

BLACKBERRY SOLUTION ENABLES DOCKWORKERS AT SESTIBALSA TO WHISTLE A BRIGHTER TUNE



As Spain's busiest container port, and the sixth largest in Europe, Algeciras is an obligatory port of call on the through route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean and on to the Far East. Lying at the cross-roads of the busiest sea-lanes towards the Suez Canal, it serves as a natural bridge between Africa and Europe.

In accordance with Spanish law, the loading and unloading of cargo must be carried out by a different organisation in each of the country's ports. In the case of Algeciras, the company with this responsibility is the majority state-owned Sestibalsa. Sestibalsa's 1,800 dockworkers look after all of the loading and unloading of merchandise in the port, where a large number of major container operators such as Maersk Sealand, Maritima del Estrecho and Contrataciones Paublete are present. It is unsurprising then that Sestibalsa employees experience a pace of work that is both hectic and demanding.

THE CHALLENGE

Neither Sestibalsa nor the container operators themselves can be sure of the workload for any given shift until shortly before the dockworkers have to begin work. Until only a year ago the dockworkers were obliged to go to the port twice daily, without any guarantee that they would be required for a particular shift. In addition to the frustration they felt if they found there was no work for them, the mass entrance and exit of the workers was causing huge traffic jams in the vicinity of the port.

Sestibalsa's IT department realised that it needed to implement an alternative system for notifying the dockworkers of their daily work schedule. They decided it should be one that would make use of new communication technologies. As David Viñas, head of IT at Sestibalsa, explains, "From the beginning, we realised that the solution had to be an email broadcast system based on 'push' technologies. We needed to be able to send out a large number of individual, customised messages in a very short period of time."

Furthermore, the company required a system through which the container operators at the port could input all available information required to determine the daily work schedule for its dockworkers.

"We didn't just want to be able to let the workers know whether they should go to the port, but to also give them information such as which terminal to go to, and which machines they had to use for each job," Viñas adds.

A diverse range of alternatives were considered. Sestibalsa knew that some organisations in similar circumstances had tried to implement a telephone-based information system – a call centre that the dockworkers could contact to find out which shifts they were needed for. It required a large number of staff to answer an enormous number of calls in a half-hour period on the run-up to each shift. However, once the various schedules had been shared, the call centre agents would be left with nothing more to do until just before the next shift. By all accounts this had proven to be a costly and ineffective option in other companies with similar activities so a different solution was needed by Sestibalsa.

A second alternative was to post the workload distribution on the Internet. The downside of this solution was that the workers would need Internet access and a more sophisticated understanding of Web navigation than could reasonably be expected.

Traditionally dockworkers had not needed to handle IT resources in their work and the management team was concerned about how difficult it might be to encourage the workers to adopt such a solution.

"Whilst the situation is changing, it's still the case that a large number of the dockworkers are not familiar with the latest IT solutions," continues Viñas. "We felt that an Internet based solution wasn't the best fit for our requirements. We needed something more straight-forward."

BENEFITS

**SIMPLE TO
DEPLOY AND USE**

**BETTER QUALITY
OF LIFE FOR EMPLOYEES**

**REDUCTION IN
UNNECESSARY JOURNEYS
FOR EMPLOYEES
TO AND FROM PORT**

INCREASED EFFICIENCY

"Our main goal with this project was to improve the quality of life of these employees, and there's no doubt whatsoever that this has been achieved. It's probably no coincidence that we've also found that Sestibalsa has become more efficient since we introduced the new system. The benefits have been universally felt by the company and our employees."

David Viñas, head of IT at Sestibalsa

THE SOLUTION

Before too long the ideal solution became obvious. Sestibalsa decided to introduce the BlackBerry® solution, which had been proposed by the mobile service provider, Telefónica Móviles. This solution would see BlackBerry smartphones distributed amongst its workforce.

"When the BlackBerry platform was presented to us it had such a comprehensive range of uses for communicating with our employees that we realised straight away this was the solution that best suited our requirements," says Viñas.

Sestibalsa was offered two options from two different technology vendors. After appraising both devices they chose the BlackBerry solution due to its user-friendly QWERTY keyboard and particularly due to its robustness.

"The user profile meant that we needed a device that was extremely durable and resistant to blows. The longshoremen's work involves constant movement, frequent physical exertion, as well as the operation of heavy machinery such as containers, cranes and trucks. Not surprisingly, under these conditions the devices are subject to frequent knocks and falls. However, in our experience the protective casing of the BlackBerry smartphones makes them resistant to falls of up to two metres," says Viñas. "But all that aside, the beauty of these devices is that they are so easy to use – the message is sent to the user and all he has to do is open and read it. It's that simple."

Sestibalsa deployed BlackBerry® Enterprise Server, integrated it with an application that was developed in-house and linked this to a database which itself is synchronised with a directory where the contact details of each dockworker are stored.

"The initial investment required to get us up and running was minimal," explains Viñas.

THE BENEFITS

The choice of whether or not to sign up for the new process was left entirely up to each individual dockworker. By adopting this new option to check the daily work schedule the workers would be assuming an extra expense – the monthly rental fee. However, Sestibalsa was convinced that the employees would soon appreciate the benefits when they no longer needed to travel to the port only to find they were not required to work a particular shift.

Despite a cautious early welcome, acceptance of the new solution amongst Sestibalsa's dockworkers has been overwhelmingly positive. The ease of use of the device and word-of-mouth reports of its benefits from those colleagues already using it continue to convince initially hesitant workers to go ahead and try out the new solution.

"When we told the dockworkers about this new option at the beginning of 2005, only 120 of them asked for a BlackBerry smartphone. In just over 12 months, that figure has more than tripled so that already 400 of our employees have decided to sign up to use the device."

Among the many advantages delivered by the new solution, David Viñas highlights the improvement in the dockworkers' quality of life as being one of the most important. "Some of our employees live at distances of up to 40 kilometres from the port. So you can imagine how frustrated they felt when they came down here and found there was no work for them. Now they only come down to the docks when they know there is work to do. And what's more, with the BlackBerry solution we can tell them exactly which container terminal to report to and which machines they need to use for each job."

An additional benefit for the dockworkers is that they can use their BlackBerry smartphones to request vacation time and special permission for absence. In the days before the BlackBerry solution, the dockworkers would have needed to go to the Sestibalsa offices in person to make this type of request.

As Viñas summarises, "Our main goal with this project was to improve the quality of life of these employees, and there's no doubt whatsoever that this has been achieved. It's probably no coincidence that we've also found that Sestibalsa has become more efficient since we introduced the new system. The benefits have been universally felt by the company and our employees."

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