

Nisa Today's: future proofing warehousing processes

480 members operating more than 6,000 stores make up the Nisa retail business, including Budgens, Costcutter and Jacksons.

The rapidly expanding Nisa Today's group runs a central distribution service (CDS) for member stores, with ambient and licensed products handled out of three warehouses in Scunthorpe and chilled and frozen foods from a modern, dual temperature facility in Stoke-on-Trent.

As the UK's largest buying group for independent retailers and wholesalers, Nisa-Today's main objectives are to negotiate the lowest possible cost price for goods and to ensure the most efficient supply chain possible for its members. To achieve these, the group recently reviewed IT-based processes in the warehouse. This involved the deployment of voice-directed systems to deliver unmatched productivity and accuracy throughout warehousing processes.

The Challenge:

to enable supply chain efficiency
for member companies

Nisa-Today's typically has up to 100 concurrent pickers on the warehouse floor at any time, during their early, late, night and weekend shifts. For their picking operations, warehouse operators would use paper label lists, returning to collect a new list after completing each pick assignment. To improve workers' productivity, in 2003 the group opted to bypass leading RF scanning-based picking technologies in favour of a cutting-edge, yet well-proven voice-recognition system, for maximum future proofing. After a series of phased trials Vocollect's Talkman voice-directed distribution system was gradually introduced for 360 pickers across five shifts.

"The introduction of voice has helped us to compete effectively in a challenging marketplace, while also enhancing the working environment for our employees."

Stephen Hunter
Managing Director, Logistics
Nisa Today's



The Solution:

voice technology for order pickers

Vocollect's Talkman System was integrated seamlessly with the existing warehouse management system SCM/400 supplied by AquiTec. UK Voice specialist VoiteQ provided the middleware for integrating the two systems with the minimum of disruption to established working processes. The group of 'Super Users', who were involved with the voice initiative from the onset, were responsible for training the remaining picking staff, with trainees undergoing a two-week induction period. Super Users were issued with special listening kits enabling them to hear the instructions pickers were receiving and the responses they were feeding back. "The whole training process was incredibly easy; in some ways it was easier than the procedures we were replacing, as the only change for business users is that they communicate with the system using the most natural form of communication they know - speech," said Stephen Hunter. Nisa-Today's chose to run existing Label Pick procedures in parallel with the voice pick application initially, enabling roll out as quickly or as slowly as the business dictated. Hunter explained, "We used a Reference-SRF card, which indicated to the user whether to use voice, labels or both, for any given assignment. Running them simultaneously guaranteed a risk-free implementation for us, allowing a gradual increase in the number of voice pickers as they increased confidence through their training." One year on, with the migration to voice picking now complete, Nisa-Today's is now using Talkman voice-directed technology for every picking task. It has retained the use of barcodes as check digits for added contingency with high value items such as cigarettes, however the benefits of voice are already shining through.

Voice results

Objectives

- Minimisation of order picking errors
- Increased productivity
- Enhanced health & safety
- Improved supply chain efficiency

Application

- Order picking of ambient, BWS and high value goods

Installation

- Warehouse management system AqiTec SCM400
- 100 Talkman™ T2 terminals
- Radio network in accordance with IEEE 802.11b standard

Results

- Accuracy increased to 99.8%
- Anticipated productivity increase of 10%

Future improvements

- Expansion of voice picking to chilled and frozen goods

The Result:

increased productivity, accuracy and safety

Nisa-Today's envisages a ten percent overall increase in warehouse productivity and an ROI of approximately 12 to 18 months from its voice system. Often lists and handheld devices are responsible for delays through loss of momentum, as users repeatedly put down their instructions to pick and load a product. As pickers are now able to work "Hands-free, Eyes-free™" the general pace is increased, resulting in greater productivity. Nisa-Today's has reported a dramatic rise in pick accuracy to 99.8 percent with the new voice system; up 50 percent on previous picking methods. Because it will not allow users to progress onto the next pick until it is satisfied with the status of the current pick, it is virtually impossible to make a mistake. This method eliminates the occurrence of mis-keying that is common with handheld terminal methods and therefore also saves on delivery shortages or over-picks that take time to discover and are costly to rectify. As safety was also a specific concern for Nisa Today's, one of the key factors in its decision to choose a voice-based solution was that it would enable users to focus on the task in hand, without constantly having to look down at a piece of paper or read a display on a hand held terminal.

For a large, high-speed operation such as theirs, where a large number of people and pieces of machinery occupy the warehouse floor at all times, this was deemed critical to the safety of staff. As a result of the impact that the voice-directed system has had on the fluidity of the supply chain and consequent profitability of the business - not to mention the morale of warehouse employees, who enjoy using the new system - voice will remain a preferred solution for future development. "Competing effectively in such a challenging marketplace is always a primary focus for us. We are therefore committed to identifying new ways to inject extra efficiency into the supply chain," stated Stephen Hunter. "The introduction of voice recognition technology has helped us to achieve this, whilst also enhancing the working environment for our employees." ✍

**VOICE-DIRECTED
WAREHOUSE OPERATIONS:
AN INTEGRAL FACTOR IN
NISA TODAY'S CONTINUED
SUCCESS IN COMPETING
WITH THE MULTIPLE SECTOR.**

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Vocollect. Voice-Directed Distribution.

Since pioneering voice recognition for industrial applications in 1987, Vocollect has set the standard for voice-directed distribution systems for warehouse and industrial operations, and today is the world's leading provider of voice integrated solutions.

Together, its market-leading Talkman wearable mobile systems and its integrated software suite cut operating costs by eliminating errors and improving worker productivity and safety shift after shift, with a payback in less than 12 months. 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 80,000 workers around the globe rely on Vocollect's integrated voice solution to help improve their companies operations and profitability.

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