

2009

Workflow Management Makes the Whole Enterprise More Efficient



By Bob Helms

Pegasus TransTech Chairman & CEO

6/1/09

Workflow
Management
offers clear
cost benefits
and
competitive
advantages.

Workflow management targeted at reducing costs and improving operating efficiency is an idea whose time has come, particularly for trucking. With easy to use tools to assist in the process, workflow management offers clear cost benefits and competitive advantages.

Until recently, trucking software focused on specific functions such as dispatch programs, mobile communications, maintenance management and automated driver logs, for example. But like a movie shot that backs out of a close-up to reveal a vast panorama, technology providers are expanding their view of the trucking enterprise. That makes it easier to see, analyze, and improve the whole enterprise with what we now call electronic workflow. At its heart, basic workflow is comprised of streams of action, the individual pieces of which comprise almost everyone's work day.

Perhaps the most obvious trucking example is in operations: a customer calls for a pickup, a dispatcher sends a truck, someone picks up the load, and someone delivers the load. One person may have taken the call, and a second person assigned the pickup driver. With those involved in the actual pickup and delivery, all were part of the single stream of action, or process that began with the customer order.

The pickup-through-delivery process has long been monitored by mobile communications devices with GPS and its associated software. But in taking a wider view, technology providers also see other streams of activity that lend themselves to definition, analysis, and improvement. One example might be the process of recruiting, qualifying, and hiring drivers; another might be receiving, assessing, and paying – or not paying – cargo claims.

Once you decide what processes to manage with electronic workflow, the next step would be to select the right tool for the job. The software application should be easy to use and able to create an actual process map, a visualization of the workflow that shows not what management thinks the process is, but how it actually unfolds in the real world. You should be able to see every step in the flow, every person or department involved and understand what actions will drive the flow to the next step and the desired results.

Workflow ensures the right thing happens in the right sequence at the right time.

The system should be able to illustrate even complex processes that are more than simply linear; maybe they involve concurrent streams of action at different levels of a company. Every step should become apparent and understandable in the overall picture. So should steps that can be eliminated or re-engineered. It should enable management to visualize any “gotchas” and then engineer safeguards into the process.

Workflow solutions need to work across platforms, especially in trucking where separate systems are common in areas like accounting, dispatch, maintenance, document management, etc.

Yet an individual process, perhaps beginning with a simple customer order, might involve all of them. A workflow application should be able to span all the departments so that no process can drop off the radar screen, so to speak.

After a manual process has been mapped into electronic workflow, the managers, analysts and consultants usually walk away. That’s where electronic workflow technology takes on great importance. It maintains the integrity of the flow, insuring that the right thing happens in the right sequence and at the right time.

Workflow can establish consistent, repeatable processes that generate optimal results regardless of the specific individuals involved in the process. It constantly measures overall performance and reports the metrics. Management can analyze any process for improvement opportunities.

Remember the old adage: “You can improve most that which you measure and upon which you provide feedback.”

Management should select a workflow tool that quickly adapts to your ever changing business needs. All of us have experienced a major account that dictates new requirements regarding such things as payment of freight invoices or claims. Quick reaction results in better customer service and can lead to a competitive advantage.

Workflow
Solutions
have an
immediate
impact on a
fleet's cash
flow and
profitability.

At a more detailed level, a good workflow program is a daily working tool. It knows where any particular job is in a process and can notify management of anything that was (a) supposed to happen and did not, or (b) anything that is happening that is inconsistent with the intent. For example, it knows if a particular driver application has been submitted, who received it, where it went after that and whether it is being processed within expected time limits. How many times did you miss hiring a good driver because the process took too long or went sideways for some insignificant reason?

Good employees will consistently perform better if they have a process to follow and get reports on their results and efficiency. Some departments double their former throughput after implementing effective workflow tools -- another way to save money and improve profitability.

Electronic workflow can manage data, forms, documents and processes – all within specified windows which drive critical on-time results. Speeding the delivery-to-cash cycle is a typical example. Workflow can manage all the steps from the time a load is delivered until the cash hits your bank.

In an industry like trucking where profit margins are so thin and where all possible efficiencies must be found, enterprise electronic workflow solutions are having an immediate impact on a fleet's cash flow and profitability.