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status report | **Material Handling**

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U.S. Foodservice Voices a Positive Opinion

There is a classic example of how voice technology can work in a variety of areas within a food DC, it would have to be Columbia, MD-based U.S. Foodservice, one of the largest broad-line foodservice distributors in the United States. With more than 300,000 customers, including restaurants, healthcare facilities, schools and lodging establishments, U.S. Foodservice markets and distributes more than 43,000 national, private label and signature brand items.

The company operates more than 100 DCs and began using voice technology in 2000 with a pilot project to find a hands-free application for selection because the company felt that barcoding affected its productivity. "When a selector needs to stop what he's doing to work a scanner, it takes away from productivity," says Jack Granahan, director of voice deployment at the company.

Around the same time that U.S. Foodservice began testing voice in its DCs, it acquired PYA/Monarch, which was also in the midst of a voice pilot. After comparing results in the spring of 2001, U.S. Foodservice determines that the best course of action would be to work directly with voice technology provider Voxware rather than through a third-party provider.

Over the course of the original six-month pilot, U.S. Foodservice realized a 70 percent reduction in selection errors over its baseline. It also saw a 50 percent reduction in shorts on delivery. "Our selectors have to confirm what they have picked with the voice technology, which ensures the right product makes it to the right pallet," says Granahan. "With fewer shorts, we also had fewer returns, which cuts down on administrative costs."

There were also labor savings. "Because our staff could be refocused on the products, we could dedicate more time to our customers, rather than chasing down errors," says Granahan. "That allowed us to re-allocate our staff to more productive tasks."

The result was a 14 percent improvement in productivity. The pilot provided successful and U.S. Foodservice began deploying voice technology in additional DCs.

Two years after rolling out voice technology in the picking area the several of its DCs, U.S. Foodservice began deploying the technology in replenishment. "We keyed in on replenishment because it supported picking," Granahan explains.

If selectors reach a slot and find it empty, a high –priority replenishment task is sent to the forklift operator. Once the slot is replenished, the selector is sent back to the slot to complete the pick task. The voice units are also set up to interface with existing RF devices that were mounted on forklift trucks. That way, if a product is short the information can be communicated back and forth between the selector and the forklift operator.

By adding voice to the replenishment task, Granahan says that the company has been able to reduce the number of people needed to run "shorts" picking. In addition, "our inventory and slots have become much more accurate, due to real-time updates to the inventory" he says. "These updates allow reserve slots to be available immediately for inbound product."

So far, 24 of the company's DCs have deployed voice technology with about two sites per month scheduled to come on board throughout the coming year. In three of those sites, barcoding has been replaced entirely. Other sites will likely follow suit.

Granahan says that the entire company is pleased with the technology, from the executives right down to the actual users. "The feedback we get from the employees is that it's one of the quickest and easiest transitions they've experienced," he says. "It allows the user to focus on productivity because it directs them to the correct locations within the DC."

Long-range plans call for the company to add a news bulletin and a quick place discussion forum so that employees can post questions, receive updates on procedures and product news, and view analysis per site. Clearly, voice technology has found a home at U.S. Foodservice.