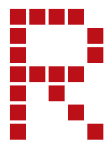


GETTING IT DONE

TASK MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IMPROVE STORE-LEVEL JOB COMPLETION

BY JULIE RITZER ROSS



etailers face a double-edged sword when it comes to labor. On one side lies pressure to keep a lid on human resources expenditures; on the other, a push to satisfy ever-louder demands for top-tier customer service.

Increasingly, task management applications are being implemented to address these issues. Such systems disseminate and track the completion of individual job assignments, ranging from checking in inventory and putting it out on the store floor, to setting up displays in accordance with a planogram, to executing category resets, and more. They also provide a vehicle through which managers can be notified of non-compliance with assignments and related process breakdowns, so as to address them proactively.

"If executed the right way, task management can facilitate superior customer service standards and operational efficiencies in a business unit," asserts Sahir Anand, a retail research analyst at Aberdeen Group.

Proponents of task management applications say they yield a number of key benefits. Officials at Home Depot have publicly credited a task management application with enabling a recall safety alert compliance rate of 100 percent, as well as a 20 percent increase in employee "face time" with customers.

MONITORING STORE-LEVEL OPERATIONS

Dick's Sporting Goods was looking to better monitor and execute store-level operations, programs and promotions when it implemented the Web-based RetailAction suite from Reflexis Systems, notes Joe Ratay, director of store systems. "Keeping stores up-to-date on information sent from the corporate office through a combination of e-mail, snail mail, phone and intranet was problematic; often, they either received du-



24 Hour Fitness monitors task execution on the gym floor and in on-site shops selling apparel and accessories.

there was a lack of consistency in the appearance of different store departments leading to lost sales and lost credit for vendor returns, as tracking and moving merchandise from store to store was very difficult.

The Reflexis software eliminates these problems by streamlining the delivery of task-oriented communications to stores; e-mail and other communications methods are no longer necessary. Duplicate and missed communications are rare, Ratay states. "Because of the tracking capability and exception reporting, we also can see not only whether communications were received, but identify non-compliant parties. The amount of time spent on paperwork has been significantly reduced as well."

24 Hour Fitness, a chain of health clubs, also

INTEGRATION A MUST

Task management systems must interface with other applications if the full potential of, and investment in, task management is to be realized. Labor scheduling systems top the list: only through an integration of this type can retailers ensure that improvements in the customer shopping experience wrought by task management modules do not increase labor costs.

Merchants can take one of two "best business practice" approaches to achieving successful task management/labor management integration. One option assumes sufficient labor capacity at the store level and the ability to schedule tasks to be performed in a given week. Labor hours needed for a job are estimated when tasks/projects are created, and the information is passed to the scheduling system so that total labor hours required to finish all tasks in a week are available to the scheduling engine.

The second option entails earmarking a fixed number of labor hours per week for individual tasks. Labor hours are estimated when using the task management application to create a store task/project. The application applies the "cap" of total hours available for such tasks, permitting low-priority jobs to be eliminated.

Apparel chain AnnTaylor Stores ranks among merchants taking the integrated tack. The retailer has rolled out the BlueCube Enterprise Workforce Management suite from RedPrairie, which features interfaced forecasting, optimized scheduling and business process workflows modules. Employee roles, availability and preferences are aligned with labor demand to produce optimized work schedules that are tracked against the system's time and attendance tools. According to Scott Knaul, AnnTaylor's director of store operations, the integrated nature of the tool allows the chain to "deploy labor more effectively in response to client traffic in stores." **RIS**

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— JOE RATAY, DICK'S SPORTING GOODS

plicate communications, or no communications at all," he explains. "There just wasn't any real way of knowing whether store-to-store transfers, returns to vendors, sign packages, planograms and the like had been received by the correct store-level managers — and whether managers were acting on them."

Ratay adds that planograms were a major concern for Dick's because management frequently did not discover poor execution or missing signs and fixtures until it was too late. Consequently,

selected the Reflexis application. "In addition to visibility of execution, the solution — which is being piloted in the fitness areas of several clubs as well as on-site shops selling apparel and accessories — will be instrumental in keeping us abreast of what staff need to get tasks done," says Dan Benning, senior vice president, corporate operations. "For example, if we send down a planogram and there's a reason staff can't execute it, we will be able to react appropriately."