The 10 Keys to Voice Technology Deployment Success in Distribution Centers
In fact, voice technology has emerged in the last decade from a little-known approach in order-picking – primarily deployed in the grocery and beverage sectors – to a technology option that has become truly mainstream across virtually every industry sector. Voice technology has now been deployed at thousands of companies around the globe in multiple industries, for multiple workflows/processes, and has now moved well beyond the initial picking applications that were the first areas of deployment focus in the DC. The “hands-free” nature of voice technology is the key driver of its value proposition.

Today, hundreds of thousands of workers around the world use voice technology to help ship products to customers and perform other DC tasks. Voice technology vendor Vocolect alone says it has 500,000 users. That is incredible growth for a technology that really only started to take off ten years or so ago, and is testimony to its value.

Voice technology is not only an increasingly preferred approach to order-picking and more; it has become one of the most popular distribution technologies, solving business issues that impact DC operations, with a proven ability to reduce operating costs with relatively little “pain” associated with deployment of the technology and a rapid time-to-value opportunity. The inherent financial benefits from voice have been extended in recent years by improvements in the technology that have enabled very rapid implementations compared to most logistics-related technologies, driving even more rapid time-to-value.

That fact also opens up voice as an opportunity for mid-sized and smaller operations that might have had a hard time cost-justifying many other DC-related technologies but which can make a strong business case for using voice technology. Many small and mid-size distributors, as an example, have successfully deployed voice technology already.

Voice may not be for everyone, but it is a technology of choice for an accelerating number of distribution operations.

The reality is also that today, the success rates for voice technology are very high, and “failures” today virtually unheard of.

However, that doesn’t mean that some companies don’t run their voice deployments better than others, reducing headaches, minimizing costs, and achieving the most rapid time to value.

In this report, after reviewing some voice technology basics, we offer 10 proven tips to get the best results out of your voice project and to ensure your company maximizes its success.
Understanding Voice Basics

The relative simplicity of a voice system is one of its key attractions.

In the most basic terms, a voice system directs an operator to complete discrete tasks, such as an order-pick or replenishment, using audio commands. That generally means that the “text-based” commands originating in a warehouse management or order processing system have been converted into voice commands by the voice technology provider.

How Voice Works...

In turn, operators confirm various aspects of the task by speaking into a headset connected to a portable voice terminal. The specifics of what information is communicated relative to the task and what information is confirmed by the operator via voice vary from application to application, but a common “dialog” between the system and the operator might be as shown in the diagram nearby, in an order-picking scenario:

Typical Voice “Dialogue”
Although voice has been predominantly implemented in piece-picking and case-picking applications, in recent years voice has rapidly expanded into other process areas of the DC, especially among companies that first start with voice in picking, learn and appreciate the benefits there, and then look to expand the success to other areas. Replenishment of picking areas is a natural complement, but voice today is being used in putaway, truck-loading, receiving, inbound quality/compliance audits and really just about every process in the DC.

Voice might even expand into other logistics areas outside the DC, such as route drivers “picking” orders off a delivery truck in the beverage industry, where being hands- and eyes-free could also drive real value.

### System Components

While specifics for any given deployment can vary, the basics of a voice technology solution for distribution will often look something like that illustrated in the graphic below.

### Optimizing the Associate

- Let the process and business requirements drive the technology “solution” configuration
- Offer device-options ONLY where they provide a quantifiable value-add
- Optimize your voice-enabled workflow tasks
Warehouse Management System (WMS) or Order Management Application: Source for what work, such as an order pick, needs to be performed, and assignment of that task to a specific worker (though in some systems associates select their own work from a queue).

Voice Integration: The voice system must be integrated obviously with the WMS or similar system to receive tasks and confirm that the work is complete. Increasingly, leading WMS providers have built-in, real-time integrations with leading voice providers that makes connectivity quite easy, and almost (but not quite) off the shelf. However the WMS provider may support only a limited number of transaction types.

