

D.C. Automation Trends

Increasing Productivity with Self-Serve Locker Solutions

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Automating the management of highly-valuable assets, including hand held scanners other mobile devices, decreases operational costs and increases productivity.



The very concept of a distribution center is in flux. No aspect of D.C. operations escapes scrutiny today – including the way in which tools and devices are managed and deployed throughout a facility.

Technology has transformed the tools and devices themselves, providing warehouse workers with unprecedented levels of speed and accuracy. But the bigger challenge today comes down to something more basic: the question of how these highly-valuable mobile devices – scanners, headsets, tablets, label printers and the like – are distributed and tracked across shifts.

Self-serve, automated locker solutions from Apex Supply Chain Technologies© offer a simple way to address this challenge, increasing worker productivity and decreasing costs in the process.

The number-one issue in any D.C. or warehouse today is productivity. To meet the ever-increasing demands of the e-commerce age, facilities strive to move materials in and out the door more quickly, and at a lower cost.

Lean principles are designed to help facilities yield these performance improvements. The focus is on eliminating waste, from excess time spent executing a task to the squandering of materials and equipment. Any step that doesn't add value to the operation is an unnecessary cost and a target for elimination.

A MINOR INCONVENIENCE HAS A MAJOR IMPACT

The bigger the facility, the higher the stakes. Imagine a million-square-foot D.C. – hardly atypical among today's high-volume supply chains. Workers might spend 15 minutes or more walking to their stations from the storeroom where they pick up their mobile device. And should the device's battery die during a shift, it's another long walk to and from the storeroom for a replacement.

"You've lost a tremendous amount of productivity because workers aren't able to utilize these devices as well as they could," says Kent Savage, founder and CEO of Apex Supply Chain Technologies.

Mobile devices are, of course, essential assets in this environment. Without them, work in the warehouse comes to a complete standstill. Yet many operations continue to store and

distribute these valuable items manually from centralized locations within the facility. They are managed by one or more employees who would be more productive on the warehouse floor. It's an unwieldy process with the potential for wasted time and lost or misplaced equipment, ultimately contributing to inaccurate inventory data.

POINT-OF-WORK ACCESS INCREASES EFFICIENCY, PRODUCTIVITY

The solution lies in an automated system matching the technological sophistication of the mobile devices themselves. Instead of centralizing the storeroom within a large facility, warehouses deploy self-serve lockers at multiple, strategic points putting mobile devices closer to where the work is done.

At the beginning of a shift, workers use their secure ID badges to open their pre-assigned locker, acquire the mobile device they need for their tasks and begin their shift immediately. At day's end, they return it to the same location. The device is automatically logged back in and the day ends as quickly as it began.

Such a solution is the AXCESS™ 6100 self-serve, automated locker from Apex. The solution combines secure lockers with the Apex Trajectory Cloud™ software platform to automatically keep track of who is using each device at any given time, when it's due back and its current condition. This data is cloud-based and available in real-time, giving management 24/7 visibility into equipment usage patterns and other process insights.

Checking devices in and out takes a matter of seconds. By contrast, a traditional counter transaction can take several minutes, especially when multiple workers are queuing up at the beginning or end of a shift. And if an item isn't returned as scheduled, a notification is automatically sent to a supervisor. But no employees are required to oversee the process up to this point.

AUTOMATION CREATES EMPLOYEE ACCOUNTABILITY

The AXCESS solution "introduces accountability into the system," says Savage. "It's a self-serve, automated system that provides an electronic audit trail of every transaction."

The lockers also allow workers to identify any conditional changes in the device when it's returned. An item in need of recharging, repair or recalibration can be instantly flagged with the push of a button. In such instances, the compartment locks so that the item



The Apex solution relies on a cloud-based data platform to track device status in real-time and automatically alerts managers if devices aren't returned as scheduled.

Hand held scanner utilization increases by 25% or more after automating the asset management process.



isn't assigned to another employee. A manager is automatically notified to attend to that device.

The compartments are more than just secure storage lockers. They can also be equipped with chargers so that batteries and devices are ready for use the following day. The AXCESS software knows the proper charging period for each piece of equipment.

The 6100 locker series, which easily scales according to the size, volume and layout of any facility, can result in a significantly higher rate of mobile device utilization. Warehouse managers typically see improvements of at least 25 percent. Multiply that by a thousand or more devices within a big D.C., and the savings can quickly add up to "tens of millions of dollars," says Savage.

SELF-SERVE AUTOMATION: A GLOBAL BEST PRACTICE

Some of the largest brands in the world, including Amazon, are using Apex technology. Amazon has deployed well over 1,000 Apex self-serve, automated devices through several of its distribution centers to manage inventory tracking assets and other items.

Another major retailer uses Apex lockers in the back of its stores to manage and distribute the devices used to track inventory and conduct daily price changes.

Distributing these devices manually was leading to unacceptable delays and downtime. In some stores, employees could spend half an hour looking for a scanner and mobile printer. This could happen several times a day in each store. Across shifts and stores, the time saved quickly translates to millions of dollars in savings.

The retailer reports less employee downtime and a reduction in damaged and missing equipment. All of this has helped to increase productivity and device utilization has tripled. This has eliminated the need for thousands of extra devices throughout the retailer's stores.

ANY COMPANY CAN AFFORD TO IMPLEMENT THIS SOLUTION

Smaller warehouse and retail operations stand to benefit from the Apex technology as well. Savage notes that the system can be delivered to users by subscription, eliminating the need for high capital investment and maintenance costs. The price includes hardware,



The typical worker saves as much as 30 minutes per shift after automating the asset management process.

installation, data management, business intelligence, and extended maintenance. "It's a soft cost," he says, "not a capital expense."

All of which adds up to an immediate payback on the cost of a system that transforms the way in which inventory-control equipment is managed. New data shows that a typical warehouse employee using the Apex solution can save up to 30 minutes per shift, Savage says.

In today's intense, high-speed fulfillment environment, such savings can be critical to the success of a supply chain. And as distribution centers adapt to an unprecedented pace of change, self-serve, automated lockers represent a simple way to reduce costs and improve performance.

To learn more about AXCESS self-serve, automated lockers from Apex Supply Chain Technologies, visit ApexSupplyChain.com/AXCESS, email us at info@apexsupplychain.com or call 800.229.7912.