

## Automate Your Dock for Big ROI

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Not much has changed since the 1970s when, as a young technology marketer, I stood on the docks of countless trucking companies for hours, sometimes days, clipboard in hand, trying to measure the time and efficiency of dock management. Armed with data laboriously collected, I would confront trucking executives with the evidence that I thought would persuade them to invest in the latest technology of the day to automate wherever they could.

I cannot say I was totally successful in making my case.

Docks then — as they are now — were the forgotten stepchild of the trucking industry, places where activity would begin to heat up at night long after the senior staff had departed. No one, it seemed, really cared.

Today, we no longer have to engage in such intensive due diligence. Computers collect our dock activity data at lightning speed, and all trucking executives have to do is take the action required to save valuable time and money. But they do not.

Many transportation companies, particularly less-than-truckload carriers and other multiple-stop carriers, still do not seem concerned enough with what happens on the dock. They invest substantial sums in their transportation management technology systems, typically in back-office and in administrative activities such as payroll and billing. They also invest in truck operations and mobile trucking technology. But, unlike courier and airfreight companies, few LTLs and multiple-stop carriers invest in technology for the dock.

Why? It's largely because the dock is still out of sight to senior executives of the trucking company. Most dock operations are conducted overnight, between the hours of 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. Out of sight, out of mind.

On the other hand, when an incorrect rate is applied, management knows it right away. If a shipment does not go to Cleveland, top executives find out fast. But if the dock is "working OK" and the shipments are arriving pretty much as expected, nobody will pay attention to how the dock is managed — even though there is the potential for huge savings.

A great many freight carriers perceive dock systems as expensive. But the question is really not what the system costs but what the return on investment is. Plus, the "high cost" of the initial investment can be offset by leasing equipment, which can hasten and increase the paybacks. Paybacks can be in the neighborhood of 8% to 12% savings on dock expenses,

30% reduction in its dock labor force as well as a savings of 140 hours a week for data entry and manifest preparation. These are real numbers reflecting real savings.

In addition to the dramatic cost savings outlined above, a good dock management system brings operating benefits and speed to the process. Morale goes up as employees welcome the accountability of scanning freight on the dock, and no one wants to load a shipment on the wrong truck. The system also reduces the need for employees to return to the office to get their next assignments.

A modern dock system speeds things up by enabling trucks to arrive earlier at their destinations. It allows progressive loading of trailers so they can be unloaded more quickly and efficiently at destination, and it eliminates the need to record what freight is left on the dock after trailer departures.

Other operational benefits include real-time tracking, a historical record of freight movements, a customer alert system for delayed shipments, reduced paperwork and reduced on-dock accidents. The system provides faster handling through one-move efficiency on the dock while preventing misdirects and shortages.

Still not convinced it's time to see the potential in automating your dock? Non-operations benefits include more efficient use of lift trucks, reduction in clerical time for manifest entry, and more accurate and more readily available data. Finally, the dock system means you never again need to go out on the dock to search for a missing shipment. It expands the ability to supervise all dock employees and all shipments, eliminates repetitive work and leads to job enrichment for dock employees.

Trucking employees are equipped with the latest in scanning monitors and handheld scanners to enable the shippers and the shippers' customers to trace and learn where shipments are and when they will arrive. Scanning at the piece level ensures proper consolidation of freight, leading to more cargo handled over less floor space.

Sure, it may be easier to continue to ignore the dock and say that it is running "just fine." But if you want to save big money, eliminate duplicate data entry, cut down on labor hours, make sure that all your shipments go to the right place and gain many more benefits, then it is time to automate your dock.