Additionally, many older or home-grown WMS solutions may not have that native support for voice. Fortunately, leading voice systems providers offer their own connectivity solutions that can address those limitations. For example, leading multi-format food and fuel retailer Giant Eagle had for many years a voice picking solution directly supported in its existing WMS (from a leading provider), but that older version of the WMS did not support other DC applications for voice.

As documented in a recent Videocast on our Supply Chain Television Channel, Giant Eagle decided to use an interesting new voice integration solution from Vocollect called VoiceExpress that essentially “maps” existing radio frequency (RF) terminal screens from the WMS into voice commands and responses. This enabled Giant Eagle to quickly add voice to these other application areas without needing to upgrade the WMS or get into a large customization effort.

Voice Terminal: A wireless device, using the same type of WiFi communication technology as traditional RF/wireless terminals, and which contains the voice recognition software that converts WMS/OMS generated tasks to voice, and operator responses (such as confirming an order pick) back into data that the WMS can understand.

Headset: Headphones and microphone connected to the voice terminal, either via traditional cable or increasingly today via wireless Bluetooth connection, optimized for the industrial setting of the distribution center.

“Giant Eagle [uses] an interesting new voice integration solution from Vocollect called VoiceExpress that “maps” existing radio frequency terminal screens from the WMS into voice commands and responses. This enabled Giant Eagle to quickly add voice to other application areas without needing to upgrade the WMS...”
Voice Technology Value Sources

Voice technology delivers value in a number of ways, often delivering a payback on the investment in as little as six to nine months.

As noted above, the core value comes from the “hands-free” nature of the technology. Both traditional RF devices and paper/label-based picking require operators carry/hold something in their hands, which can be a real productivity killer. They also must frequently need to look down at terminal screens to see the work or interact with the system, leading some to correctly say voice is “eyes-free” as well, since commands and confirmations are done via audio.

The need to hold and look at a terminal can often force companies into making tough choices: do I scan each product when picking to ensure accuracy but take a big productivity hit, or not scan and risk picking and shipping errors, or costly downstream QA operations?

With hands- and eyes-free voice technology, significant double-digit productivity gains in order-picking are quite common.

Let’s consider, for example, one common and challenging application: full case-picking to a belt upstream of an automatic sortation system. In these systems, the ROI from the automation comes from enabling “batch-picking,” meaning that for a current wave of orders, a worker will stop at a given location only once, picking all the cases for that wave at one time and placing them on a pick belt. The downstream sorter breaks the cartons back out for individual orders. Due to the batch-picking approach, pick quantities can be in the dozens of cases at any individual full case pick slot.

A company deploying such a system without using voice has one of three choices for picking, none of which are really satisfactory:

1. **Scan each case/piece/pallet** (if a barcode is even present on the carton) to verify the quantity being picked. While this greatly improves accuracy, the obvious downside is a severe hit to productivity due to the effort to pick up and put down the scanner to grab each carton, and the time it takes to scan.

2. **Scan the location** at the beginning to confirm the picker is in the right spot, then rely on the operator to correctly count the right number of cartons in his or her head, confirming via key entry at the end that the right quantity was picked. This obviously can enable rapid picking because no other scanning is required, but the downside is that the picker is quite likely to make a quantity mistake, especially as the number of cartons required for a given pick in the batch increases.

Anyone experienced with this type of system will likely have direct knowledge with this problem with the no-scan method. Those pick quantity errors mean either a shortage in the number of cartons picked for the order that have to be fetched later when the shortage is recognized, or else extra cases that will eventually go down the “reject line” on the sorter. In either scenario, the error is time-consuming and costly to correct.

3. **Use pick-by-label**: Another approach is to have preprinted carton labels for each set of picks. The picker puts on the labels and places each carton on the belt, moving on to the next location when the labels for a given SKU/

“Voice technology delivers value in a number of ways, often delivering payback on investment in as little as six to nine months...”
pick are exhausted. The downside is that this approach basically defeats the concept of using wireless technology to begin with, and also is a hit to productivity, being roughly as fast (possibly a little faster) than scanning each carton.

