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IF&P foods reliably tracks dates for produce orders with mobile computing

Wholesaler trades paper pick lists for barcode scanning technology and ensures that perishable product received first into its distribution centers is also the first to be shipped out. IF&P Foods anticipates further productivity benefits by migrating all its devices to Zebra Android shortly.

Situation/challenge

IF&P Foods keeps its regional retail grocery and foodservice customers supplied with fresh produce. The company needs to use a consistent first in, first out (FIFO) inventorying method to prevent expiration of older product before it is shipped out of its distribution centers. The use of paper pick lists made tracking date-sensitive product lots difficult, however. As a result, order fulfillment errors were unacceptably high.

Solution

IF&P Foods implemented an enterprise resource planning (ERP) and warehouse management system (WMS) and utilized Zebra handheld and wearable mobile computers and label printers. These investments are components of a strategy that uses barcode scanning technology to make more efficient and accurate tracking of product possible.

Result

As a result of its ERP/WMS and mobile computer investments, IF&P Foods has dramatically increased picking productivity and order accuracy. And the company isn't finished boosting productivity. It plans to migrate its mobile computers to Android and use Zebra's Mobility DNA software suite, including Device Tracker, PowerPrecision+ and Push-to-Talk, to further enhance its order fulfillment performance.

SUMMARY

Customer
IF&P Foods
Indianapolis, IN

Industry
Wholesale produce

ERP / WMS
Produce Pro Software™

Challenge
Use of paper pick lists failed to maintain first in, first-out (FIFO) inventorying of perishables in quick-turn warehouse environment.

Solution
Zebra® MC3300 mobile computers
Zebra® WT-6000 Wearable Computer with Android™ OS
Zebra® RS6000 Ring Scanner

Results
- 90% fewer picking errors
- 20% picking efficiency improvement
- Accelerated onboarding of new acquisitions

Adopting Zebra Android tools to build on accuracy and efficiency gains

Rapid turnover of perishable inventory makes achieving highly accurate order fulfillment enough of a challenge in the wholesale produce business. For a wholesaler that is growing rapidly by acquisition and inheriting legacy order picking systems, it's even more daunting.

Indianapolis-based IF&P Foods, a diversified produce wholesaler, has enjoyed order accuracy gains of 90% by investing in mobile picking solutions and replacing paper-based pick lists starting in the late 2000s, according to Eric Richardson, vice president of information technology. Such improvements will be critical as the company expects to continue making acquisitions, implement operational efficiencies and rapidly increase its revenues in the next few years. IF&P Foods already owns a portfolio of brands that collectively serve retail grocery and foodservice customers from six main regional distribution centers, including Piazza Produce and Indianapolis Fruit Company.

Richardson points out that the company's adoption of an enterprise resource planning (ERP) and warehouse management system (WMS) was the first step in improving upon paper-based picking. From there, IF&P Foods has worked with a Zebra Technologies partner for more than 10 years to increase the efficiency and accuracy of its picking processes with handheld followed by wearable mobile technology. In early 2019, the company began planning its next performance leap by equipping its workers with Zebra Android devices and features that suit the unique demands of warehouse work. The benefits of Android will grow exponentially as IF&P Foods expands with each new acquisition.

Trading paper for pixels

Improved picking accuracy was the company's top priority in adopting Produce Pro™ as its ERP and WMS platform and Zebra mobile computers, replacing paper pick lists. To increase the automation level of its picking processes, IF&P Foods also began using Windows®-compatible Zebra mobile computers with push-button interfaces. The company then upgraded its mobile computer form factor to wearables with WT4100 wrist-mounted Windows units to gain greater picking efficiency. Later, it began replacing the WT4100s with WT6000 Android wearables.

Because a typical IF&P Foods distribution center turns over its inventory in about two days, using the first in, first-out (FIFO) inventorying method is critical, Richardson points out. When using paper pick lists, he says, workers often picked items with a newer rather than older product lot because they could not instantly verify

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date-ordered product lot information. Since the company adopted its ERP and equipped its warehouse workers with barcode label printers, mobile computers and barcode printing and scanning capability, tracking product at the lot level is possible. That enables management of product outflows in the correct order. Workers locate the correct pallets with paper lists, but paper pick lists are a thing of the past.

"We saw some really significant improvements in our fulfillment operation error rates once we started bringing in this technology," Richardson says. "We had somewhere around a 90% reduction in errors that were operationally driven during the fulfillment process." IF&P Foods used to run periodic lot error reports typically comprising about 80 pages when it attempted paper-based inventory tracking. Now those reports typically are less than a page long and the errors are due to rare manual data entry, not barcode scanning.

IF&P Foods' product line has grown from about 8,000 to about 15,000 items in recent years, making digitization of its distribution center operations essential, Richardson contends. "There's no way to control that madness without automation and no way for us to measure our production levels, either," he says, adding that productivity has increased by about 20% over paper-based tracking. "Picking at a certain pace is important, but picking accurately is more important because if we're running a truck four hours away and we give a client the wrong product or have no product at all, that's a massive hit to our profit margin. Productivity, accuracy and visibility are three huge gains from using the technology."

Anticipated productivity increases

In early 2019, with the end of Windows mobile operating system extended support approaching, IF&P Foods planned to maintain the operating continuity of its mobile devices by migrating them to the Zebra Android OS. The company had already migrated some devices with Windows-to-Android terminal emulation by that time.

Richardson was looking forward to using three tools in Zebra's Mobility DNA software suite—Device Tracker, PowerPrecision+ and Push-to-Talk—to further improve picking accuracy and productivity.

- He says his team occasionally takes device inventory and in a recent count, 20 devices were missing. Sometimes a worker stashes a favorite device in a location where they can find it the next day. He expects Device Tracker to drastically reduce device shrinkage.

- Richardson is confident that PowerPrecision+ battery analytics will reduce enterprise-wide device downtime. The system can show a worker who might think his device will have enough power for an entire shift evidence to the contrary, if it wasn't fully charged or the life of the battery is at its end.

- "The Push-to-Talk concept will be really handy for communicating with our employees," he adds. "Sometimes, as they're picking, they have questions. If they have an easy way to communicate with the dock office, that will result in fewer errors."

Richardson also expects the transition to the Android OS to support IF&P Foods' acquisition strategy. "Usually, as we acquire new companies, our first move is to set up the WMS environment so we can gain visibility into case movements," he says. "Without Android, we would have no visibility of where we are in production, so it is definitely a requirement at this point."

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