards completed early so that employees don't get used to performing at the old rate.
- Reward members of the implementation team with specially made T-shirts, pizza lunches, or other appropriate incentives to show you appreciate their efforts.
- Do advance trouble-shooting with IT to anticipate RF coverage issues and make sure you have enough equipment to cover peak periods.
- Form a corporate SWAT team to configure the voice system and train the on-site trainers. It is often helpful to have actual users conduct the training – whether union representatives, supervisors or front-line end-users.
- There can sometimes be a gap between the long-term employees and newer employees when it comes to their willingness to embrace change. By involving front-line workers who can speak to both groups, companies increase the likelihood that all employees will adapt to voice.
- Devise some type of label and tracking method for the equipment and employ a problem-tracking log, especially in the beginning. Also, ensure that support processes are well designed and in place prior to the system going live.
- Don't be afraid to redo an implementation if it isn't working. To retain employee trust and management credibility, sometimes that means starting over.
- At the outset of a voice deployment, meet with union officials to explain why changes will result from the voice deployment, why management feels those changes are necessary, and how it will have an impact on labor standards. Invite the union

to send representatives into the DC to look at those changes once the voice system is in place.

- Supervisors may need coaching on managing with real-time data for individual performers.
- Position your successful voice implementation as an asset in your recruitment and retention efforts.

Says Randy McConnell, director of information systems with Smith Drug Company, a Spartanburg, S.C.-based full-line, full-service distributor of pharmaceuticals and over-the-counter merchandise, “Voice has been a real value-add in our employee recruitment and retention efforts. You don’t need any special skill set in order to use the system, which makes it easier for us to attract employees and keep them on board. Our people were fine working with paper labels, but now they would rather have voice than any other system in the DC.”

But experienced users of voice all agree on one important piece of wisdom: *don’t shortchange yourself*. “Large implementations with demanding roll-out schedules require many resources and a lot of planning to be successful,” Stark of United Stationers says.

By establishing a cross-functional implementation team, anticipating employee, union and supervisor resistance, communicating the change well in advance, using on-site peer training and rewarding employees for adopting the new system, companies will be able to realize the promise and potential of voice much more quickly. 

About the authors

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About Vocollect

Since 1987, Vocollect, Inc. has delivered proven performance improvements in productivity, accuracy, cost reduction and job satisfaction for mobile employees.

Vocollect Voice literally talks people through their daily tasks, replacing cumbersome lists and traditional data capture methods with hands-free, personal voice dialogs. Through a premier global network of certified resellers and supply chain performance experts, hundreds of thousands of people on six continents use Vocollect Voice to improve work every day. Vocollect is headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pa., U.S.A., and supports its clients and resellers through offices in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. For more information, visit www.vocollect.com. Vocollect[®], Vocollect Voice[®] and Voice-Directed Work[®] are registered trademarks of Vocollect, Inc. All rights reserved.

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