

Sustaining a Successful Voice Deployment

Leading for Peak Performance

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Executive Overview

Yesterday's tired approaches are simply inadequate for today's world where supply chain organizations are struggling mightily to squeeze as much profit and performance out of their operations as possible. These overwhelming expectations create many challenges – and opportunities – for DC/warehouse leaders. Their ability to inspire and enable their workforces to achieve peak performance gets tested on an hourly basis.

Part of this leadership dynamic is helping workers to understand and embrace the technological changes that come into their work environment. Experience shows that companies receive the greatest payback from their technology investments when they carefully consider the impact these systems will have on the end users – front-line distribution center (DC) and warehouse employees – and plan for potential issues before a technology initiative goes live. These best practices are ideal to employ when implementing a voice system in a DC/warehouse operation.

The stronger the productivity payback voice can deliver, the bigger the benefit to the operation.

As part of Vocollect's ongoing white paper series on best practices for achieving successful voice deployments, this paper summarizes the insights and best practices gained from thousands of implementations worldwide over the past 20 years.

You'll learn ways to most effectively lead your teams through a voice deployment to more quickly realize the many benefits that voice applications provide for your business. Warehouses and DCs across the globe increasingly rely on voice to improve productivity, increase accuracy and reduce operational expenses. Voice is well-established in over 40 developed countries as a strong alternative to labor-intensive technologies like paper-based systems, radio frequency (RF) scanner-based systems and pick-to-light. Here's how it works: Assignments for selection, replenishment, put-away and inventory moves are generated by a warehouse management system and transmitted via a wireless network to a wearable or mounted computer. That device translates the assignment data into verbal commands conveyed through a worker's headset, directing the worker to an aisle or section of the warehouse and a specific slot or pick location. The worker then verifies his or her action by speaking a check digit or quantity.

Voice is the most natural and intuitive of all data entry and order-management technologies, because speech is one of the first skills people learn. However, like any technological innovation, voice systems introduce complexities that organizations must carefully manage. One of the biggest challenges DC/warehouse leaders face is anticipating and addressing employee concerns, which can range from productivity and safety to worries about stress, boredom and isolation. With careful planning, each of these issues can be alleviated.

Addressing Issues - Acknowledge Concerns

Stress is a natural result of the learning process. However, as people gain proficiency with a new tool or task, stress recedes. We have found this to be the case with voice, where hundreds of thousands of warehouse and distribution center employees now use voice every day to improve work. While any new system has a learning curve, workers quickly become comfortable using voice as a work process improvement tool.

Studies have shown that human anxiety escalates when workers know they are being tracked or monitored. Sometimes employees may perceive an increased level of scrutiny that voice will enable. They should be assured that actually, performance is always measured through the warehouse management system (WMS). What is different with a voice system is there is now yet another way to identify who handled what assignments, and how long they took to complete specific tasks.

As with any change effort, companies need to clearly communicate to all stakeholders that the voice deployment is the new way of doing business – not an experiment.

With that said, it is important to clarify that tasks are being tracked, not employee behaviors. Workers need to understand that voice does not change the essential nature of their work; it is merely a different and more effective medium for communicating the steps to get the job done. Sometimes employees may worry that using voice will make their jobs boring or force them to become isolated from coworkers. In the experience of most of our customers, voice actually decreases boredom, while improving speed and accuracy. Most workers will feel more engaged with the job, because they can now interact with the work flow by providing input, making queries or redirecting their work. Because voice is responsive and engaging, workers stay alert.

Contrary to popular belief, using voice does not isolate employees or prevent them from speaking with one another. In fact, voice puts workers in control of their own devices. If they need to speak with someone on the floor, they can simply put the device into sleep mode with a quick voice command. When they're ready to resume work, they can wake it up with another command. These simple voice commands make it easy for employees to communicate among themselves and then return to their assignments.

Like a dedicated personal assistant, the voice system is controlled by employees, providing them with on-time, on-demand access to on-the-job information. They can start, stop and configure the system as needed to work more efficiently and at their own pace.

Addressing Issues - Acknowledge Concerns (continued)

As your employees gain comfort and proficiency with the system, they can speed up the pace and volume of the voice dialogue. While management typically determines the language or languages in which instructions will be provided, workers can determine the language in which they want to speak back and, in many cases, whether they want to hear a male or female voice. For non-native speakers, the ability to hear instructions in their first language gives them equal opportunity to excel, regardless of their English proficiency.

Present the Big Picture

More productive operations grow and flourish; less productive ones lose business. That, of course, is the reason for investing in new performance tools in the first place.

The leadership challenge for voice is in getting employees to see the real win-win performance benefits that voice enables. By the time of the actual deployment, this mindset should be well-established and understood by all.

Equally important, front-line employees need to understand the overarching reasons behind voice, not only from a business perspective (improved productivity, accuracy, and/or safety), but also from an individual user or human perspective. Workers also need to know the game plan for implementation, and what labor and management expectations are for team and individual performance.

It's not unusual for employees to raise issues at the start of a voice deployment. Therefore, organizations should anticipate typical questions and concerns and address them in advance as much as possible. Many initial concerns can be alleviated by emphasizing that the voice system is based on the most natural form of human communication: listening and responding.

