



Back to basics

Stewart Arbuckle,
Managing Director, LOC8

FOR MANY LOGISTICIANS, nirvana may be considered as automation in the world of efficient warehouses. How, I ask, can a more cost effective nirvana be achieved without automation?

Given the proper time commitment for planning, selection of vendors, manufacturing, through to implementation, automation can work very well and offer a short to medium term payback. But I would also argue that there are many retro fit possibilities within existing racking and operational areas that still offer the ultimate in flexibility and picking benefits. I believe it can be easier and quicker to go this way, as adaptations within existing systems are relatively straightforward with minimal need for downtime or maintenance.

My intention is not to show automation as being secondary, as it is certainly not.

When done properly, automaton can reap huge benefits for a business. My point here is that a great deal of upside benefits can be had by making the most of your existing system without using automation.

Thoughts to consider before jumping into automation include:

- How much room for improvement is there latent in my existing facility?
- When was the last time I evaluated the efficiency of my system in a measured way?
- How much space can I free up?
- How limited is my budget?
- How much pressure am I under to improve and save?

What can be done? The fundamental approach is to be clear on the objectives that best benefit your operation and to focus on how these areas can be improved. For example, if your objective is to case pick more, you can look at creating pedestrian pick level walkways within sections of your racking. You can place pallets for convenient picking, or totes and/or cartons themselves in carton live storage lanes. Here pickers can do their job in a dedicated area far more effectively. Although some pick trolleys may suffice, adding a gravity or powered belt conveyor to each level of the warehouse may speed up the process even more. This improvement is made using the existing racking, within the same floor space and with minimum disruption.

A warehouse management system will always dictate best practice, but perhaps you can add voice picking technology or wireless pick-to-light systems. Now you have a very clever pick environment that will get the most out of your staff. Both of these methods mean that staff skill levels need not be so high, as the system either guides them with voice commands or a path of lights.

An objective might be to value add, co-pack, stretch wrap, box and seal. This can be done through an efficiently laid out co-pack area that can be adjacent to or within the rack environment itself, or on a cleverly placed mezzanine.

Another objective might be to create more floor space. If this is the case, then look to move up, not out! In this case, releasing dead or unused valuable headroom by installing a mezzanine floor is often the best option. The additional space can be used for offices as well as increased storage and production space.

In summary, a huge range of retro fit or hybrid solutions can bring many efficiencies to an existing operation, and be more economical, easier and quicker to implement than automation. However, once volumes become excessive, automation becomes more of a requirement, particularly if main drivers such as staff costs, utility costs and land costs are increasing. But, in the meantime, be innovative and creative from within and you may be surprised at how many improvements can be had.