Now, consider this case-pick scenario with a hands-free voice system. The location and the number of cartons to pick are delivered via voice command (which can always be repeated upon operator request). Now, instead of hoping the picker gets the quantity correct, or slowing the pick process down significantly by scanning or labeling, the picker simply tells the voice system every time he/she picks a carton. This could be by literally counting (1, 2, etc.), or by saying “next” or some similar prompt. Again, the operator can always be reminded of where he/she is in the count by asking the system. With both hands and eyes free, the picking process will go as fast as possible, with almost perfect levels of accuracy.

Similar examples can be shown in piece-picking applications as well. In fact, a number of high-speed piece-pick operations that had learned to live with a certain level of pick errors rather than slowing the process down with RF scanning (e.g., office products, auto parts) have switched to voice to give them higher and more acceptable levels of productivity with much fewer errors at the same time.

While the number as usual will vary, it is common for picking via voice to be 15 to 25% more efficient than traditional RF scanning, although some companies have experienced gains of as much as 45% or even higher depending on their starting point.

**Labor Management:** In addition to the core productivity gains, a voice system will generally generate lots of collective and individual performance data that can be used for insight into how distribution productivity can be improved.

**Quality and Accuracy:** Perhaps surprisingly, voice systems usually deliver a higher level of accuracy than scanning with handheld computers, especially in piece-pick applications (voice accuracy being much higher than for paper-based operations).

Why is this? First, many companies won’t scan each item or case due to the productivity hit. We also suspect that it has to do with the fact that after scanning a location and/or bar code, workers often lose track of the actual pick quantities. With voice, however, the process keeps the workers engaged in the task through the voice confirmation of the pick quantity. The great news is that this increase in accuracy is generally achieved with greater productivity at the same time.

In addition, companies commonly report improvement in safety, training time, ergonomics, worker satisfaction, and customer satisfaction.

Following this introduction to voice technology and its value, we now take a look at 10 keys to deployment success.

“While the number as usual will vary, it is common for picking via voice to be 15 to 25% more efficient than traditional RF scanning, although some companies have experienced gains of as much as 45% or even higher depending on their starting point.”
The 10 Keys to Voice System Deployment Success

The value proposition of voice technology is clearly there, and today almost every company can find success with voice.

However, as never before, companies are focused on “time-to-value;” therefore, total project success and ROI are tightly linked to how successfully a voice system is implemented and when the company starts achieving the expected ROI.

And even the best technology can run into deployment problems if proven successful practices are not followed.

So to ensure your company avoids pitfalls experienced by others that delay the results achievement they expect, below we discuss 10 important keys to voice system deployment success, roughly in the order in which they should be addressed during the course of a project.

Key #1: Get Educated About Voice

We have learned over and over again in any area of supply chain and logistics technology that a project is almost always more successful when a company and its project team do a thorough job of educating themselves on a technology and its benefits upfront.

While this may sound so common sense as to not be worth mentioning, it is surprising how often companies fail to adequately educate themselves before jumping into a project. Symptoms can include:

- Only one person in the company really has a truly solid grasp of the technology being considered; in fact, sometimes “hoarding” the information for his or her own reasons.
- There are hidden concerns about a new technology (e.g., voice), because some employees do not understand it well, have unexpressed concerns, think the change will be negative personally for them, or some other objection.
- People don’t understand the long-term and positive track record of a technology; they think it will just be the “flavor of the month,” not THE new way of doing business.
- Employees investigating the technology can’t simply and concisely communicate with upper management about the technology, or answer their concerns.

If you think voice might have a good fit in your operation, there are a wealth of resources on the web, at various trade events, from voice providers, and more. We recommend that companies spend sufficient time to get several people well educated on voice technology and applications before embarking on a potential voice project - and that executives confirm the level of knowledge the team has before allowing the actual solution/provider selection effort to go forward.

Presentations on voice by the team chartered with getting educated should be made to a wider company/logistics audience to display the knowledge that has been acquired and address initial questions/concerns. Where possible, the purchase decision and deployment should have strong involvement with supervisors/team leaders and star employees to ensure widespread acceptance.

