

From boardroom to loading bay: adding value to the supply chain



In just 15 years, Great Bear has become a significant player in the UK logistics market. Managing over three million ft² of warehousing, 23 distribution centres, 150 vehicles and 1,200 people, Great Bear today turns over more than £85 million. Blending the best of entrepreneurial innovation and the customer focus of the smaller organisation with the scope and reach of a corporate, Great Bear runs a true multi-site, multi-client 3PL operation for a range of clients in the grocery, manufacturing and retail markets that include household names like Sainsbury's, Mars, Umbro, Unilever and Michelin.

With logistics solutions in the ambient, multi-user and chilled sectors, Great Bear also provides its customers with a range of shared resources, services and facilities. The primary focus of these operations is full load traffic, using both dedicated resources and regional partners to deliver rate per load traffic nationally – and includes value-added reworking services.

Technology infrastructure is critically important to Great Bear, underpinning its ability to deliver a fast, accurate, flexible and highly cost-efficient service. At the heart of that infrastructure is Autostore, one of Europe's leading enterprise warehouse management and control solutions. Developed by supply chain software specialists Central Systems & Automation, Autostore is Great Bear's key to delivering future-proofed value and high performance supply chain management for its customers.

Great Bear and Central Systems & Automation combine to offer a package of credibility, performance, functionality and price that has helped put Great Bear on a performance par with larger 3PLs. The relationship proves how complementary businesses can work together to add a level of value in tough trading conditions that strike a profound chord with the market.

Tuning the 3PL model for tough times

Today, customers are seeking lower inventory with higher throughput at a lower operating cost – coupled with the ability to consolidate and scale their supply chain operations for changes in demand and future growth. Outsourced 3PL supply chain management has two key focus points: asset management and information management. It's the software technology that innovative 3PLs like Great Bear are using to drive integrated and expanded service offerings that increase revenues and drive exceptional value – and this is where the Autostore enterprise WMS software solution comes in.

The flexibility to handle ebbs and flows in demand across sites and multiple customers in real time is critical; it removes inbound/outbound delays and costly customisation, as well as tricky integration and higher systems maintenance costs. The supply chain is a clear source of competitive advantage and Great Bear's clients view the company as a natural extension of their core operations, able to place a constant downward pressure on costs while being able to respond instantly to changes in market demand for product. Great Bear now uses Autostore to deliver this fingertip flexibility across several of its distribution centres for blue-chip clients like Cadburys, Premier Foods and Mars. It is also scheduled for implementation at its new Manchester facility for PZ Cussons.

Embedding best practice at the Desborough DC

Great Bear's newest distribution centre at Desborough in Northamptonshire is a textbook example of 21st-century supply chain management that's as flexible as it is efficient. Built in 2007 and completed inside 12 months, the greenfield Desborough Distribution Centre (DDC) covers 475,000ft² of storage space with 70,000 pallet positions in four chambers – plus 58 loading bays with four level access doors and four automated vehicle off load bays. DDC comprises four main chambers with: 35,000 pallets in the temperature-managed chamber; 8,000 pallets over 1,200 pick faces in the high volume case pick zone; 5,000 pallets in the chill chamber; and 22,000 pallets in the normalised ambient chamber. DDC has helped one Great Bear client to consolidate its multiple format UK supply chain operations from three sites to two.

On peak days, DDC will handle around 3,400 pallets inbound and 4,000 outbound, comprising 105,000 case picks across 300 orders and up to 275 vehicles. Autostore is networked across the site, co-ordinating and scheduling all stock movements in real time.

It communicates with all mechanical handling equipment (MHE) across radio frequency (RF) terminals, and the RF system carries the data for receipt of goods, pallet storage and retrieval, marshalling,

loading, case picking, rework and added-value services and yard management data. Radio data terminals (RDT) give Great Bear's users complete freedom around DDC and means that more pallets can be handled faster and more accurately at least cost. Because Autostore works in real time, it gives Great Bear instant and full visibility and control over every item of stock held: where it has come from, where it is located, and when and where it is going.

The benefits of standardisation

Mark Roberts is Great Bear's General Manager, Business Development: 'The systems, hardware and software are an integral part of how we designed Desborough. We take a factory-style approach that is always to look forward and keep the flow of goods moving; we pick ahead and pre-assemble. Autostore is already a proven solution for us – prioritising and managing daily workflows at several sites and across multiple clients. This level of strategic standardisation gives us the operational flexibility we need plus the predictability and performance we need to be able to deliver reliability and efficiency for our clients. It's a trust thing; not only does Autostore fit us well, there's also a strong cultural fit between our two organisations that has evolved into a true business partnership.

'A major benefit of this standardisation is the simple integration between Autostore and our clients' enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. No two Great Bear clients are the same and the fundamental key to delivering an effective supply chain solution is clarity and timeliness of the mission-critical information – and the ability to act on it quickly and without error,' he added.

Standardisation on a single, multi-site WMS makes clear practical sense. But why Autostore? Andrew McKaig is commercial director at Central Systems & Automation: 'Perhaps the most important single consideration is confidence in the system you choose. It has to work from the off and deliver not only against the specification but be robust enough to handle the unexpected, too. Autostore has been proven over many years and in many organisations to deliver exactly that level of power and reliability – right across the automated, manual and mixed warehouse spectrum.

'Whether operators are in the warehouse or making decisions in the boardroom, Autostore's flexible and fast reporting capabilities mean that everyone gets the information they need in the format they want, when they want it. There's no time-consuming double keying of data, just a simultaneous, real-time picture of what's happening – and what's required.'

Taking a balanced approach

From a technical perspective, Great Bear's embracing of leading-edge and standardised IT infrastructure at DDC and other sites means it can precisely match client demands without costly integration issues. Pallet and goods processing is faster, enabling Great Bear to make Desborough work closer to its capacity limits without compromising performance or the need for physical expansion. Plus, the centralised control of data ensures that network bandwidth is optimised, making for a leaner and more efficient technology backbone.

It's no surprise that the shared benefits and shared objectives that drive Great Bear and Central Systems & Automation have struck a chord with some of the UK best known brands. Using a 'light touch' supply chain management model that's nimble, flexible and effective, Great Bear today offers integrated, technology-driven solutions that combine the gravitas of a major player without losing site of the company's entrepreneurial, customer-focused roots.

Rick Geall is Great Bear's Operations Director for the South of England: 'Our extensive investment in technology doesn't lock us into purely automated warehousing and supply chain management solutions. At Desborough, we run a mixed range of people and technology-led processes that offer a balanced approach for least cost today and flexibility tomorrow. It cuts inventory holdings, increases throughput and delivers real value to our clients. As a custodian to our clients' brands, our ability to manage and handle their stock to exceptional levels of accuracy allows them to focus on their core competencies – knowing that when they call on their stock, it will be there, in the right condition and in the right quantities.

'Our IT systems – and Autostore in particular – provide us with a high level of sophistication, but without the complexity that often means a high total cost of ownership. At a time when efficiency and profitability have never been more important to our clients and UK businesses as a whole, we can offer a proven 3PL model that delivers a level of value, performance and edge in the supply chain that's difficult to match by our competitors.'



Further information

For more information see Great Bear's web site www.greatbear.co.uk