# Using voice technology to optimize warehouse worker performance

KÖRBER

Today's warehouse is facing immense pressure from all sides. Customer needs are rising, shipping windows are shrinking, and competition is pushing many operations to the edge of their capabilities. Combine all of these factors, and the stress all falls on one group: your workers. They need to be more productive. More accurate. More careful with your product. You need more support from every front to keep your warehouse in the black. With this massive increase in expectations, something needs to be done to help your workers rise to the challenge. That something is voice-directed work.

# Contents

# About voice

Voice-directed work for the warehouse was originally created with the idea of freeing up the hands and eyes of workers. Rather than having a piece of paper or a RF scanner to use, workers are fed information from your warehouse management system (WMS) through a headset, allowing them to move freely through the warehouse.

**The voice system works by call and response. The voice system tells your worker where to go, and the worker responds with a confirmation of their location. The voice system tells your worker what item to pick, and the worker confirms they have the right item. Finally, the voice system tells your worker the quantity to pick, and the worker confirms they have picked that quantity.**

The entire process is restrictive, as it requires workers to pay attention at all times and follow the exact instructions they are provided. However, it also enables them to reach their best possible performance and, in turn, meet the demands you are asking of them.

## Navigating the warehouse

When a worker is able to keep their hands free and eyes up, moving through the warehouse becomes a much safer and faster process. They are able to see and react to hazards, like forklifts and carts, while being directed to walk the optimal path through the warehouse for their specific orders.

Additionally, the orders from the voice system require the worker to move quickly to the next location, and requires focus to follow the directions. This removes the ability for workers to stop and chat on the floor, wasting time and ultimately slowing down other processes.

**"Once we implemented voice, the associates themselves were the ones telling us they were faster. They said 'Voice forces us to focus. As you walk up and down the aisles, you can't stop and talk to the people around you. You have to continue moving and listen to what the headset is telling you.'".**

–Scott Campbell, Distribution Center General Manger, Talbots

## Productivity

One of the main benefits that is often showcased with a voice solution is the increase in productivity. Although the ease of navigation with voice plays a large part in this, it is also related to the hands-free, eyes-free nature of voice.

Without having to hold a scanner or clipboard, workers are able to move through processes with ease. Although picking up and putting down scanners or paper may seem like a small move, when you add up the time spent among all your workers over a week, month, or year, you are losing valuable time. Voice completely removes those actions, enabling your workers to move quickly and efficiently through your processes.

**"Our order fillers are working about 25% faster than they were without the devices. In fact, on the very first time using the devices every one of our order fillers worked faster than they did with the paper system."**

–Paul Courchene, Logistics Core Team Leader, Patterson Companies

## Accuracy

In addition to aiding in productivity, the hands-free and eyes-free nature of voice also lends itself to large increases in accuracy. From the beginning of the process to the end, workers are able to keep their attention on the item they are to be picking, replenishing, cycle counting, etc., ensuring no mistakes are made. There are no screens to look at, or papers to shuffle with and set down, so the risk of workers going to the correct location and getting distracted are minimal.

**"Accuracy was the one area where we have experienced the biggest improvement. Before voice, pick errors were costly to correct and were turning into real customer service issues at our retail stores. With voice, pick errors are almost non-existent."**

–Lothar Bruers, Manager for Systems and Training, London Drugs

## Training time

One of the biggest issues with training on traditional methods lies in the amount of time it takes to get new employees up to the standards you expect of your workers. For many operations, this process can take up to a month, costing you time and money.

Training your workers on voice is a two-part process: training the voice template and learning the warehouse. Training the voice template typically takes 15-20 minutes, and enables the voice system to recognize the unique tone, accents, and dialects of the user while also training the user on the call and response style of the voice system. After that is complete, new users can be turned loose on the warehouse to learn the layout while being guided by the voice system. Once the workers are comfortable in the warehouse and know how to navigate, they are considered fully trained.

**"Before voice, it took more than a week. We had new workers spend time shadowing our more experienced workers to learn what to do, where to get the paper and tickets, where things were located, and how to use the RF guns. It was inefficient at best. Now that we have voice, we can confidently train workers and turn them loose in the warehouse with an hour of training."**

–Demetrius Smith, DC Manager and Head of Operations, Nilfisk

## Compensation and bonuses

For many organizations, compensation and bonuses are seen as a way to encourage workers to do their best, or to meet benchmarks set by the company to help meet goals. Voice not only aids your workers in increasing their output, but it also allows you to better track their performance.

The voice software tracks productivity and accuracy on an individual level, allowing you to see the statistics of any worker at any given time. This makes it easier to provide compensation based on individual skill, and also allows you to coach or correct any individual issues workers may be having.

A real life example of this lies with Harbor Wholesale, a grocery and convenience store distributor that has been using voice for more than a decade. Harbor utilizes a productivity-based compensation program where pickers are docked for errors or mispicks. This compensation program has pushed workers to their peak performance, with Harbor's pickers ranging from 1,400 to 1,900 picks per hour in certain areas of the warehouse.

**"Voice makes our pickers more accurate, so they are able to take advantage of our compensation program. We don't charge employees for errors if they are 1 in 5,000 or better. We just want them to focus and be rewarded for doing their best work."**

–Noah Skelton, PM Warehouse Manager and Technical Operations Specialist, Harbor Wholesale

## Problem solving

With voice, your workers are able to problem solve on the go- often without the help of a manager. The voice system features a variety of options on a verbal help menu, allowing workers to report damaged items, inventory shorts, and other issues directly into your mission critical systems. For many issues, like inventory shorts, the voice software can trigger other workers to address the issue by adding tasks onto their workflow. By enabling the workers on the floor to address these issues themselves, your managers are able to focus on their own jobs and tasks that actually require their attention.

**"The voice system allows our workers to troubleshoot on the go, which has made a real impact. We have seen a huge difference in the amount of time our managers are able to spend actually doing their jobs, rather than running around and putting out fires. They have been able to re-allocate their time, and it has been really beneficial for the company."**

–Aaron Chrismas, Director of Strategy and Technology, ContainerWorld

## Worker re-utilization

Although voice was originally created as a picking application, there are now more than two dozen different workflows that can be voice enabled. By adding voice to additional parts of the warehouse, your workers can perform multiple functions at once. Not only does this reduce labor costs, as fewer workers can perform the same amount of work, but it also enables your workers to learn new job functions and become more useful if they have to cover for other employees.

**"We still have dedicated cycle counters, but we now utilize our pickers as well. If they arrive at a location that has inventory below a set threshold, the voice system will ask them to confirm the number of items available. It's really helped us stay on top of inventory control."**

–Justin Sullivan, Manager of Supply Chain Systems, LifeWay Christian Resources

# Final thoughts

Your workers are the driving force in your warehouse, and investing in them could be the key to reaching your goals and sustaining long term growth. Voice will enable your workers to work at their highest potential, elevating your warehouse to its peak performance.

**For more information**
To learn more about voice technology visit:
**koerber-supplychain.com**

KÖRBER