The Bottom Line: Getting a solid understanding of voice technology (how it compares to other technologies, how it works, its benefits, applications, etc.), plus involving some of the people who will do the actual work in the decision and planning process, will provide a solid foundation that will significantly enhance the overall smoothness and success of the deployment.
Key #2: Evaluate How Voice Fits In With Your Overall Logistics/Distribution Strategy

Any distribution technology should not be viewed in isolation, but rather as a component of a broader logistics strategy. Those strategies in turn should be well aligned with overall company goals and objectives.

While “cost reduction” in one form or another is usually near the top of most of these logistics strategies or goals, the value and opportunity for other improvements (such as accuracy/customer service) should also be recognized. More importantly, almost every company has a number of potential options for investment and operational improvements in their logistics network.

So the question will be: Why should voice be at or near the top of that opportunity list?

While every potential project has to have the right numbers in terms of ROI, those that can be tied to broader strategies and objectives will almost always have a better chance of making it through to approval and funding. For example, a voice project might be directly connected with efforts to increase productivity to react to growing challenges recruiting or keeping distribution center workers.

Executives should be able to draw a line from a potential voice project back to broader logistics strategies and goals, and from there back to corporate strategies and objectives.

The Bottom Line: Don’t look at your voice project as an island, or think only in terms of ROI. Experience has shown time and time again that connecting such projects to broader strategies and objectives will help differentiate them from others vying for attention and funds.

Key #3: Understand Your Technology/Integration Options and Limitations

A new voice system obviously will not live in a technology vacuum. Depending on the scope of your deployment, it is possible that the voice system will at a minimum integrate with a WMS. Across a network, that could possibly mean more than one WMS, and/or even more than one enterprise system, even within a single facility.

Before you get too far into the project, it is important to gain a solid understanding from your internal IT staff and/or vendors on what the options are for adding voice support in different specific areas. While the good news is that many WMS vendors now have standard voice support, it is possible that they don’t have native support for some voice vendors, or they don’t support a specific DC process to which you would like to add voice.

As mentioned above, legacy systems will almost never have existing voice support. So the answer there is either to modify that system to add voice capabilities, or move some of the processing and logic to a separate voice-specific application. That’s where a really good technology partner comes into play.

Knowing the options and trade-offs early on will clarify what the end solution will look like, and often keep the project team from going down some dead-ends in designing the solution.

The Bottom Line: Understanding your options for voice integration and application support from the get-go will often help you avoid headaches and confusion later on.
Key #4. Complete “As Is/To Be” Process-Mapping

This is another basic element of the deployment process that applies to adoption of any change in technology - the problem is that too often companies delay this step until too late in the process.

With the voice education achieved in Step 1, most companies should be able to do fairly detailed “As Is” and “To Be” process maps (built using a simple tool like Visio or even PowerPoint or a spreadsheet) before looking at different voice providers. This will serve to get all stakeholders and/or the project team members on the same page at the outset.

The reality is that the specifics of the “As Is” model are not as well-known as many expect. This is especially true for dealing with exceptions. For example, what is the picker supposed to do if the product expected in the slot isn’t there? Very few companies have employees who can fully describe the existing processes with all the exception routines strictly from memory. Further, the way work actually gets done might not be the way the process is currently documented. Even expert employees will often disagree about process steps.

If the current system is using RF scanning, a key question becomes how closely you want to mimic the current process using voice, instead of scanning and looking at a screen. Or, do you want to use the potential change in technology to reinvent the process; for example, by implementing a “cluster-picking” approach to “eaches” picking? That information, coupled with a solid understanding of voice from the education phase, will help you to construct the “To Be” process, including exception-handling (always the most difficult areas to manage).

While the To Be process may change a bit over time as new understandings are realized, completing a first pass at this step before detailed voice provider evaluations are started will separate the two steps and allow companies to compare vendors and solutions in reference to the To Be model.

Bottom Line: The execution of any documented process tends to not match up with real-world practice. Companies often want to jump right in to vendor evaluation before doing the difficult next stage of process modeling for voice deployment, but doing that work up-front usually pays nice dividends as the process unfolds. Companies with the discipline to follow the documented procedures tend to get bigger returns.
Key #5: Build a Smart Business Case

Interestingly, for the most savvy companies, price isn’t the greatest driver. The real story is what value they will receive for a given price, and how quickly their investment will be paid back through reduced operational costs.

