By S&R staff writer

# Beyond the loading bay
# Making every movement count

A product can be well priced, attractively packaged and in demand, but if it is not available when and where a customer wants it, the sale may be lost. Behind every well-stocked shelf and successfully delivered online order is a warehouse operation coordinating inventory, space, equipment and digital information with the transport network. For retailers, getting these moving parts to work together has become as important as the product itself.

## Visibility is the starting point

Retailers need to know what stock they have, where it is located, how quickly it is moving and whether it will reach its destination on time. Without that visibility, stores may order stock already available elsewhere in the network, while fast-moving products run short because replenishment comes too late. The costs extend beyond transport and storage to lost sales, excess inventory and working capital tied up in the wrong products.

Digital systems can connect purchasing, inventory, warehousing and delivery information, giving decision-makers a clearer picture of the operation. Barcode scanning, warehouse management systems and real-time tracking can improve stock accuracy and show where goods are moving through the network. The objective is to respond to problems sooner, not simply discover them more quickly.

https://stockcake.com/i/cyber-cargo-fashion

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## Small efficiencies, substantial gains

Knowing where existing equipment is and how effectively it is being used can release capacity and avoid unnecessary expenditure. SPAR South Africa presents a useful practical example of this. The retailer introduced Smartee360 asset monitoring across its distribution and store network in 2022. Bluetooth Low Energy beacons fitted to material-handling equipment, including rolltainers, dollies and meat trolleys, record movements through an existing delivery sign-off process. The information feeds into online dashboards, giving operational teams visibility of asset locations and how long equipment remains at specific points in the network.

According to a case study published by Logistics News in July 2026, SPAR reduced average asset dwell time from 4.93 days in 2022 to 2.61 days in 2026, a 47% improvement. The case study also reports that improved utilisation helped the group avoid buying more than 800 replacement rolltainers, with approximately 200 new units required instead.

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## The warehouse becomes a fulfilment hub

Warehouses must now replenish stores while handling smaller, more frequent online orders, each with different picking, packing and delivery requirements.

Improved racking, conveyor systems, automated storage and retrieval, and robotics can help businesses use space more effectively and reduce unnecessary handling. Goods-to-person systems, for example, bring products to workers rather than requiring them to travel throughout the warehouse to collect each order.

However, automation need not be an all-or-nothing investment and it does not have to all happen in one go. Retailers can start by digitising manual processes or addressing a specific bottleneck. Installation, maintenance, energy, staff training and systems integration must all be included in the business case. Technology cannot compensate for inaccurate stock records or poorly designed processes.

Nestlé's Longmeadow distribution centre is a case in point, where 17 laser-guided vehicles were introduced to handle an additional 6 804 pallets without expanding the building, reducing reliance on external warehousing.

(Nestlé ESAR)

https://www.lta.gov.sg/

Calculating a vehicle's efficiency doesn't begin and end with the fuel it carries, but needs to take into account all the factors that go into building andrunning it.
www.autoweek.com/

Depending on the location, in some cases an equivalent or even bigger reduction in emissions could be achieved by switching to lightweight conventional (gas-powered) vehicles instead of electric power vehicles.
https://news.mit.edu/

## Where third-party logistics adds value

For retailers without the volumes, capital or expertise to develop these capabilities independently, a third-party logistics (3PL) provider can offer access to established distribution networks, warehouse infrastructure and technology.

A specialist may spread investment costs across several clients, making capabilities available to businesses that could not justify them alone. However, outsourcing does not remove the need for sound inventory planning or guarantee that the retailer's systems will communicate effectively with its partner's.

The two operations can be effectively connected by sharing information. This is improved even more through clearly defined responsibilities and agreed performance measures. Obviously problems must be resolved before they affect customers, so both parties need to know whether stock is available and that orders are accurate.

## Efficiency must reach the shelf

Supply chain performance should ultimately be measured by its contribution to the retail business. Are stores receiving the right quantities? Are deliveries arriving on time? Are picking errors declining? Is stock spending less time sitting idle?

Resilience also matters. Retailers need to identify vulnerabilities and have practical alternatives when delays or capacity shortages disrupt supply. Tracking technology can reveal problems earlier, but contingency plans and capable people are paramount.

Whether retailers manage their logistics internally or work with specialist partners, the goal is the same: to make products available where they are needed, when they are needed, without allowing the cost of getting them there to erode the margin. **SR**

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