



Extending the Life of Your Warehouse Management System

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By using adaptive software tools, you not only can lengthen the life of your existing WMS products, including legacy systems and systems no longer supported, you now can have all kinds of new functionality at your fingertips.

No matter how big or how small the operation, everyone has “The List”—that set of unique items that their warehouse management system simply doesn’t do, or does poorly. That’s why warehouse managers often say something like this: “If only we could make our WMS do X, Y or Z.” The good news is, they can.

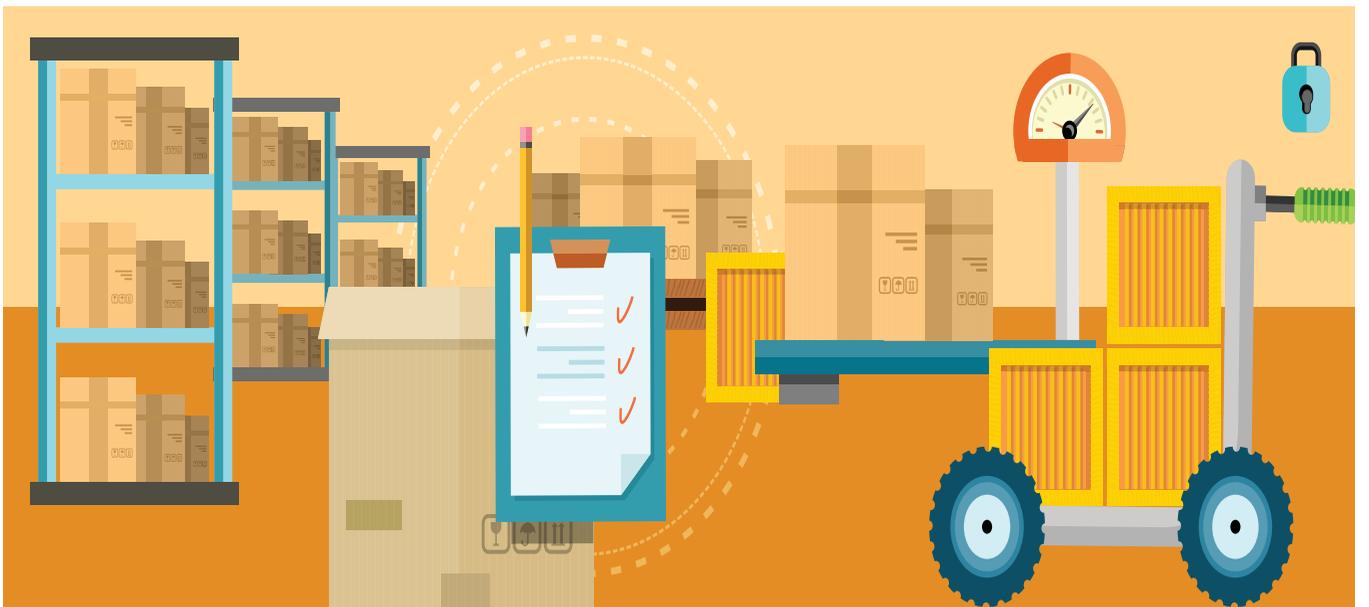
Even users without programming skills are able to create their own software and help a legacy system continue to stand the test of time. Using the right software products, companies can enhance and add on to their existing software products. Even owners of products that are no longer supported, like MARC or legacy systems. Adaptive software tools, like STEPLogic from DMLogic, enables them to write scripts, create screens and RF dialogue

without touching the core WMS software. That extends the life of their existing software—and allows them the flexibility to do things the original software was never configured to perform.

Folks are generally positive when asked if they like their warehouse management systems, says Bob Kennedy, vice president of business development at DMLogic. But, inevitably, there are functions that the installed WMS was never designed to do, and that is problematic. “The inevitability of the fact is that on day one of the implementation of your WMS, that’s the day it will come closest to meeting your needs,” he says. “Because with every passing day, your business grows and changes, and therefore the gap grows a little bit more between what the WMS does and what your business requirements are now.”

As good as it is, the system just can’t keep up. If nothing else, that’s because the volume of business may increase. That means taking on new customers with their programs and demands. For instance, customers may have a promotional program that requires special packaging, labeling or inserts of some kind. Typically, these demands are seasonal, but they can come at any time. If your WMS isn’t geared toward handling those needs, then the requested operation has to be moved off to the side and dealt with manually.

Another shortcoming arises when an RF system simply doesn’t have the flexibility to change or create messages, Kennedy says, because to do so requires special coding. It’s not at all uncommon that a new product requires special handling. Suppose it’s one that contains bio-hazard or flammable



material. “You would like to be able to put out an alert that says that you’re handling this, but you can’t because the RF has one dialog box that it uses. It’s those kinds of things: new requirements, and your existing system isn’t up to dealing with them.”

The reality is that the system may perform its intended functions very well. It’s

responsive as you would like, especially if they are working on more strategic initiatives. Your priorities simply may be further down the line than you would like.