Even if the ROI from a voice deployment is a slam-dunk, the ROI will need to be documented and accepted by the finance organization in your company. As mentioned earlier, even if the ROI meets corporate thresholds for payback periods or hurdle rates, the investment in voice is also competing for allocation of available capital. A strong ROI that is attractive as a percentage may not be compelling in terms of absolute dollars versus alternative uses of capital and human resources.

To build the business case for a distribution technology investment like voice, it is important to spell out projected ROI, ROI versus payback, time-to-value, and TCO (total cost of ownership). Here are some important elements that often fail to get accounted for in the total benefit projection:

• Leaving out areas of additional ROI beyond labor productivity gains, such as the benefits of reduced shipping/inventory errors.
• Failing to provide detailed supporting evidence, available from case studies and site visits, that the projected labor and other savings are commonly achieved, reducing management uncertainty. By doing a detailed internal calculation supported by independent data showing similar companies/applications that have achieved the same type of results, maximum credibility and confidence will be achieved. Remember, CFOs want to reduce operating costs too.

• Not providing a range of likely savings to build additional credibility. The good news about voice is that usually the lower end of the range will still provide an attractive ROI. By using this approach, the “most likely” and “maximum potential” returns should look outstanding, and as a result, reduce the perceived investment risk.

Do not be afraid to engage voice providers in this process. They will be able to open the door for you to talk to others that have had success with voice implementations, and they can also provide insight into savings areas and ranges based on significant experience with voice applications that can enhance your business case development. We are never quite sure why companies often want to hide business case construction from voice providers; they can provide excellent resources and ideas.

At this earlier stage, before the formal vendor selection process, you should open up your facility to a walkthrough and evaluation by one or several potential voice providers. A few hours on the DC floor, including general discussion of your pain points, goals, and operating environment should be enough to enable them to offer you additional support for business case development.

The Bottom Line: Lack of rigor in business case development can delay or even in some cases kill potential voice projects. Usually, the problems are related to either time constraints or a lack of experience. Investing the time required to do the job right is critical, and getting some help from voice companies and/or technology consultants with real voice experience will almost always improve your analysis.
Key #6: Carefully Select the Voice Provider and Make Sure Operations is in a Lead Position, Since It will have to Live with the Decision and I.T. will only Act in a Supporting Role.

As voice has become more “mainstream,” there can be some tendency to view the technology as having been commoditized, and therefore cost becomes the dominant selection criteria.

This is wrong. First, there are still important differences among providers not only generally, but certainly for the specifics of any given application/deployment. It takes work to understand these differences, but that is what it is needed to select the vendor that is right for each company.

Sales channels can also be an issue. Are the vendors competing for your business selling on a direct basis, or through systems integrator/reseller channels? There is nothing at all wrong about buying through resellers, an increasingly common way for voice systems to get to market, but this means you need to evaluate both the reseller and the “OEM” and how they work together.

Second, while IT will naturally be involved in any technology-related project, too often an IT team member winds up really leading the project, often because logistics managers committed full or part-time to the effort cannot make their commitments (see next section as well).

IT is a critical support resource, but like most areas, success will most strongly be delivered when Operations leads the evaluation and overall project management. That structure should be set in concrete very early on as the project unfolds.

The areas of evaluation between voice technology vendors are fairly straightforward and include:

- Hardware offerings
- Software offerings (specific to your application scenario)
- Approach to integration
- System flexibility over time
- “Out of the box” support from your current WMS/ERP provider
- Vendor’s financial stability
- Level of R&D investment/product roadmap
- Proven track record of success in similar applications
- Support resources

It is generally also a good practice to let a few associates on the floor get involved in parts of the evaluation process, to ensure the actual users have some “voice” in the selection. This will help not only build support from operators for the change in technologies (some of them were part of the process), but may identify some potential issues, say with a given vendor’s equipment, that may not have been recognized by management.

