

THE IMPORTANCE OF IT IN PRODUCE QUALITY CONTROL PROCEDURES

This month, Richard Jones of Anglia Business Solutions outlines how successfully deployed mobile and communications technology is vital to quality control (QC) procedures in the produce industry

THESE DAYS, it is not enough to ensure that the shelves of the supermarkets you supply are filled with goods on time and at the right price. They also have to comply with increasingly stringent quality and labelling standards.

Retailers are very specific in their descriptions of the attributes that the supplied produce has to meet. Failure to meet these standards can result in the rejection of the consignments, together with the consequential relationship and commercial implications.

The task of managing this activity is fraught with dangers where goods with a limited shelf life are moved rapidly through the supply chain. The traditional method of managing this activity is the use of the ubiquitous clipboard and pen. The results of the product and pallet inspections are captured on paper and subsequently entered on an electronic system for information distribution and analysis purposes.

There are many drawbacks to this method of working. The most obvious one is the risk of transcription errors that could cause the posting of incorrect QC information. This could have commercial implications that could result in either underpaying or overpaying the grower for the product. In extreme cases, the wrong goods can be delivered. Apart from the risk of errors, there is the sheer slog, as well as the costs of administration involved in double entering the data.

There is also the all-important time element. It may be necessary to hold

up other processes until the QC data has been entered. In many cases, the goods are held up until the results of the quality checks are made available. In the case of perishable goods, there is also the risk of product deterioration during the holding period.

Where this occurs, the QC department is placed in an invidious no-win position. Taking short cuts to facilitate the company meeting its delivery obligations means that the blame for rejected goods on QC grounds rests with the department. Releasing the goods too late means that the designated delivery dates can be missed, risking the return of the produce. A further drawback to operating in this way is the lack of visibility of events as they unfold. By the time the results of the QC analysis are made available, it is too late to correct an error if the goods have been despatched.

Recent developments in the IT mobility space can greatly assist in improving productivity, while reducing the administrative workload in this vital sector of the business. Basic handheld devices with limited capabilities have been superseded by powerful mobile computers with massive memory and CPU capability. This means that programmers are no longer severely restricted by the memory limitations of the older technology. They can therefore include far more sophisticated applications to help users carry out their daily tasks. In addition, rather than being restricted to one application, the mobile devices can be programmed to cope with multiple tasks.

Mobile devices now commonly support in-built digital cameras, GPS sensors and enormous amounts of storage. A QC report can now capture photographs and the location of the end user very simply. This allows for a rich set of information to be collected as part of the QC operation, rather than just a simple text entry. It is now easy to set up a wireless network that these mobile devices connect to at a price point that makes such systems cost-effective to install. In addition, the mobile phone operators have greatly reduced prices for providing data services. This makes it commercially feasible to deploy a remote QC system using the internet to securely send and receive data from any part of the world.

The business benefits of installing a

Dynamic workflow QC applications working in real time with back-office systems



mobile QC solution become apparent almost immediately. The primary tangible benefit is that the time it takes to re-key information with a manual system is alleviated. The speed and accuracy of capturing information dramatically improves while the results can be shared. In addition, action can be taken more rapidly should a QC problem occur.

Capespan is a classic case in point with the elimination of the clipboard and associated paperwork. This was replaced by a state-of-the-art mobile QC solution. As a result, QC productivity has greatly improved, administration costs were cut and customer service increased (to view the full case study, visit http://www.angliabs.com/Solution_Capespan.aspx)

In summary, the recent march of progress has made high-powered mobile devices and communication technology available at affordable prices. The increases in available memory, together with the improvements in the CPU speeds, have removed the previous programming constraints. This has allowed programmers to design and develop flexible applications that were previously not feasible. The resulting solutions have proven a real boon to both workforce and management in the fresh produce sector. In today's competitive environment, successfully deployed mobile and communications technology are proving to be a vital business aid in the quest for future market share. ○

Powerful handheld computers: capable of running multiple advanced applications



BRC GLOBAL GOES ONLINE

BRITISH RETAIL Consortium (BRC) Global Standards has launched its own website.

The new site will be the main information source for BRC Global Standards, training courses and the gateway for visitors to the BRC Directory of certificated sites.

It has been developed with a content management system that allows quick and easy updates using tools to manage the website content, architecture and imagery. The system incorporates an easy-to-use browser interface, allowing the BRC technical team to easily and simply create, edit, approve and amend web content at any time.

The pages were designed by award-winning online marketing agency Coast Digital, which is ranked in the UK top 100 interactive agencies by New Media Age.

Dr Geoff Spriegel, BRC director of global standards and technical services, said: "This is a significant step forward for our scheme. The website contains all the information you need to know about BRC Global Standards in a simple, easy-to-follow layout." ○

FREIGHT PILOT YIELDS RESULT

ON LINE Benchmarking (OLB) is now available across all sectors within the freight transport industry through the Freight Best Practice programme, following a successful pilot within the primary distribution and aggregates sectors.

OLB is seen as the next generation in benchmarking and is designed to allow operators to compare their performance with that of similar operators, instantly and anonymously.

By benchmarking performance, operators gain a thorough understanding of how they are performing against best in class, are able to identify areas for improvement and ultimately improve the efficiency of their operation, experts claim.

The internet-based system will allow a transport operator to compare details such as average gross vehicle weight, fuel types, vehicle configuration and fuel efficiency.

Mike MacDougall, transport manager for PS Transport based in Grimsby, which took part in the pilot, said: "The benchmarking process has helped us to identify where we are as a business across a wide range of hauliers and identify areas for us to focus on in the future." ○