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CASE STUDY

ABS Holdings

Warehouse Wireless & Handheld Terminal Refresh



A Warehouse Network Infrastructure and Handheld Terminals to Support Rapid Growth

As the UK's foremost omni-channel reseller of pleasure products, ABS Holdings run a busy distribution operation from their Hampshire-based warehouse and head office space.

During a time of great change, in terms of the way people purchase goods of all kinds, the growth of e-commerce has helped the business to quadruple their turnover in a strikingly short space of time.

However, this growth led the company's Commercial Director, Symon Reeves, to consider the health of his picking, packing and shipping operation as well as the technology that underpins it.

This journey began after the business outgrew their existing warehouse and moved to their current, larger unit.

New Warehouse; New Issues

Having experienced on-going connectivity problems at their old warehouse - an issue which saw handheld devices dropping their network connection on receiving orders from their ERP software - the existing system in the new premises degraded to the point of inactivity.

"The problem was extremely difficult to diagnose", explained Symon, "it could occur on any handheld device and at any location on the warehouse floor.

Once in the new warehouse, our order picking performance was a cause for concern, going from a constant stream of activity from 7am - 4pm to just one successful pick every 20 minutes."

Having used the legacy wireless network equipment and the same handheld terminal (HHT) units which were in use before the move, ABS Holdings were keen to solve the issue and opted to increase the wireless coverage by adding access points to the new warehouse infrastructure.

"We tried to retrace our steps for clues as to how we might have affected the system, but in doing so lost another week of shipping at a significant cost to the business." said Symon,

"We knew we needed a technology partner to help ensure our warehouse wireless was fit-for-purpose and that our handhelds could cope with the volume of order picking and inventory management we were experiencing - it was at this point we contacted Ensign Communications."

Health-Check Survey

After receiving the call from ABS Holdings, Ensign Communications' account manager, Justin Pender, began working closely with the business to help them correct their faltering warehouse infrastructure.

"The best way to diagnose malfunctioning handheld terminals - particularly where drop-outs are concerned - is to conduct a health-check survey." explained Justin.

"On completion of the survey we found that the access points in situ were all sited in the incorrect locations and just moving them could, at the very least, ease the pain being experienced by ABS."



The Weak Link Identified

The access point relocations produced some marginal improvements but the handheld drop-out issue persisted. After some careful consideration and consultation from Justin and Ensign, ABS Holdings decided that replacing their end-of-life handheld estate was the next logical - and necessary - step in their warehouse transformation.

Handheld Terminal Refresh

Ensign Communications supplied ABS Holdings with a number loan HHTs from a range of business-grade manufacturers.

These Handhelds offered the warehouse staff the full portfolio of possible features and form-factors, such as screen types and sizes, touchscreens, various keyboard options and even PDA-style devices.

After just one week of the four-week loan period ABS Holdings' staff and their management selected the Datalogic Falcon X3, preferring its combination of rugged ergonomic design, QWERTY keyboard and high-performance long range 2D imaging capabilities.

“Ensign Communications came to us with a range of options that really fitted our needs.”

“Given the increased volume of shipping we were experiencing it was crucial to get this right.” said Symon.

“What we really liked was that, whilst onsite, Ensign's engineers really did look at what we were doing and how we were doing it, and really tried to understand our business operation before making any suggestions.”

Problem Solved; Lesson Learned!

With the new Datalogic Handheld terminals in place and running perfectly alongside the re-positioned access point estate, the headaches for Symon and his staff were over and the business could get back to its normal levels of picking, packing and shipping.

Pleased with the outcome, Mr Reeves said: “What we learned through the entire warehouse project was just how finely balanced the entire infrastructure is. With the handheld devices tied in with the harsh RF warehouse environment and the access point layout design, as well as the way the overall network is configured; an expert partner such as Ensign Communications is essential.”

Although the work so far had been a great success, Symon decided that a fully functioning network was not enough and that future-proofing their warehouse infrastructure was the next strategic progression for the business.

Future-Proof Warehousing & Logistics

“We wanted to further de-risk our future operation”, explained Symon, “we really didn't want to learn another harsh lesson.”



“If there is one thing I would pass on to other warehouse and logistics based businesses in this same scenario, it would be this:

“You can put the 'sticky plaster' on an ailing network if you want, but when it comes down to your warehouse operation and getting orders out of the door to your customers, you really can't scrimp and save to reduce impact in the short-term as it will fall over eventually.”

Justin and Ensign again worked closely with the ABS Holdings team to ensure that they selected the correct wireless access points for their current and future plans, eventually opting for the HPE Aruba 305 Series.

“The HPE Aruba hardware is tried and tested in warehouse environments”, explained Justin Pender.

“We wanted a Wave 2 device that would offer ABS Holdings the maximum degree of RF penetration without over-specifying for their requirements and budget.”

The HPE Aruba 305s fit this remit perfectly and offers ABS Holdings network scalability in the future, should they need it.”

The new access points, sited by Ensign Communications, now offer full resilience to ABS Holdings' warehouse operations, giving them the peace-of-mind that they have safeguards against any future hardware failures; however unlikely they might be.

The addition of Wavelink technology further streamlines the warehouse, enabling them to deploy software upgrades to their handheld terminal estate quickly and effectively - a process that was previously taking devices out-of-action for a number of hours each month.

Relationships Forged

Asked to comment on the working relationship between Ensign Communications and ABS Holdings, Symon Reeve said:

“Ensign recognised that we were in pain and gave us a great deal of confidence from the beginning with their proactive and positive attitude.

I have always found that, in potentially damaging IT situations, a business can be quite vulnerable - if the problem can't be fixed internally you may find yourself paying 'over the odds' or taken advantage of. However, at no point throughout our entire journey did we feel that Ensign were trying to monetise us.”

Smooth Sailing

Since the completion of the work ABS holdings have not experienced any of their previous issues.

In closing, Symon said:

“We have taken the warehouse to a place it has never been - the system works perfectly!”

If there is anything we need to consider with regards to the warehouse WiFi or the warehouse infrastructure in general, we take Ensign's advice first - it is now business policy that any IT supplier we use in the future has to be able to work with them.”



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ABOUT ENSIGN COMMUNICATIONS

Ensign Communications is a UK-based provider of secure, business-grade wired and wireless network infrastructure solutions and professional services.

For more than 30 years we have delivered bespoke, secure business-grade network infrastructure solutions from the world's leading technology manufacturers.

Our strategically located offices, Poole in the South and Manchester in the North, enable our team of highly-accredited network engineers to cover the entire United Kingdom.

This nationwide footprint enables Ensign Communications to meet the varied needs and requirements of our broad customer base.