

Voice Enabling Your SAP Warehouse: Building the Business Case for Voice Technology

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Introduction

Voice technology has great appeal for users of SAP who want to extend their logistics and fulfillment processes. It offers the promise of hands-free, eyes-free wireless access to the information needed to drive key warehouse processes and has become an important ingredient in the success of a company's IT strategy.

Before Voice, no other technology had a greater impact on the evolution of warehouse management systems (WMSs) than the wireless local area network (LAN), and mobile or Radio Frequency (RF) terminal. While they are popular with many organizations, RF terminals and barcode scanning do have some drawbacks. They require operators to use their hands to scan and key data. They also require operators to read instructions on terminal displays. For many operations, these activities disrupt the normal flow of warehousing and limit the benefits provided by the technology.

Despite these drawbacks, LANs and RF have provided the opportunity for many distribution operations to substantially increase accuracy, productivity, visibility, and control of core warehousing functions. In many ways, the integration of RF communications and barcode scanning into WMS solutions in the 1990s put information and data collection into the hands of warehouse floor personnel.

Like traditional RF-based barcode scanning terminals, Voice solutions center on a small, wireless mobile computing device that warehouse associates typically wear on a belt. The difference is that Voice delivers application instructions verbally through a headset and captures worker responses through a microphone - with no stopping to look at a screen, key in a quantity, or scan a barcode.

Voice Becomes Mainstream

Voice is not new to SAP users. But until recently, it has been more of a niche application than a mainstream solution offering. This has changed as the technology has matured and evolved and as SAP users have focused more on improving their logistics and fulfillment processes. Voice technology now plays a major role within the warehouse and distribution center for users of SAP and non-SAP systems.

The key drivers in this movement are:

- **Proliferation of Wireless LANs** - Warehousing has been at the forefront of the development of wireless LANs since the late 1980s. But early deployments of this technology were costly, custom propositions. The evolution of 802.11 standards propelled wireless LANs from custom to commonplace. Today, most top and mid-tier distribution operations use RF terminals with barcode scanners over 2.4 GHz wireless LANs.

Voice logistics solutions can share this common backbone with traditional RF scanning applications. Even operations that currently do not use RF scanning terminals are not put off by the prospect of installing an 802.11 (a,b,g) wireless network, since the technology has become commonplace in this increasingly mobile society.