

Darrel Williams, regional director, Northern Europe & South Africa for Vocollect discusses why managing changing business volumes is a top priority for logistics heads and how it can be efficiently accomplished

Rising fuel and raw material prices and the continued uncertainty in the global and domestic economy are just some of the external cost pressures affecting business and the supply chain. However, independent research commissioned by Vocollect suggests that aside from budgetary or other fiscal pressures, the single biggest internal priority as noted by almost 40 per cent of logistics heads, is managing changing business volumes.

Various factors contribute to this; expectation of real time product visibility, instant availability and immediate delivery has contributed to a surge in internet business, with it being the norm rather than exception to demand and receive unparalleled levels of service in order fulfillment. Consequentially, as organisations at all levels seek to stand out from the crowd, stock keeping units (SKUs) change almost daily, either in the form of new product or promotions and traditional seasonal patterns are disappearing in favour of short-term trends. Indeed it seems that new lines are continually launched every day to keep consumers interested – a new gadget is no longer just for Christmas.

With this 'must have now' culture apparent in most fulfillment situations, the supply chain is under increasing pressure to deliver performance to retain business in a highly competitive and fickle market. It is critical that shorter product life-cycles achieve maximum results hence, the importance of managing business volumes. Under-stock a product and you lose a customer, while over stocking could mean wastage, ties up capital and much needed warehouse capacity. Logistics experts need accurate data on current stocking levels to satisfy demand and to accurately set replenishment. In fact, optimising inventory levels was noted as the second top priority for 29 per cent of logistics heads.

Getting optimum 'in-shed' performance, while delivering increased productivity can be achieved through the deployment of voice-technology. By its very nature, voice-directed working instills best practice and optimises individual performance. Voice-directed workers wear a head-set and have hands and eyes free. Each simple instruction from the WMS is provided to a worker only when needed, enabling total focus on the next action, without distraction or delay. Each spoken response is validated to ensure accuracy (the third noted business priority for logistic heads), before the next instruction is delivered. This step by step 'mentoring' of each worker also means workers can be reassigned at any time without the need to train staff on different processes, equipment or methods of working saving time and money and delivering flexibility, essential in delivering high performance in even exceptional circumstances.

Voice directed working delivers the performance and the confidence to manage a dynamic supply chain operation. By deploying Vocollect's voice technology, Brakes, a leading food service supplier, achieved productivity gains of 15 per cent, while another Vocollect customer Holland & Barrett,

Europe's leading retailer of vitamins, minerals and herbal supplements, recorded an accuracy rate of 99.5 per cent and a 75 per cent reduction in the need for agency staff following the implementation of Vocollect voice technology.

Logistic heads needn't be concerned about managing changing business volumes, they just need to fully utilise the resources they have. Voice technology enables this, improving operational visibility across the warehouse, improving flexibility, productivity and accuracy leading to more efficient working and ultimately, a happy workforce and a satisfied customer base.