

# THE STRUGGLE TO SHARE

**Meeting customer expectations is only getting trickier, and maximising speed and efficiency within the supply chain is the only way to deal with the challenge, writes Aoife Valentine**

**S**upply chain performance can be the making or breaking of some businesses, which isn't surprising when you consider how inextricably linked the supply chain is to business cashflow, production costs and customer service. Optimising operations to maximise speed and efficiency is the name of the game, and as technologies advance, the improvements to both seem almost exponential.

The most effective supply chains deliver products as fast and as cost effectively as possible, without sacrificing the quality. This is done using complicated logistics tools and systems that at their core, allow your employees pool information to help coordinate their efforts in real time, to help fulfil orders.

According to a survey recently conducted by Zetes of senior manufacturing professionals across Europe and South Africa, 67 per cent of businesses are struggling to share key information between departments, and 59 per cent don't have a real-time view of manufacturing volumes across plants within the organisation.

For businesses that find themselves struggling because they don't have the data they need to make key decisions, supply chain solutions can offer visibility they didn't previously have. "These solutions help businesses to design processes that will allow them to grow without needing to expand their workforce and to capture the data required to drive effective fact-based decision-making. They enable supply chain businesses to react to their customers increasing demands for accurate, real time data visibility," said Aoife O'Connell, group business consultant for in-store solutions for Zetes.

A lack of traceability is one of the big challenges companies require supply chain management solutions to tackle, according to Andrew Daly, sales manager at VisionID. Data capture technologies are now quite advanced, allowing much quicker ways of capturing and processing the information you need.

"Using data capture technologies, either through bar code technologies or RFID (Radio frequency identification), we can track any asset or track goods throughout the supply chain. From when something is taken in as a raw material into a factory or whatever, we can track it through various points in the supply chain, using our type of technology," he said.

"Access to real-time information enables quick decision-making, especially if your stock within the supply chain is perishable or if you've a high cost of storing goods, you can move it faster and get it to the marketplace or end user faster, so you're creating a more efficient supply chain."

Most efficient supply chains enable businesses to provide better customer service, whether that means providing adequate stock levels for demand, or simply delivering products as quickly as the customer expects. This is key, according to O'Connell, as the other main challenges in supply chain businesses



**Andrew Daly**  
sales manager at  
VisionID

centre on fluctuating customer demand, increased customer expectations, increased competition and increased price sensitivity.

"Customer loyalty is a thing of the past and you need to offer high levels of customer service at affordable prices to remain in the game. This puts pressure on all areas of the business to keep costs down without sacrificing on service levels," she said.

Some focus has to be put on 'the last mile', which is the last bit of the delivery process in the supply chain, to help meet customer expectation and build any potential loyalty. It's often referred to as one of the most important parts of the supply chain as if this is where your system fails, the whole supply chain falls down. Aiming for excellence in other parts of the chain is all well and good, but as 'the last mile' is the last link, it decides for the customer whether or not their experience with you was good or not.

"The last mile' is a topic that will continue to be a focus in 2018 and onwards with businesses trying to find ways to keep up with customer expectations on delivery and collection options. Retailers will need the ability to hook into flexible delivery networks to offer customers fast delivery at an affordable price," said O'Connell.

Relatively simple implementations are



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making a big difference in terms of meeting customer expectations, and one example is the introduction of voice technology to supply chain systems. "We're really seeing the added advantage of voice technology within the supply chain, where you can use headset technologies and be able to pick and pack within the supply chain using both hands, which makes a big difference," said Daly.

RFID, essentially smart bar codes that remove the need for physical scans, are a technology that has been around for decades, and is currently used in plenty of day-to-day situations like for access control, toll bridges, and even credit card payments. As it has become ubiquitous across supply chain, the cost has dropped dramatically, making it more accessible for operations of all sizes. "Within the supply chain, we're seeing the costs of hardware, software and fully managed solutions are coming down. We can attach greater return on investment on a RFID solution now, and it offers savings on time, and it offers speed to capture data and a lot of it, very fast," said Daly.

The Internet of Things is starting to take hold in supply chain management, meaning even greater abilities to capture huge amounts of data, and quickly. "There are sensors available for just about anything and with sensors constantly collecting and sending data back to a central repository the eyes of the business can be extended inside trucks on the road, onto the production floor or into shelves in a store. With access to multiple sources of data, analysts can derive patterns and trends to form predictions and then use these patterns to drive performance improvements in the supply chain," said O'Connell.

As the Internet of Things and supply chain continue to develop, O'Connell believes that big data will become the next big focus point for technology in supply chain. Big Data, which is a largely untapped resource in supply chain management, will come to the fore with increased use of sensors and the IoT providing rich sources of data that will need to be understood and translated into information that can support business decision-making," she said.