

Bar code systems must be high quality, accurate to be successful

Application Factory

In an industry where attention to detail is crucial, one mishap in inventory, quality control or shipping can result in substantial damage and can be a costly, dangerous nightmare. The use of bar-coding technology as a control method can be hit or miss in any arena. But when the stakes are high, investing in a sound bar-coding system is money well spent.

"The most common misconception with bar codes is what they will do for you," Keith Davis, president of Beaumont, Texas-based Application Factory, said. "Bar codes are not a cure-all solution for big problems that some companies are having. They have to be very carefully applied, or you are wasting your money."

Bar codes are really just printed media, designed to code what you want to represent like product numbers. They can be obtained easily and inexpensively. However, if they are low quality and not printed on high-quality equipment, chances are they will not scan accurately. Low-quality bar codes can even be rubbed off of inventory and equipment during transport.

"Quality printed bar codes are paramount," Davis said.

Bar codes still require work. They do

not make inventory simple. They do provide quick data entry, but every item still has to be scanned, which takes manpower.

Further, barcoding inventory only works if the bar-code scanner can be integrated with the existing inventory that allows you to compare what you have in your system with what you have on your shelf. If there is a deviation, you still have to count, determine accuracy, change the ledger and make the final posting.

Consider this example. A petrochemical company in the Fortune 10 had a petroleum incident with an industrial fluid. The fluid was improperly packaged (wrong fluid went into labeled bottles) and shipped. Once the bottles reached consumers, it resulted in equipment damage.

Application Factory developed a new system for that petrochemical company that interfaces with their production system so that they know what product is coming down the line. Bar codes on bottles and boxes are matched up to ensure the correct product is in the right bottle and so on.

"The key of the system is that we have high-quality scanners that can keep up with their system, scanning each bar code about 50-60 times, so that gives us a pretty good

certainty that we are acquiring our data properly," Davis explained.

With this system, no one has to stand over it and watch the process since the system is constantly paying attention to the scans. An incorrect bar code will stop the line and sound an alarm.

"That one previous mishap was so costly to fix that if our system had been in place, it would have paid for itself 30 times over instantly," Davis said. "That is a return on investment for you."

In another example, Application Factory developed a barcoding quality control system for a company that forges up to 36,000-pound steel ingots. The company would send workers out into a 15-20 acre field to retrieve a steel ingot, strap it to an overhead crane and gradually move it across the yard only to discover it was the incorrect ingot needed. Everyone on the shop floor was waiting around for the steel. A lot of manpower was tied up.

Application Factory's system involves a wireless network that covers the entire facility. An employee wears a laser gun on his belt, scans a bar code on a piece of steel in the field and it either says "good" or "bad"

on the screen.

"We pared it down to the basic information that they need to know, and they only have to move the ingot once," Davis said. "That system paid for itself in about six months."

Bar-code systems are not one size fits all, and that is where a lot of these systems fail.

"We will go in and first do an analysis of what the customer needs, and we can even do a site survey to determine why their current system is not working," Davis explained. "We are a 'job shop' or a 'spec shop.' We custom tailor solutions for every client, so everyone gets a system that is more likely to exactly fit their needs."

Maintenance on the systems is easy. The end user is set up so that they are empowered to do day-to-day things on the systems like clean the lenses or add a product. If they need to alter the system and add a feature or do enhancements or adjustments, that is when Application Factory gets involved.

"If you get a cheap solution that doesn't work, then it isn't a solution," Davis said.

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