Adapting to change

Parts Town: How a flexible WMS improved warehouse accuracy and efficiency during rapid business growth

Snapshot

Company
Parts Town

Industry
Food service equipment parts distributor

Warehouse Size
250,000 Sq. ft.

Infios Competency
Supply Chain Software

Solution(s)
Warehouse Advantage

Complexity

Update Parts Town's warehouse management system to keep up with immense growth, while increasing speed and accuracy.

Best practice

Implement a flexible and adaptable warehouse management system (WMS) to optimize the facility and further enhance the end customer experience.

Founded in 1987, Parts Town is a food service equipment parts distributor. Over the span of 35 years the company's staff has grown from two to almost 1,000 team members and expanded from servicing local companies to supporting local, national and international customers.

Setting the industry standard
For a time, the industry landscape was grim. Manufacturers were frustrated with declining parts sales, customers wanted better customer service and there was no platform for eCommerce. Parts Town saw this as an opportunity to own the market and proceeded to collect massive amounts of original equipment manufacturer (OEM) inventory. Next, they created a website and then the industry's first mobile app to facilitate sales.

Breaking the industry standards came with great success. Parts Town grew quickly; becoming the industry's largest and fastest growing company. For over 15 consecutive years they saw a 20-30 percent growth rate year over year.

Substantial growth and demand led to issues with their previous Warehouse Management System (WMS). Some of the biggest challenges faced were the system's performance issues, inflexibility and lack of support.

30%
improvement in inventory accuracy

20%
increase in picking productivity

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A large draw to Infios's warehouse management system was the highly customizable nature the previous system did not have. Parts Town had dedicated two team members to own the implementation project. After the go-live, the Parts Town team saw myriad areas where they could customize processes to optimize their business. Over the subsequent months and years, Parts Town built an internal technical team and made multiple customizations to reach their goals to increase speed and accuracy as they grew.

One of the ways the team drove speed was by putting more control in the hands of the frontline employees. For example, they allowed employees to fix their own mistakes by using the F1 ["back"] button on the RF scanner, when possible. In practice, this meant that if database updates hadn't been confirmed or minor mistakes occurred, like starting to pack the wrong order, scanning a different item or entering the wrong dimensions, the employee could quickly "go back" on the RF screen to fix the error.

Customer satisfaction and the business's overall success was dependent on being able to quickly and efficiently get the orders out. Submitted orders tended to skew late due to customers knowing they had until 9 p.m. EST for same day shipping. To achieve the ambitious daily same-day shipping target, dozens of WMS enhancements were made, large and small. For one clever innovation, Parts Town decided to implement combo barcodes on picking labels. When an item is picked, the picking label is printed with a description of what is on the pick line. Normally, RF processes request one piece of information at a time from an operator, resulting in lots of scanning to obtain individual pieces of data (item, location, etc.). But Parts Town, to dramatically reduce the number of overall scans, piped together three key pieces of information into one scan, removing the need for three individual scans for one pick line label.

Next, their team improved accuracy by implementing forced verifications, specifically for handling notes, paper packing lists and order checks. When reaching these steps in the packing process the system requires employees to scan a barcode or enter a response to verify the step, cutting down the room for errors. To reduce the number of damaged packages they implemented a handling note verification. For example, if there are specific handling instructions, the RF scanner will show a screen with the handling specification on it, e.g. "do not bend". For an employee to move on to the next step they have to physically type in the letter "Y" to acknowledge they are aware.

Another issue they noticed was packing lists were not always making it into the shipment. An employee would lay the list down on the table, finish packing, seal the box, and accidentally forget the packing list. Now, there is a barcode on the physical packing list that must be scanned to complete the shipment, making sure the list is never left behind. Lastly, they added routing LP/item label cross-checking scans to confirm that the box, and what is in it, match before an order can be considered complete. For a distribution center that has 70,000 to 80,000 transactions and ships 10,000 orders per day, these customizations vastly increased speed, accuracy and efficiency.

If Parts Town needed any customizations or changes to the system, they had to submit a request to the original developers, who were not built to support a company growing at this rate.

Issues with speed were most apparent when printing pick tickets. All the pick tickets came out of one printer and if there was a need to print tickets faster, another part of the system would have to slow down, putting the operation in a vulnerable state. Due to the inability for the WMS to adapt, they became more dependent on human labor and saw an increase in human error. This led to more time spent onboarding and training new employees on extra steps to makeup for the warehouse management systems shortcomings. Quite simply, the company's warehouse management system could not keep up, and its inability to adapt and scale with growth was harming the operation.

A robust solution
Parts Town realized they had outgrown the previous WMS and needed to find a system that could scale with their year-over-year growth, while improving accuracy and speed. They also needed to keep up with the company standard to fulfill all orders placed before 9 p.m. EST the same day.

Following a review of multiple warehouse management system providers, Parts Town selected Infios's Warehouse Advantage solution. While some other providers insisted on an "our way is the best way" mentality, Infios understood the challenges that came with growth and would be able to innovate at the speed their operation needed.

Parts Town's overall go-live was a success. "Since signing in 2015, Infios has fulfilled nearly all the promises they made, which is not always the standard in this industry" stated Kenny William, Senior Director at Parts Town. During the go-live, there was no downtime in the distribution center, and within a few weeks, Parts Town was exceeding previous rates for accuracy and speed.

Results

With Infios's assistance, Parts Town was able to achieve these results with almost zero interruption to the businesses operation. The organization saw enough improvements to their operation, using the capabilities of their new WMS and the internal team, that they expanded their two-person team into a small, dedicated department, solely focused on developing the solution for the benefit of the business.

Parts Town has been able to further meet customer needs with Infios's WMS. An example was during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when the restaurant industry took a detrimental hit. Parts Town understood the importance of rapidly getting parts to commercial kitchens in schools, hospitals, and restaurants during this time. Restaurants, in particular, were fighting day to day just to stay open, and if a pizza restaurant's oven was down they couldn't make pizzas to sell, and potentially faced closure.

Parts Town consistently had 35% of orders shipping next day by air. It was imperative to the restaurants to get the correct order and have it arrive on time. The customizations their internal team was able to create using Infios's WMS assisted in the speed and accuracy of these orders.

Parts Town realized key benefits from adding Infios's WMS:

- Inventory accuracy improved by over 30%
- Picking rates increased by over 20%
- Training was streamlined: employees no longer had to take time navigating the potential best route, they simply followed instructions on the RF scanner to take the optimal path
- Increased job opportunity: Parts Town had built a team around the WMS to customize and oversee its impact on the operation

With the help of Infios's WMS, Parts Town was able to take total control and build its own company-specific business processes into the WMS. The ease of configuration gave the company a solution that could grow with it for years to come.

"We have deep abiding faith in Infios to keep up. The warehouse management solution has delivered since go-live in 2015."

Kenny William
Senior Director, Parts Town

"Our experience with Infios has been one that has fulfilled nearly all the promises that were made when we signed on."

Kenny William
Senior Director, Parts Town

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