



Making Technology Pay!

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An overhead or an asset?

Over the past two years, the fresh produce industry has continued to invest large sums in plant and equipment in an attempt to meet the ever increasing demands of its customer base. The aim of these investments is invariably to increase capacity and quality while improving overall efficiency. Providing the reasons for making these investments come to fruition i.e. winning a new client contract or increased capacity to cope with a new line for an existing customer, the return on investment is easily measurable.

Few fresh produce companies however have taken the same view on information technology in the past. Despite having great sourcing, growing and packing facilities, organisations have made do with inadequate IT systems that failed to meet the demands of the business. Typically, these have consisted of a variety of manual and electronic systems with information held in disparate places. These islands of data were a major inhibitor in enabling the companies to realise their potential in an increasingly competitive sector.

Currently, the tide appears to be turning with many fresh produce companies taking a critical look at how they can refine their internal processes to operate more efficiently. The driver for this change is the downward pressure on margins coupled with increased quality and delivery demands of the supermarkets. This is bringing their IT solutions under the microscope and many are found wanting. The realisation is dawning that if you do not have an agile system that precisely meets the changing needs of the business, the IT solution becomes an expensive overhead.

Dr. Nick Turnbull, Technical Director of Branston Limited agrees. Branston are one of the UK's leading suppliers of potatoes to the supermarkets. "A year ago, we were in exactly that position. We had made massive investments in our production line facilities. These provided us with state of the art sorting and packing technologies that improved the efficiency of our production out of all recognition. However, we had a variety of IT systems in place that meant that our administrative procedures were holding us back. A long hard look at what we were doing revealed that we were duplicating information in various places and we were very reliant on the knowledge in people's heads".

"Investing in a modern centralised business management system has made a very significant difference to the company. Our new IT system already complements the sophisticated production facilities and our plan is to integrate these into a single enterprise wide solution during this year. We have already removed most of the data duplication and we now rely on the business management system to manage the entire sales and purchase order processing needs of the business. As a result, we now have instant visibility of product and customer data that was impossible in the past. The new IT solution is already proving to be a major aid in our quest to realise the future commercial potential of the business".



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Branston is just one example of where modern totally integrated solution has transformed disparate IT systems from what was becoming an expensive overhead into a company asset. Many others are emerging as the new applications sweep through the fresh produce sector. So how do modern solutions help a business to compete and why can they make a difference? The answer is that over the last three years, recently developed mid range business management systems have significantly evolved both in terms of functionality and integration. This is in response to customer demands for more accurate and timely information delivered by powerful but easy to use applications.

However, this is not the whole story. The evolution of the new mid range business management systems has been accompanied by a move towards industry specialisation. Customers are now demanding evidence of specialist sector expertise ideally in packaged format. The combination of a modern business management system platform combined with specialist industry functionality represents a low risk option in an area that has been fraught with difficulties in the past.

These can make a significant difference by providing IT functionality which is based on best operational practices across a range of similar businesses. This also helps by reducing the deployment timescale while achieving the benefits of centralisation of all information i.e. a single version of the truth. Once in place, administration costs can be reduced by elimination of data duplication, stock can be monitored and traced, QC information can be made visible and management information extracted as events unfold.

In this dynamic environment, a well implemented IT solution can provide a company with the management controls and commercial agility to meet the ever increasing demands of their customers. Rather than being an expensive overhead, an IT solution that facilitates this provides the business with a competitive advantage using real time information as a major differentiator. It therefore becomes an invaluable aid in the battle for market share.

The last word goes to Nick Turnbull. "Over the last year, our turnover has increased by 30% and we managed this growth without a significant increase in our administrative headcount. This would have been impossible without our new IT solution. It has proved to be a real asset to the business and I cannot imagine how we managed without it in the past"

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