

Collected works

When people think about the postal service they usually focus on how long it takes a letter to get from A to B. But prompt service starts with accurate, punctual collections. Wendy M. Grossman gets delivered.

Generally when we think of postal service automation we think of postcodes – hard to remember but effective at helping machines sort mail quickly and accurately. This type of automation began as early as 1959, driven by increasing volume and escalating costs. But mail sorting is only part of the story. Postal services need to prove they meet government targets; deregulated postal services need to compete with newer entrants into their business. In both cases, postcodes are only the beginning. In recent years, postal services have been looking for ways to automate other parts of their operations.



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Take, for example, the ubiquitous pillar box. One of the keys to prompt mail delivery is ensuring that these are emptied frequently and on schedule. In the Netherlands, for example, the postal organisation is contractually required to empty boxes many times a day – and they need to prove it. In the past, they managed this by having the drivers write everything down. But lengthy written logs are awkward to manage: kept on paper they're unwieldy to merge and analyse, but keying them into a computer system takes a long time and introduces errors. In 2005, therefore, the Dutch post thought of barcodes.

Postal codes

"We offered them a small scanner with a built-in clock that could add the exact time the box was emptied," says Rolien Faber, European marketing director for Opticon Sensors Europe. She explains the system like this: when drivers empty the box, they use one of Opticon's data collectors – light but rugged handheld scanners – to scan the

barcode attached to the box. The data collector automatically adds the date and time and stores the record. As soon as the returning data collectors are placed in one of the cradles in every office, the data is automatically uploaded into a centralised system.

The system has spread throughout Europe with increasing functionality; Faber says that often new customers have feature requests. "Our projects are all based on customised solutions," she says.

After the Dutch came Royal Mail (see sidebar), then the Italian, French, and Spanish postal services. "The whole idea of emptying post boxes and adding a time stamp to a barcode rolled out over the whole of Europe," Faber says. Next was Mexico, which wanted GPS added to the devices. "Adding GPS coordinates to addresses helped the postmen find the right location," she says, "because now they can verify if the GPS coordinates they've scanned are the same as the ones they have in the admin system."

Opticon, originally founded in Japan in 1976, also sells its scanning engine to third-party manufacturers; recently it's begun incorporating them into smart phones, a design Faber says the several postal organisations are working on using to improve their parcel logistics. "Smart phones can capture signatures," she says, "and if the packages are delivered the receiver can immediately sign on the smart phone and with wireless communications and GPS it can be sent to the host system immediately so everything is up-to-date."

So, she sums up, "We started with one small data collector for the Dutch post and now we have nine different data collectors, since every country has specific requirements, though they all do actually look like the same scanner."



Royal Mail

Like the Dutch postal service, Royal Mail needs a way of ensuring that collections of the more than 84 million items it delivers a year are reliable and punctual. It, too, must meet government targets. As a condition of Royal Mail's licence, for example, Postcomm requires 93 percent of first class mail to be delivered by the end of the first working day after posting (third working day for second class); if Royal Mail's performance falters it must pay fines. Royal Mail also faces competition from a variety of sources, from couriers to parcel delivery specialists.

In 2005, therefore, Royal Mail set up an initiative it called "Access Barcoding" (ABC) to measure the punctuality and reliability of collections from pillar boxes. The company spent some £4.5 million on implementing ABC including project management, hardware, and delivery to end users. The upshot: Royal Mail rolled out 17,000 Opticon data collectors at a rate of 1,000 a week. Sourced from The Barcode Warehouse, the devices include backlit displays, single-button keypads, and protective cases and allow Royal Mail to determine whether collections have been made early or skipped entirely. Collecting such data enables the company to report regularly on the quality of service it's delivering throughout the country and also to make improvements.



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