

Corporate Express: Preparing the World for Business

Corporate Express is the world's largest business-to-business supplier of office and computer products: everything from Post-it® notes to imaging and computer graphics supplies to fine furniture. Providing customers of all types and sizes with these essentials adds up to \$5 billion in annual sales in North America alone — and a continuing demand for a distribution system that's second to none. To Corporate Express, that means continually pursuing new and better technologies, and using them in innovative ways. A prime example: voice-directed systems from Vocollect.

The Challenge:

100,000 Orders - Overnight

Like its customers, which include approximately 90 percent of the *Fortune 500*, Corporate Express lives in a fast-paced, demanding world. Office products are essential business purchases: the things that employees need to get the job done every day. And that translates into “immediately if not sooner” delivery required for virtually every order placed.

For Corporate Express, multiply that demand by 100,000: the number of orders the company receives from customers throughout North America every work day.

And multiply again by the number of items per order. The grand total: a daily sales volume of \$16 million, requiring a nationwide system of distribution centers, spanning more than 6 million square feet and working 24 hours a day.

“We showcase our Vocollect voice system every chance we get. Once customers see it in action, they understand it – and the commitment we’ve made to superior service.”

Tim Beauchamp

Senior Vice President
Distribution Operations
Corporate Express



Yet, the challenge for Corporate Express is not “just” filling 100,000 orders a day; it’s filling 100,000 orders that typically arrive late in the work day, and shipping them out to customers the next morning! Online orders, which come in at all hours through E-Way®, Corporate Express’ highly advanced e-commerce solution, have grown to approximately 35 percent of sales — and continue to climb sharply.

Of course, to fill customer orders that range from one item to a major shipment, Corporate Express is actually picking hundreds of thousands of items every day. What’s more, over 85 percent of its line items are less-than-a-case quantity; workers are often picking a single box or even a single piece. Still, even one wrong or missing item is something that customers will notice — and remember.

Voice Results

Application

- Picking, largely less-than-case

Objectives

- Improved accuracy and productivity
- System integration
- Corporation-wide scalability

Installation

- 300+ Talkman computers at 22 facilities across the U.S.
- Internally developed and managed WMS
- Installed RF backbone
- Integrated with wearable scanners

Results

- Three-sigma accuracy
- Productivity jump of 50-60%

ROI

- Conservative estimate:
Payback in less than 1 year

Future Improvements

- Additional applications for voice
- Installations in other geographies

"We've installed our systems two at a time, in less than three weeks. The third week is 'comfort time'; the sites are essentially on their own in two."

Jeff Landsbach

Manager

Distribution System Development
Corporate Express

The Solution: Winning Combinations

The infrastructure at Corporate Express includes a highly customized warehouse management system (WMS) that interfaces with multiple pieces of material-handling equipment and conveyor/delivery systems. It also includes advanced front-office applications, an established radio frequency backbone, scanning and pick-to-light systems.

In spring 2002, Corporate Express added voice technology, installing Talkman® systems in Boston and in a model facility in Secaucus, NJ. Developed and implemented by Vocollect, Talkman uses speech recognition and synthesis to translate data into speech — and back again. Workers talk to the WMS, wearing a headset and wireless Talkman computer.

Siemens Dematic, a Vocollect Partner, integrated the voice system into piece-picking applications, as well as Siemens RapidRoute conveyorsortation system to provide fast, accurate routing of customer orders to correct pick zones.

The installation also integrated voice and scanning technologies. Order selectors at Corporate Express wear the Talkman computer on a belt and a scanner that fits like a glove.

As they move through their assignments, workers verify their location by speaking a set of check digits from a rack label or scanning the location bar code and/or UPC. The Talkman system will not relay pick information until the operator has confirmed that he is at the correct location; it's a built-in check to ensure accuracy each and every time.

By mid-year, Corporate Express turned up the volume, installing two additional Vocollect systems at a time, in a period of three weeks or less. The total: 22 sites up and running by the end of 2002.

The Result: Measurable Success

Corporate Express reports that key operational measures have not only improved, but improved dramatically, at every Talkman-installed site.

Order accuracy, always a crucial metric, has been consistently near-perfect, moving Corporate Express into an elite tier of companies operating in the six-sigma range. Mistakes are so rare they're three standard deviations from the norm.

What's more, productivity is up a phenomenal 50-60 percent. The jump in productivity comes from taking advantage of both voice and scanning technologies — a powerful combination — plus ready acceptance by employees.

Increased accuracy and productivity boost throughput, which for a high-volume business like Corporate Express, is the key to being more competitive — and ultimately, more successful. Another top-line benefit: solid information for management, based on real-time data and the increased visibility that it provides into operations.

In addition, Corporate Express has found that voice is highly flexible and scalable, two qualities that are extremely important to a business that encompasses different types of picking and varying levels of activity. Talkman enables the company to balance operational demands, and offers clear advantages over other technologies in terms of set-up, communications and maintenance.

The bottom line is that Talkman has improved operations at Corporate Express and, in turn, overall business performance. It has also served to differentiate the company, testifying to its relentless search for new and better ways to serve customers. 🚀



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Vocollect. Voice-Directed Distribution.

Since pioneering voice recognition for industry in 1987, Vocollect has set the standard for warehouses and other business settings. Together, its market-leading Talkman® wearable mobile computer and integrated software suite cut operating costs by eliminating errors and improving worker productivity shift after shift.

Leading WMS providers, material handling integrators and specialty voice solution providers around the world choose the performance and reliability of Vocollect to deliver integrated voice-directed distribution solutions. And every day, over 60,000 workers around the globe rely on Vocollect's integrated voice solution to help improve their operations.