Americold Logistics Cuts Paper and Costs with Electronic Forms Solution

by Erin Bradford

Clinging to familiar business practices, companies can overlook the small expenses that add up over time: manual labor, ink, and paper. One company, Americold Logistics, was able gain a forty-fold return on their investment by ditching the old-school paper pushing and embracing DRV Technologies' FlexTools electronic method of forms management.

The Paper Chase

Americold Logistics is the largest provider of temperature-controlled food distribution services in the United States, providing cold-storage warehouses for major food distributors. Although Americold provided superior service to its clients through personal attention and regular invoicing, keeping up with more than 15,000 individual customer invoices a month was overtaxing the company's employees—not to mention costing the company a small fortune in wages. Additionally, as part of a recently instituted "go green" initiative, Americold's management had decided to focus on decreasing paper usage.

Americold's staff was manually invoicing customers using warehouse management systems built on home-grown legacy applications on their IBM i, but business had grown over the years, and management decided to invest in some new tools that could speed things up and save money. "We had over 100 warehouses manually printing forms, batching them up, and mailing them to the customers," explained Sheila Wolf, business systems/intelligence analyst for Americold. The company needed to modernize and automate invoice processing to save on labor costs, ink, and paper, not to mention the substantial investment in purchasing preprinted forms. Americold estimated that if they could automate the invoicing process, their savings would reach into the six-figure range.

Originally, Americold considered several different software automation solutions to solve the problem. Americold was also looking to replace their preprinted forms with electronic forms that could be emailed to customers as PDFs. The company also needed a tool that could be used to store and retrieve individual invoices for each customer. Of the different forms-management solutions that Americold researched, DRV Technologies' FlexTools was the obvious choice, said Wolf. "It was just the best product for the money. We also very much

Americold Logistics' FlexTools project team: West Hutchison, Lou Ella Ratliff, Sheila Wolf, and Linda Ballinger

liked the people who came out to present to us." DRV also came out on top because of the manner in which they handled a series of test calls that Americold made to their support staff. Although other companies kept Americold hanging on the line, DRV was ready and available immediately to answer questions.

West Hutchison was the project sponsor visionary who provided the creative scope for the project and was able to gain executive approval for the purchase and implementation of the new solution. He envisioned the potential in the various FlexTools modules, including the PDF repository, which would deliver much-improved access to all customer invoices to Americold users. This feature would "really make our system a complete solution for our warehouses and customers,"

said Wolf. So, in December 2008, Americold purchased the FlexTools suite of products.

The Implementation

Americold knew they would need to tweak FlexTools to integrate the solution with existing warehouse management systems. According to Wolf, because of DRV's continuous support in modifying FlexTools to perfectly match Americold's needs, "we have probably the most robust implementation of FlexTools anywhere." Wolf explained that DRV's support squad and Americold's auto-distribution team worked hand in hand to refine the tools. Adam Owen, IT programmer/analyst for Americold, integrated an entry system to feed the SpoolFlex address book, while Russ McBride, IT Lotus Notes analyst/developer for Americold, set up a repository for distributed PDFs so that users could easily access PDFs produced either manually or automatically by the system. Finally, Linda Ballinger, Lou Ella Ratliff, and the CRM team polled customers to gauge their requirements, enrolled customers, and set up email lists.

Americold used DRV's SpoolFlex and FormFlex native IBM i software to build their electronic invoicing system. SpoolFlex allowed Americold to collect, organize, and store customer data (e.g., email addresses, customer numbers), and FormFlex enabled them to key on that data to both auto-populate their chosen forms and convert the data and form to a PDF attachment, which could be automatically emailed to customers. This allowed customers to see data in the traditional invoice appearance as a text-searchable PDF. Americold was pleasantly surprised to find DRV's Spool Sentry (a job scheduler) included in the tool set. The tool eliminated the need to write any custom programs to process and schedule delivery of invoices.

Americold gradually introduced the solution, and the staff practiced with the new system running in tandem with the paper invoicing for a few months. "We parallel-tested this system longer than most, just because it was so critical to us," explains Wolf. Linda Ballinger, business lead for Americold, gathered data from every warehouse and assisted with training employees on the new solution. Even with the prolonged testing, Americold had the system fully functional by July and even purchased additional FlexTools modules including the Audit Trail, which works like a "sent box," allowing users to log, track, and review all the company's document distributions, including electronic invoicing. This module even lets users resend a document without rerunning the form merge.

So, just a few months after purchasing the FlexTools suite, Americold was able to discontinue the use of manual paper forms altogether. "This has been one of the smoothest, most successful implementations we have undertaken here at Americold. We are now completely live across all our systems and warehouses with the electronic distribution of our invoices," said Wolf. While a few customers are still receiving paper invoices because of their size or familiarity with the old system, most customers are instead opting for pre-filled PDF forms distributed by email.

And the staff at Americold can't say enough regarding DRV's real value: their dedicated staff. Wolf praises DRV's team for providing not only support but also training. She also recalls a time when they ran into a problem when trying to combine receipt documents for email distribution. Throughout the parallel-testing phase of the auto-distribution process, Americold customers repeatedly requested batch distribution of receipt documents. "All of our other documents being automated are already in a summarized form, so their distribution was relatively easy. Not so with the receipts," said Wolf. Americold needed to split spooled files by warehouse and customer, sort them, then recombine them for batching. The files also needed to be merged with electronic forms for email distribution to customers. "This would be far from an easy manual process," said Wolf.

Wolf took the problem to the DRV support team, who, she reports, "gathered the data to test the issue, ...enhanced the software to accommodate us, and made sure we got the free upgrade as soon as it was available. Now, with this new 'Combined Document' process, we will be able to meet all of our customers' requirements."

The End Result

Wolf and her fellow employees at Americold have high praise for the DRV solutions. "Not only did Americold select the right products in choosing DRV Tech's SpoolFlex and FormFlex, but we are very fortunate to have received the best support along with those products," said Wolf.

But what about the bottom line? "The results have been fantastic," said Wolf. "We'll save over $750,000 annually by using FlexTools. And these aren't 'pie in the sky' numbers, these are real cost savings already partially realized by Americold by utilizing FlexTools." With slashed paper usage, reduced postage, and less manual processing, labor costs are dramatically lower. Since the distribution executes electronically, customers receive their invoices faster, and Americold users can search and retrieve copies more quickly and with much less effort.

With happy customers and more money in the budget, Americold has been able to utilize DRV's FlexTools as another step on the road to financial success. "Not only is Americold pleased with the results," said Wolf, "our customers are happier as well. The delivery of invoices is more timely, the invoices are easier to read than the old manually printed forms and can be processed more quickly, and customers can choose to store electronically or print.... It's a total win-win." ∎

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