The Bottom Line: This should not be treated as an IT project. While voice is a “technology,” its evaluation should not be considered simply as a technology purchase. Voice is an excellent enabler for the Operations team and should be treated as such. Often, significant project problems can be traced to vendors requiring extensive IT support, but not producing enough solid results from the effort to warrant the resource allocation.
Key #7: Assign the Right Internal Resources and Define Success Metrics

There is probably no more common cause of voice project delay and disappointment than discrepancies that emerge between the resources initially committed to the project and the level of those resources that are actually deployed.

Example: Logistics Project Manager X is charged to be committed to the voice system deployment 50% of his/her time. In practice, the manager’s availability is really only 25%. This will almost surely lead to project issues or failure to meet the timetable that has been set.

This scenario is common not just in voice projects, but in any supply chain application. But it can be especially harmful in voice – almost paradoxically – because the deployment times are generally much shorter than those for other technology implementations; thus, the impact from leadership absence will be more detrimental to the effort.

To that end, companies must determine whether resource commitments are realistic (e.g., a manager said to be 50%-dedicated to the voice project is not realistic, if his/her day-to-day responsibilities are not actually reduced).

It is critical that both executives and the committed employees are realistic about the effort that can be delivered. We recommend that the voice project manager report on the expected/actual levels of effort weekly, with escalation of the issue and/or schedule changes as that analysis suggests. The worst scenario is when management and others believe someone is working the committed 50% of time, whereas in reality he or she is falling far short of that plan.

Equally important, it is critical that companies take the numbers developed in the approved business case directly into the actual project. The project kick-off meeting after the system is approved and the contract with a voice vendor is signed should start with the metrics that will define project success, and those numbers should be kept front and center for the duration of the project (see number 10. Manage the Project to the Numbers, below).

The Bottom Line: The time to actually implement a voice solution tends to be very quick and not to be an extended “WMS”-type installation process. As a result, those dedicated resources are usually “away” from their normal responsibilities only for a short period of time, but their strong up-front planning presence is vitally important. Ensuring adequate committed project resource management and clearly defining what results will signify project success are two frequently overlooked actions in voice and other distribution technology projects that have a big impact on the project results.

“Ensuring adequate committed project resource management and clearly defining what results will signify project success are two frequently overlooked actions in voice and other distribution technology projects that have a big impact on the project results.”
Key #8: Determine Which Deployment Model (Standard or Accelerated) Works Best for You

The incredibly good news about voice technology is that - when it makes sense - it can be implemented quickly, sometimes in the matter of just a few weeks.

This is a function of several factors, including the professional expertise of technology partners; the flexibility of options to meet unique customer needs; the intuitive nature of, and flexibility for, expansion of the voice system; how fast the system can be “trained” for individual operators; and more.

Is your organization and operation ready for this type of rapid deployment? Don’t think of this as a technology install… it’s a process reengineering effort. If you have done the types of up-front work we have recommended (education, process mapping, etc.), you may indeed be ready, enabling your company to rapidly achieve time to value.

This approach is not for everyone. A company should only go only as fast as what makes sense for the business. You don’t want to just add “technology” here. Ensuring that effective process, internal communication, coaching and training, and other components are in place is critically important.

The Bottom Line: Rapid deployments of voice can start delivering savings in just a matter of a few weeks and transform some areas of the DC almost overnight, but companies need to carefully assess whether their systems, culture, management resources and more are ready for this approach, or whether a more measured approach makes better sense. Spending more time up-front to fully assess the operating climate so that there can be some reengineering of processes may be a concern, but experience shows that stronger results and a faster ROI are the typical end result.

“Rapid deployments of voice can start delivering savings in... a few weeks and transform some areas of the DC almost overnight... but companies need to carefully assess whether their systems... are ready for this approach, or whether a more measured approach makes better sense.”
**Key #9: Develop an Implementation Roadmap**

In some cases, the initial deployment is the one and only potential use of voice technology within a given facility or across your network (e.g., you have only one DC).

More often, either officially as part of the initial buy and cost justification, or informally, as a likely path for future voice rollouts, there can be a reasonably clear expectation relative to adding additional workers into the targeted process (say picking) in your original facility, voice-enabling other areas of that DC, and/or voice-enabling the core application in additional DCs.