Explain to employees that using voice to perform their work is no different than using a cell phone with a Bluetooth earpiece or listening to a navigation system in a car. This will help them see how verbal communication allows them to visually and mentally focus on the task at hand, making the work more efficient, easier and safer.

Involve and Empower

One of the keys to implementing a successful launch is to give people as much ownership of the effort as possible, so they become more empowered and determined to succeed. That requires regular and consistent exchange of information throughout the implementation process. Good communication also can help curtail gossip and rumors, and minimize the chance that employees will develop the wrong set of expectations.

Floor supervisors are a critical link in any voice implementation project. It's imperative that they are fully on board and present a consistent attitude of support on the front line. If they are not unified, employees will notice, and that can derail any change effort. Supervisors should be offered an appropriate management forum to voice their opinions, so that the entire management team can be aware of any issues and objections and work to overcome them. The end goal is to send a consistent message to the workforce.

Companies need to clearly convey the message that voice will make people's daily jobs easier and increase their efficiency.

In addition, long before the deployment goes live, the organization needs to line up enthusiastic employee champions to communicate their support for the project to fellow team members. One strategy is to identify key users in each work group and bring them in early in the planning stages. Make them part of the decision to go with voice, let them have a vote in the system selection process, and involve them in planning and execution. Ask for their ongoing feedback, and try to implement at least some of their ideas.

Armed with information about the system and how it will make their own jobs easier, these lead employees can become evangelists within their teams. As the system is implemented, these key workers also will be among those who work most closely with the system, so they are likely to have the best ideas on how to make the system run at peak performance.

Proper education and training are crucial in helping ensure employees remain engaged and confident. No matter how heavy the workload, front-line employees need adequate time for focused training. The same goes for supervisors, who also must be well-trained on the voice management software. The more comfortable they are, the more ways they will find to innovate and to recognize good performance. They'll also be better prepared and armed with the information they need to identify and implement training for people with less than adequate performance.

Make Performance Pay

Especially in economically uncertain times, maximizing worker and team productivity is of paramount concern to both labor and management. Because of performance improvements through voice, companies often will raise their productivity targets. As this is done, it's important not to overwork employees. Further, wherever possible, consider integrating incentive programs to address the "What's-in-it-for me?" question, to ensure balance and equity on all sides of the worker/management team.

Of course, what motivates one employee won't necessarily motivate another. And what drives one implementation might be different from what drives another one. But everyone – both individually and collectively in a company – has a stake in making the organization as productive as possible so that jobs and incentive plans are maintained. If an employee incentive program is already in place, explain that the voice system will provide an extremely fair measurement of performance. This is a good selling point for labor union leaders, for whom equity in measurement systems is of paramount concern.

One way to engage and motivate employees is to start a team chart of productivity metrics before voice and after voice so that improvements are visible to all. For example, if you track injuries related to order selection, it likely could be a candidate for chart entry in the future. If you can reduce sprains and back injuries thanks to voice, why not point it out as an advantage of the system?

Supervisors also can create team celebrations for improvement built around productivity milestones. Further, if you don't yet have an employee incentive program, now is a good time to consider starting one. Employees will care more about doing a good job when they gain some personal benefit from their extra effort. Such a program provides them a clear reinforcement for a job well done.

Reap the Rewards

Measuring performance is a corporate-driven activity that takes into account many job variables. Standards are typically already in place prior to a voice deployment. Where voice can help is in providing data as one aspect of performance. As productivity and accuracy increase, voice helps management more consistently forecast the workload. Improved forecasting will lead to more accurate staffing levels and a more consistent workforce.

Reap the Rewards (continued)

The potential of voice to deliver a positive return on investment is further magnified through its ability to help protect worker health and safety, while enhancing performance. Anyone who has crossed an aisle while viewing a screen on a handheld device and had a “close call” or even worse, a painful collision, can attest to the value of voice. Voice provides a “hands-free/ eyes-free” approach to DC/warehouse work that is a major improvement over many other types of handheld devices. With voice, employees are more alert and focused on the task at hand and aren’t visually distracted. Moreover, with both hands available, workers are in better position to properly lift and handle materials.

Conclusion

A voice system is a win-win for both the company and the individual worker. Voice makes the job easier for workers to perform their duties, and it makes the organization more competitive. It also can help improve employee morale and job satisfaction, through better and more accurate incentive programs and the ability to recognize top performers.

But even the best work process tools can fail to deliver if companies neglect to address the human factors before, during and after a deployment process. Identifying key barriers and implementing strategies to address them will help maximize long-term value and return on investment. By adopting a strategic, people-focused approach, you’ll optimize the potential benefits that voice offers and gain a critical competitive edge for the future.

About Vocollect

Vocollect, Inc. is the number one provider of voice solutions for mobile workers worldwide, helping customers achieve a higher level of business performance through voice. Every day Vocollect enables over 250,000 workers worldwide to distribute more than \$2 billion dollars' worth of goods from distribution centers and warehouses to customer locations. A global team of over 2,000 supply chain reseller and channel partner experts supports Vocollect Voice offerings in 55 countries and in 26 languages. Vocollect's VoiceWorld Suite integrates with all major WMS and ERP systems, including SAP, and supports the industry's leading mobile device solutions. For more information, visit www.vocollect.com.



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