Customer Profile

Tacoma Public Schools tame paper peak with Infor Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management

Facts at a glance

Product: Infor Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management
Industry: Public Sector
Country: USA

"Moving to a paperless process with Infor Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management has enabled us to get beyond a lot of errors and speed up the process. Errors in picking dropped dramatically. Before, one out of about every 20 orders had an error on it. Now it's more like one out of every 85 orders."

—Steven Demel, Purchasing Manager for the Tacoma Public Schools

About the organization

The Tacoma Public Schools contains 36 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, five high schools, one alternative high school, a science and math institute and one school of the arts. The district covers 34 square miles with 30,000+ students. These various facilities are served by a single warehouse charged with maintaining the district's inventory and meeting the individual schools' supply needs.

A mountain of paper

The name "Tacoma" is a variant of "Tahoma," a Native American word meaning "snowy mountain peak." Until Infor™ Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management (MSCM) entered the picture, the Tacoma Public Schools might have thought Tacoma meant "paper mountain peak."

Its paper mountain consisted of the paper forms that drove its inventory system. Inevitably, the paper-based system led Steven Demel, purchasing manager for the district, to search for a way to automate the system in order to manage the warehouse, inventory and delivery processes more effectively. He and the Procurement Department at Tacoma Public Schools wanted a system that would be automated yet as simple as possible to use. The search ended when Lawson delivered and helped to install and implement Mobile Supply Chain Management.

The paper phase

The paper-based system of the district's warehouse was slow, error-prone and increasingly inefficient in meeting the district's needs. An inconsistent layout of the inventory bordered on being random. A major source of errors originated with the paper forms, marked by pencils or pens and used for picking, put-away and delivery. The labor-intensive process also risked significant human errors being made in a variety of areas. The necessary visual checks and cross-checks of stocked items versus inventory control numbers slowed each step of the process. Report generation of inventory status and other administrative matters by an older mainframe computer was sporadic and often incomplete because of system weaknesses. In light of previous budget-related cuts, the existing system consistently added to the daily burdens of the diminished workforce at the warehouse.

The return on investment for Tacoma Public Schools for MSCM was six months.

Warehouse setup details

A list of priorities drove the process of setting up the warehouse — a necessity for preparing the physical plant and its inventory to be managed by the automated processes of MSCM. The first priority reconfigured the aisles, both as to width and traffic, picking and put-away patterns. The aisle width had to accommodate any cart, forklift or vehicle used for picking or put-away. Aisles also needed to be wide enough to turn the vehicles around. The traffic patterns graphically portrayed the direction of travel, or flow, through each aisle and across the warehouse floor. The picking and put-away patterns had to be established to ensure that the MSCM module managed both those activities in a logical and timesaving manner.

Existing inventory items were then classified into three categories: A for fastmoving items, B for moderately moving items and C for slow-moving items. The fast-moving items typically account for 10% of an inventory and 60% of sales. The fast-moving items occupied spots toward the front of the traffic pattern, close to the picking and packing stations. The B items sat more in the middle and the C items were placed towards the end of the pattern.

Letters designated the aisles, which were then divided into odd and even sides, much like building addresses on a street. Then each inventory item received a dedicated alpha numeric bin number and shelf location number. Every item had its own dedicated bin and an auxiliary overflow bin.

With this preset-up of the warehouse, the employees doing picking and put-away procedures could now take full advantage of the efficiency of using the automated MSCM system.

Implementing Mobile Supply Chain Management

The Mobile Supply Chain Management application is part of the Infor Lawson Supply Chain Management Suite of products. After the warehouse was fully set up, a Infor consultant helped to implement the system beginning during the summer, typically a school district's slowest time of year. The stock items were set up in Infor Lawson Inventory Control, a conference room pilot study was held, the set-up of the MSCM application was finalized, and testing began. The testing was carried out with the actual warehouse crew in place to give them hands-on training during the testing period. The warehouse crew found using the handheld reader/scanners to be intuitive and actually reported that they were "fun to use."

The test lasted only two weeks, and then the system went live. For the first six months of use, there was some minor tweaking, but the new system was judged to be successful from the beginning.

Picking, delivery, receiving and tracking

The Infor Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management system is currently being used in the Tacoma Public Schools to manage the picking, delivery, receiving and tracking functions of its warehouse and inventory management system.

The picking operation is fairly straightforward. Orders are downloaded directly into the system twice a day and the picker logs into the system to access the picking order. The order is downloaded and the order is listed in pick order. A shipping list is generated and placed with the order.

The delivery usually takes place the next day on smaller orders. The driver logs in, accesses MSCM, downloads the order form and loads the physical order. The driver then delivers the order to the school, scans the barcode on the delivery ticket, has the customer sign the handheld reader/scanner as proof of delivery and then returns to the warehouse. There, the driver accesses the system once again, and the delivery is automatically downloaded into the system.

The receiver downloads the receiving information directly into the system where each item is assigned its established aisle, bin and shelf number. The receiver then simply places the items in their pre-assigned bins.

Tracking depends on the signature of the customer at the time of delivery. Drivers are requested to record the first name initial and the full last name of the signature since handwritten signatures are sometimes difficult to read. The tracking capability keeps the number of phone calls about deliveries to a minimum.

Keep it simple, but what else can you do for us?

Tacoma Public Schools officials wanted to keep the system simple after automating it. But they also knew they wanted a new system that had potential capabilities to be used in the future. Infor Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management provides that capability. Reports can be generated about anything from delivery statistics, crew productivity, error rates, statistics on returns, and a great number of other types of reports if and when needed.

Cost and return on investment

An organization might wonder if the cost of Infor Lawson Mobile Supply Chain Management would be a wise investment for a smaller warehouse carrying a relatively light inventory volume. District officials think it's not only a wise investment of both time and money but an absolutely necessary one. The return on investment for Tacoma Public Schools for MSCM was six months. Additionally, it has made the workload for the remaining warehouse crew, after deep budget cuts, much more manageable because of the increased efficiencies brought by the new system. Most importantly, the mountain of paper at the Tacoma Public Schools has been scaled.

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