

A Page Out of the Voice Playbook

We've more than doubled our efficiency and productivity in the picking area.

Dave Schaeffer
VP, Distributions and Fulfillment
Simon & Schuster

By the Numbers

150

million units shipped annually

100

% improvement in pick rates

50

temporary positions eliminated

Quick Facts

Objectives

- Increase productivity
- Raise accuracy rates
- Eliminate non-value added processes

Solutions

- Voxware-powered voice solution, delivered by AL Systems
- Integration with AL Systems DynaPro WCS
- 100 order selectors
- Manhattan Associates WMS
- Honeywell HX3 voice-only wearable computers with ring scanners

Business Value

- ROI achieved in under 1 year
- Consolidated two warehouses into one
- Eliminated need for temp staff
- Productivity and efficiency more than doubled
- 600,000 units shipped per day

Simon & Schuster, a division of CBS, ships 150 million books annually to eager readers in the consumer market. The distribution operation has to keep on its toes. “Getting a product through the building and out the door accurately and quickly is the whole key to the business,” said Dave Schaeffer, VP, Distributions and Fulfillment at Simon & Schuster. When something is selling, it’s selling, and when it’s not selling, life is over, so we have to meet a very high standard of excellence.”

Order picking is at the crux of the distribution operation, and today it relies on a voice recognition system powered by Voxware, which was implemented by Voxware partner AL Systems. Some 225 employees work in Simon & Schuster’s Riverside, NJ warehouse to get books to customers, who include both brick and mortar stores and online retailers.

“We are always surveying the industry to find out how we can do things better,” said Schaeffer. “We see voice technology being adopted by more publishers, so we focused on the best way to implement it at Riverside. The results that we’ve realized have surpassed our goals.”

Pick and Pass

Voice pickers use a “bucket brigade,” or pick-and-pass workflow. Workers use voice commands to build a “train” of cartons, pick individual books, and place them into specific cartons as directed by the voice system. Workers pass their trains onwards to the next worker. With voice, they can work on as many as 10 cartons at a time, which has doubled productivity in the picking area.

Workers use HX3 rugged wearable computers from LXE, along with integrated ring scanners. Scanning is integrated into the pick and pass voice workflow in logical places – to verify which carton

a specific book is being placed into, and also as an “on demand” verification of a book’s ISBN number at the pick face, which ensures that the right volume is being selected from shelves that contain many different titles. The worker simply says “verify ISBN” and the voice system accepts a scan from the book’s cover, which is cross-checked to the expected title before the book is placed into a carton.

Warehouse Consolidation and Elimination of Temps

Simon & Schuster did have two facilities, but the voice project produced such good results that they were able to consolidate operations in Riverside, thus eliminating a major operating cost element.

Management is now better able to forecast work against deadlines, knowing they can rely upon high pick rates from the voice system. “Voice has taken the guesswork out of our daily planning – when we have to ship a certain volume, we know how to organize to get it done, because our performance is now at a predictable level,” says Pat Kelman, Director of Operations at Simon & Schuster.

During peak periods, Simon & Schuster used to hire as many as 50 temporary workers to help with the higher picking volumes. Predictably, this was a management challenge and had the potential to impact accuracy. But productivity with the voice system has been so strong that site management has been able to eliminate 50 temp positions – thus keeping quality high while saving additional cost.

“We hit ROI in less than one year, which is a phenomenal success, and the speed and efficiency we’ve gained with voice was second to none,” said Schaeffer.