The mistake companies often make, especially when the path forward has not yet been formally approved/funded, is not laying out this roadmap in a detailed, time-phased way. Failure to detail actual or potential rollouts within or across facilities can delay those next-stage deployments of voice.

Why? Because voice proponents will often have to “resell” additional investments, over and over again. Conversely, if there is a strong sense that the first voice deployment will be a success (as there should be), then building a vision from the start about how that voice success can be extended over time in a “Master Plan” style can gain consensus on that vision from the start of the first project.

As a result, the project often also gains greater visibility and support as it moves the initial voice deployment from appearing like an isolated project to one that has broader strategic and possibly even network-wide ramifications both across the US and even to other countries around the world. We will also note that, without immediately committing to additional voice terminals/systems, a company may be able to gain favorable “option” pricing for additional systems down the road, if this option is anticipated at the initial contracting stage.

And don’t give short-shrift to planning for the human side of the voice implementation – make sure there will be adequate and ongoing training and coaching. And remember, you never can over-communicate – before, during and after the deployment. These two issues surface time and again as being critical factors that often get overlooked.

**The Bottom Line:** Creating a time-phased Master Plan for voice deployment across applications and facilities at the time of initial deployment will help you consistently roll out voice technology more rapidly.
Summing It Up

As voice has become a mainstream distribution center application across many if not most industry sectors, most companies should at least consider voice for new DC developments, or as a means to cut costs or gain throughput as part of continuous improvement programs in existing facilities.

In this paper, we have detailed 10 key steps in adopting Voice technology that are key to achieving high levels of end-project success. Readers may notice that we did not list any specific steps relative to the actual technical system deployment. That is because today, that generally is a fairly straightforward process, and if a company has followed the guidelines offered in this report, it will usually find that the technical system deployment will be successful.

A number of factors, such as native voice support in many WMS solutions and improvements in voice recognition technology, have combined with the inherent advantages of this hands-free/eyes-free technology to deliver significant benefits to hundreds of companies. This includes much higher levels of productivity and accuracy, while providing a stronger payback from the investment than ever before.

The real challenge then, after determining that voice could be a good fit for your distribution operations, is to follow a disciplined approach to investigation, cost-justifying, and ultimately deploying voice technology in your operations in a way that will maximize those results and get the system up and successful in the least possible time in order to achieve the desired payback.

Key #10: Manage the Project to the Numbers

Being “on-time” and “on-budget” is important - but just as important is being “on-results.” Too often, in the heat of the actual voice system deployment, the focus becomes almost solely being on-time and on-budget, and the on-results aspect is semi-forgotten. This can sometimes occur because the technical staff deployed to implement the system was not very involved in the original operational vision and/or the business case development, so frankly, the implementation team members really have that narrow orientation.

In our view, a business manager needs to stay in charge of the project, rather than deferring to IT staff responsible for the technical aspects of the implementation. This manager needs to say focused on the operational metrics used to justify the project, which define success just as much as the meeting schedule and staying on budget.

Most seasoned voice customers would tell you that they would support a slight schedule delay a hundred times over if it helped ensure they could meet and exceed the “on-results” number.

We’re not minimizing the importance of being on-time or on-budget, but too often the on-results aspect isn’t the key focus, and in reality that usually matters far more in the end than schedule or budget.

The Bottom Line: Don’t sacrifice operational results in the name of schedule attainment or project costs - and this directive needs to be communicated at the start of the project, not at the point at which the schedule or budget is in jeopardy.
Supply Chain Digest™ is the industry’s premier interactive knowledge source, providing timely, relevant, in-context information. Reaching tens of thousands of supply chain and logistics decision-makers each week, our flagship publications - Supply Chain Digest, Supply Chain Digest –On-Target, and The Supply Chain Digest Letter - and web sites (www.scdigest.com, www.distributiondigest.com, and TheGreenSupplyChain.com) deliver news, opinions and information to help end users improve supply chain processes and find technology solutions.

For more information, contact
Supply Chain Digest at:

www.scdigest.com
email: info@scdigest.com