This is the kind of thing that leads to workarounds, and they can be ingenious. “Some of the most inventive people I’ve ever seen work in the warehouse,”

tractual relations, warranties or upgrade paths with one’s WMS vendor.

Timeline? Clearly, the training and implementation depend on the changes that a user wants to see made, but Thomas Lee, DMLLogic president, says the process can take as little as a few days or a few short weeks. For example, he says



just that your business is changing, and along with that, so are your requirements. Challenges are growing larger and coming more rapidly.

Help From Your Vendor?

So why not just go to your vendor for the needed configurations? After all, vendors will pretty much do what you ask them to. Yes, but the question is, how much are you going to pay for it? Additionally, are you going to see a return on your investment? Finally, how long will it take for the vendor to make the changes requested?

The irony is that staying in-house—tasking your IT department or staff—raises much the same questions. While your vendor is looking for new business and plowing time and money into new development, your IT staff is, no doubt, already burdened with a number of projects; it doesn’t really want your “business.” They may not be as

Kennedy says. “But it costs you in the end because it’s more labor used and more time spent.”

So why not use software that enables you, or a reasonably technically-minded person on your staff, to create the needed applications, quickly, without burdening the IT department or digging into the core of the warehouse management system?

Adaptive software like STEPLLogic allows just that. It’s a platform that is layered on top of the WMS and integrates with the database and pushes information to it. Existing code of the WMS is not changed in any way because it is actually creating its own overhead code. So instead of going back to a standard RF dialog, the operator goes to the STEPLLogic dialog, which is personalized to handle the new situations that new business brings. And functionality can be changed frequently, even on a daily basis if need be. Moreover, none of this affects existing con-

DMLLogic put in a system for a client involved in the manufacturing of electrical components. Initial discussions included potential plans to schedule training. It was feared that the client wasn’t using the STEPLLogic product when it never called back. Following up, Lee says, “They told us they were going into production in a couple of weeks. The software is so intuitive that they built an app for themselves and began using it without our help.”

That customer is Thomas & Betts Canada, which designs, manufactures and markets components used to manage the connection, distribution and reliability of electrical power in industrial, construction and utility applications. In an effort to continuously improve its distribution, Thomas & Betts decided to improve the quality of its pick operation by integrating a weight check into the pick sequence. The problem was a tough one to solve because the com-

pany's legacy WMS was difficult to change or enhance, says Bob Primeau, WMS specialist at Thomas & Betts. Once T&B began using STEPLogic, they created an app to enable weight checks as picks were being completed. A Thomas & Betts employee built the app himself and deployed it without formal training or support. The entire

don't need the latest and greatest release from the vendor."

Changes Needed Now

And the reality is that changes will have to be made. Lee points to the pharmaceutical industry where government regulations are ever evolving, and compliance is strict. "If

lasted their creators. They, or the persons who first coded the systems, may no longer be available.

And putting in a new system is clearly out of the question for many companies, he says. "A WMS for a sizable organization can cost more than a \$1 million. It's just not something they're willing to do."



process took only two weeks to build, test and deploy.

"It's a good thing that we were able to create the app ourselves," says Primeau, "because it would have been more expensive to go back to the original vendor."

Waiting for a new release or version of existing WMS software doesn't necessarily meet a user's needs, Lee says. Quite often, one doesn't use 100 percent of the functionality of an existing system anyway; a later version isn't likely to change that. In addition, all of the firepower of a WMS may still only meet 80 percent of a user's requirements. "So you often find yourself looking for ways to change the system to meet your operations or changing your operations to match what the system offers," Lee says. "Neither is a good situation."

If, however, you can make the desired changes to your own specifications, you are in control. "You will find that you just

you have to label something differently or provide information in a report or interface or comply with some federal regulation, those agencies aren't going to wait for you to get changes made through your WMS vendor. They want you to adapt to changes properly but timely."

As an example, he says, a pharmaceutical company may need to ship a critical trial drug to numerous customers. The product remains the same, but the documentation and literature likely will differ with each shipment. "You can't go back to the vendor and say you need to change the packaging every time you have a new trial. You need to be able to do this on your own."

In fact, in many instances you can't go back to the original developer under any circumstances, says Ian Hobkirk, founder and managing director of Commonwealth Supply Chain Advisors. There are a lot of legacy WMS systems that have long out-

Hobkirk likens the WMS to a human heart, and replacing it to open-heart surgery. "The warehouse is the living, breathing organism that, like a heart is pumping the lifeblood of the company. It's just not easy to replace because there is so much going on. Even if replacing it goes well, you still run the risk of losing productivity. A lot of companies just don't want to sign up for that." In his view, that's why the STEPLogic product makes sense.

"On the one hand, we're talking about features and functions, filling in where those gaps might be," says Lee. "With adaptive software like this, you can do things more quickly than the vendor could, which creates more self-reliance and empowers you to make the system exactly what you want it to be. On the other hand, it's more than features and functions because it gives you control over your destiny." ○