

Relationships: still the heart of logistics

Freight & Trade Alliance (FTA) spoke to Australian logistics technologists Expedient Software about the trends they're seeing and the leading concerns their customers are voicing.

Managing Director Scott Craven highlights four key areas to watch: service, training, mobility and strategic automation.

Service quality front of mind

Craven says customer-centricity and reliable expertise is a core concern for the Australian market, who are weary of providers over-promising and under-delivering.

"Some solution providers have lost touch with their customer needs," he explains.

"In an effort to dominate at scale they are sacrificing context, relationships and the personal touch those things afford. We hear it from customers all the time – they want real people who understand their business, available when they need them most. It's why they love Expedient."

Consolidation of players in the market has compounded this problem for customers, who struggle to be heard when reaching out to ever-larger, often global vendors. As companies take on this kind of scale, quality service becomes challenging. Businesses must respond quickly to new information and unplanned issues. They can't afford to wait around in a queue for help – they need an active and accessible partner.

"Solutions providers have to make the unpredictable comprehensible, and more importantly, manageable," insists Implementation Manager Shaun Perkins.

"This is a fast-moving industry and access to people on your side that know your business is fundamental. The bigger multinationals are getting bigger and bigger; smaller customers need peers they can collaborate with.

"Logistics has always been the ultimate in collaborative industries. Technology is opening up those opportunities even further, providing they're applied wisely and equitably."

Optimisation demands mobility

The company's latest product enhancement delivers web browser interfacing for their

software solutions. Currently in beta, the intuitive interface connects logistics professionals up and down the supply chain with critical data on-the-go and in-situ, rather than having to track down a grounded PC terminal. It also grants easy access to stakeholders overseas or in remote locations.

"Mobility and reflexivity are essential for 21st century logistics", says Perkins.

"Businesses and operators need to be able to log on anywhere, anytime, with the device of their choice. It's a competitive advantage particular meaningful for small and medium businesses."

Expedient believe flexibility is the DNA needed to facilitate the era of 'elastic' logistics; tools and systems that offer malleable capabilities based on need in the moment.

"Digital data and analytics that drive optimisation and real-time decision-making only work if they're portable across the chain," Perkins underscores.

Vendors have a role to play as trainer

Expedient is also working to empower the digital literacies of its customer network, to help them build internal capacity and stay on top of the market. PwC research shows that lack of digital culture and training is a leading challenge facing transportation and logistics companies (2016).

"There is still a spectrum of digital literacies amongst operators, and it's the role of solution providers to offer education and guidance in this area," says Scott Craven.

"Investing in a tool is one thing – unless everyone understands how to utilise it, the business won't be getting value for money, nor seeing the gains we know are

possible. Smaller outfits will rarely have an IT department, let alone training budgets to onboard them to transformative technology. It's unreasonable to expect them to outlay additional investment once they've taken the leap with a new system."

Automation should help humans – not replace them

Automation is already reshaping the logistics industry and its workforce, with many grappling to achieve the appropriate balance between human and machine. Scott Craven argues that too many players take a 'lazy' approach to this important challenge.

"In this business margins are slim, and efficiencies are everything. But swapping people for machines without consideration or context is a lazy way to do things.

Reducing costs without comprising quality is the key, and Craven believes haphazard automation risks safety and integrity for products, process and the people involved.

"We need to examine where people bring real and crucial value in the chain (such as support and oversight), and equip them to do even more, while automating aspects of the industry that need the speed and analysis at scale that machines can support. This approach will lead to regulatory and user acceptance, and better outcomes for all."

Relationships rule

The common thread is relationships – understanding the people you're working for and with, and being responsive to their needs in a timely, relevant and respectful way. The efficiencies born of a strong relationship won't be automated any time soon.

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