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HOW-TO GUIDE

5 ways to optimize your warehouse costs with voice-enablement tools

MANUFACTURING AND DISTRIBUTION

Of all the activities that happen in a warehouse, 60% to 70% of costs are attributed to order fulfillment. Yet employing a warehouse management system (WMS) with voice-enabled capabilities could significantly lower those costs. Utilizing RF wireless belt-mounted devices that incorporate speech recognition and speech synthesis technologies, voice-enabled WMSs have become the absolute minimum for competitive third-party logistics providers (3PLs) and supply chain managers.

These five perks of voice- enablement technologies help lower order-fulfillment costs.

1. Increase worker efficiency with "hands-free" tools

Voice-enabled picking tools help improve worker productivity in many fulfillment centers. With hands and eyes free to engage completely in the picking tasks, workers can grasp more items with greater ease. A voice-directed system eliminates the burden of checking picked items against the order. Workers need only to confirm each item vocally (best practices typically involve reading a two digit "check number" at the item location), and the system takes care of the rest.

Because workers don't have to return to the assignment desk after each order, they can interleave workflows, do reverse picking, or batch-pick orders. All of this reduces travel time, boosts productivity, and decreases stress. Voice enablement creates additional benefits in put-away, stock checking, and other warehouse processes. Plus, it helps do away with tasks such as printing picking lists and keying in picking confirmations to improve administrative productivity.

2. Speed up new employee training

Voice enablement can improve overall fulfillment accuracy by minimizing the time new hires spend in error-prone training periods. It takes only a few minutes for a voice-picking device to learn its user's voice, with minimal additional training in the warehouse to account for on-the-job speech variations and ambient noises. After that, users simply follow directions.

Voice-enabled systems can also answer user questions in mid-task. At the same time, millennials tend to prefer employers who offer the latest technology, so not only does voice technology make it easier to train new workers, it's a must-have for attracting the millennial workforce. Plus, warehouse workers, from all generations, appreciate the way voice technology makes it faster and easier to gain proficiency.

3. Reduce manual entry to enhance accuracy

A voice-directed system can increase order accuracy to as high as 99.9%, according to VoicePicking.com. By eliminating distractions, such as looking at papers, scanners, or terminal screens, verbal item confirmation can be faster than manual entry—helping to improve the productivity of your existing workforce as well. Since voice-enabled systems allow managers to pinpoint the date, time, location, and quantity of each item picked, even the few errors that do occur are easier to trace. This is especially important, since increasingly strict service-level agreements (SLAs) demand rapid resolution of all customer inquiries and the ability to promptly rectify faulty processes.

4. Improve employee performance and safety

Warehouse activity still requires significant human involvement, and your bottom line depends on employing the most capable individuals and keeping them proficient and highly motivated. At the manager level, voice-enabled WMS is an ideal tool for monitoring employee performance. Use it for individual training and review purposes, or analyze aggregate performance to identify areas for improvement in work routines and hiring—to ensure that you're hiring and retaining the right people. Voice enablement will also score points for safety improvement, since it minimizes distractions and allows workers to have both hands free while reaching and climbing. You may discover a reduction in employee turnover, as voice direction can alleviate the stress of decision-making under time pressure and the constant worry about mistakes. This may be especially true for facilities that offer incentives for performance and order accuracy.

5. Control inventory with real-time updates

Customers expect more than accurate and timely order fulfillment—a key performance indicator for many SLAs. They also want more visibility into their inventory in your warehouse. Real-time inventory updates, made possible by a voice-enabled WMS, provide the most accurate input into your customers' ERP systems, so you have real-time visibility into your inventory. Aside from the investment in the belt-worn devices, voice enablement does not require a major investment in software integration and needs little-to-no additional administration. Voice enablement is already a feature of leading warehousing and supply chain management systems. Now it's only a matter of investing in a system that offers "out-of-the-box" voice dialogue integration and putting it to use for your inventory needs.

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