WINCANTON LOGISTICS.....WITH THE EMPHASIS ON "CAN"!

Walk into the reception area of Wincanton Logistics' High Bay facility at Preston Brook and you are greeted with the message "People make it happen," emblazoned across the main staff entrance. Nothing unique you might think, in an age where someone must have made a considerable fortune from the sale of lions head "Customer is King" posters! Cut deeper into Wincanton's operation, however, and you quickly discover that this is no shallow managerial slogan. Rather, the 'team' philosophy espoused by senior management actually appears to be working extremely well, making Preston Brook a model example of an effective marriage between technology and human beings.

A very flat managerial structure sees staff being described as team members and team leaders, rather than employees and managers. Wherever practicable, they are encouraged to display initiative and work autonomously, while at the same time cover for each other should a member of their team be absent. This policy is truly paying dividends, with absenteeism running at less than half of one per cent of total available working hours. Staff turnover is almost non-existent and questionnaires, issued on a regular basis, indicate a high level of job satisfaction.

Such high levels of morale and motivation are essential ingredients when one considers that the Preston Brook facility operates as the national distribution centre for one of the UK's largest companies, Lever Brothers. Levers should need no introduction, being the manufacturer of a huge range of 'household name' consumer goods such as Domestos, Persil and Jif. With these products finding their way on to the shelves of the supermarket giants, among others, it should be no surprise to learn that Wincanton Logistics are contracted to work under an exacting set of standards and targets. The distribution centre must be able to run on a basis of 119 pallets in and 145 pallets out, per hour every hour.

The average load time of a vehicle is some 14 minutes an admirable statistic, but one which Wincanton Logistics staff almost seem embarrassed by. They are at pains to point out that the 'average' figure is skewed by the continuing requirement to manually load a small number of containers. The bulk of loads are assembled automatically and loaded in between 5 and 8 minutes.

Such exacting performance standards cannot be achieved purely on the back of highly motivated staff! Wincanton have invested heavily in technology that provides for the highest level of automation and real-time operation currently achievable.

The investment in the facility included a commitment to a Hydraroll conveyor unit, which enables transfer of entire 24 pallet loads from trailer to conveyor in 90 seconds. The trailers have to be specially adapted to take the feeds from the conveyor, which can be crudely described as providing a fork lift-type mechanism within the conveyor itself. The overall benefits of such fast unload times for overall throughput and scheduling are almost immeasurable.

The operational flow of goods being received via the Hydraroll unit, begins with the loading of pallets at one of the two principal Lever manufacturing sites, at Port Sunlight and Warrington. Levers enter data on the order number, pallet quantity and product codes of the load onto their Sales Order Processing system. As the driver signs for the load and leaves the Lever Brothers site the load data is already being transferred to the Wincanton Warehouse Management System (WMS), via a kilostream link.

On arriving at the Preston Brook gatehouse, an initial check is made against the pre-determined booking schedule and if OK, the vehicle is allowed to proceed to Goods In, where a team member accesses the WMS to commence processing of the delivery documentation. Ordinarily, this will only involve the keying in of the Sales Order Number, all load details then appearing automatically on the WMS screen. The driver then proceeds to back his vehicle on to the Hydraroll, physically connecting the trailer with a sensor on the conveyor which further validates that the load identification is correct. The Hydraroll Conveyor itself then commences an automatic un-load onto the in-feed spur. The conveyor is equipped with a vast array of optical sensors and check weighing devices that check the alignment of the load, that the weight of the load is not excessive and even the condition of the pallets.

The control of the in-feed spur and subsequent allocation of goods within the Hi-Bay is via a Movement Control System (MCS) provided by DAI of Manchester. Once all the pallets on the schedule have passed the bar code reader then the system will allow for another load to be put through that particular In-feed. The put-away of goods into the choice of 32,000 locations within the 33 meter high storage facility is via fully automated cranes. However, even here, the human element has crept in with each crane being named, through a competition amongst team members. Large Cranes adorned with the names of various Muppet characters (Gonzo, Miss Piggy, etc) certainly helps to re-humanize the process! In parallel with put-away, 'confirmation of receipt' data is sent back to the Lever system via the Kilostream Link.

Dispatch of Goods from Preston Brook site is driven by an equally slick set of procedures. Lever Brothers download orders at regular intervals to the WMS. The WMS creates a dispatch schedule, which is matched against faxed confirmation of the vehicle details. Assuming that the vehicle arrives within the allotted tolerance times, then the booking-in procedure results in the WMS generating a request to the cranes to start putting the load onto an appropriate accumulation lane within loading bay.

The real-time operation achieved, thus far, needed to be preserved when moving to the next stage of the process, the physical loading of goods from accumulation lane to the vehicle. Here, Wincanton chose to use Radio Data Terminals (RDT's) manufactured by Yorkshire based Belgravium. Wincanton Logistics had experience of using Belgravium's equipment at several other of their distribution depots and so the units were, according to Alan Koppens, Assistant General Manager, "a natural choice when the Preston Brook site went live. **Belgravium's track record with Wincanton was good in terms of both product reliability and service responsiveness on the rare occasions when there was a problem.**"

The fork lift truck driver accesses his RDT and performs a cross check of bay slip details. On validating the slip data the fork lift driver will be given load instructions via the RDT. Once the vehicle is fully loaded confirmation that the task is complete is transmitted via the RDT, thus enabling the accumulation lane to be immediately released for another load.

The dispatch procedure is not complete until the axles and gross vehicle weights are checked and in the case of containers a seal affixed to the vehicle. The depot time is entered onto the dispatch schedule and again there is full visibility regarding load status for Lever Brothers, via Kilostream links.

There is a dedicated case picking area that again makes heavy use of the Belgravium RDT's. The RDT's are used to queue picking tasks, control picking and replenishment activities, determine marshalling lanes and locations and, ultimately, loading tasks. Stuart McDowall, Systems Team Leader, claims that the RDT's have performed "impeccably" and that picking accuracy within the case pick area is "virtually one hundred per cent."

The trend of continuing polarization of the supply chain towards larger operators with heavily automated distribution facilities is unlikely to slow down or reverse. Given the inevitably of automation it is refreshing to find an example of an operation that, locally, provides a rewarding working environment, whilst at the same time satisfying the global business aspirations of those industrial giants coordinating the wider supply chain.