



Above and right: Voice is becoming widely accepted in many sectors.

Bibby experienced a number of benefits, some of them unexpected. "There are a lot of benefits that we had not anticipated at the outset. We thought we'd get an improvement in pick performance and accuracy. We got both but the biggest payback was in terms of accuracy."

"Customer service level was pretty high but improved to 99.9 accuracy. I've never worked in a paper environment where you could achieve that."

With the development of RFID paralleling that of voice technology, it would be easy to see the two as

competitive. However, Tanner says it is important not to confuse the capabilities of the two technologies. "Voice is about moving goods. RFID is more akin to barcoding in that its about identification and tracking of goods. They are not technologies that you can particularly compare. Eventually the technology may get to the point where its viable to move into a warehouse for use at the pick face."

But that assumes you can overcome all the reading challenges at the pick face such as reading through liquids and metals, which can block signals. If that's done, RFID could complement voice with a built-in RFID reader within the mobile computer, so that as each item is picked, the reader recognises each item and you effectively get a talking tag. It could confirm that all the required products have been picked or it could confirm with an employee that they have not yet picked enough boxes, he says.

"Voice doesn't really have another technology that it competes with as such...It replaces paper systems that are notoriously inaccurate, it replaces scanning which is notoriously bad for both productivity and although improves accuracy above paper, it's not as good as a technology that allows you to keep your hands and eyes on what you're doing."

### HIGHER PLANE

Tanner reckons that the Holy Grail of 100 per cent accuracy might be achieved in the future with RFID and voice working together, but if 99.9 per cent is possible with voice, he says, does the investment in further technology at the pick face make business sense?

Tanner says a good application for the talking tag idea is at the back door of retail stores. If an employee is receiving goods and is taking a product off the lorry and then scanning the RFID tag, he or she could be immediately informed where that item was needed. If the shelf was empty it could be taken right to where it was needed.

Giles-Knopp says: "100 per cent is the nirvana for any solution." However he says "99.9 is practical and reasonable." Paterson says accuracy was unlikely to

## CASE STUDY

# Savoie kits-out Ebuyer.com

Ebuyer.com has consolidated its operation and re-located to a 280,000 sq ft logistics and office centre in Howden, East Yorkshire.

Savoie was asked to provide a turnkey solution, designing and supplying the total storage and order fulfilment system hardware and software. The Howden facility houses Pallet Racking for large bulky items, CLS (Carton Live Storage) with PBL for the general product range, Static Shelving for the slow moving items and the Commissioner ASRS (Automated Storage & Retrieval System) for high value products. All items are picked using PBL (Pick by Light) or RF Devices into totes that are automatically routed into the sortation, packing and despatch areas. The whole process is managed and controlled by Savoie's Warehouse Management System LM7.

A key feature of the whole system is

the fact that the totes are effectively stored on the conveyor and controlled by the LM7 software which can be launched from anywhere in the system. As such the management software will choose the tote nearest the first item to be picked for the next order and as soon as the order is fulfilled and the tote is emptied it will be introduced back onto the conveyor awaiting allocation for its next order. A major benefit of this is that there is no delay at the start up in the morning with orders picked, packed and ready for dispatch within a few minutes of switching on the system. The system was commissioned in June and is currently ramping up processing around a 1,000 orders an hour well below its' total capacity. In order to meet Ebuyer's growth targets over the coming years the system has been designed by Savoie to handle 2,000 orders an hour.