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Pick-by-Light: an innovative Custom Solution

Brilliant Novelty helps to improve Performance and Morale at Soennecken

Friedrich Soennecken, who founded Soennecken eG in 1875, made it his life goal to streamline processes at the office. 320 employees and about 500 members of the related union ensured the company's success as market leader concerning the marketing, funding and logistics of office supplies.

Advantages at a glance

- Reduction of the error rate
- User-friendly and robust
- Customer-specific display with short payback period



The company's motto has not significantly changed for the last 140 years. Likewise, "unconditionally following the ideal of quality, never settling for the second best solution and encouraging innovative spirit to constantly optimize and expand on the tried and trusted" (www.soennecken.de) is and has been an ever present guiding principle. Last year, Soennecken's logistics department wanted to follow that principle to effect fundamental changes in the order picking processes. The company successfully set itself a very tight schedule to install and introduce an all new pick-by-light order picking system. Among other factors, this was made possible with the innovative and customized solutions of the participating companies Unitechnik and microSYST.

Reduced Stock Keeping demands for Efficient Logistics Solutions

Maintaining large volumes of office supplies has been out of date for a long time. Stock keeping is cost-intensive and **digital networking** offers numerous possibilities to streamline ordering processes. Likewise, suppliers have to adapt their logistical processes to the growing pace and their customers' needs as well. For this purpose, Soennecken delivers most of their approximately 15,000 products within only one day. To organize **logistical processes as tightly as necessary**, a well-functioning order picking system is needed, as well as qualified employees and a high level of focus. "The required pace should not affect the error rate. Customers do need the exact product they have ordered in the specified quantities," says Dirk Leischner, Soennecken's project manager of the logistics department.

Spoilt for Choice: Pick-by-Voice vs. Pick-by-Light

When the previous pick-by-voice system was announced to be discontinued, Soennecken had to pose the follow-up question: A new pick-by-voice system or a complete changeover for a different system? Due to the local prerequisites, pick-by-light was shortlisted as an alternative solution.

- **Pick-by-voice:** to execute a purchase order, when picking orders, the employee is guided through the proper picking areas and shelves by acoustic signals and verbal communication (mostly through headphones).
- **Pick-by-light:** light signals and visual displays assist and guide the order picker with during the execution of purchase orders.

In the meantime, a poll taken by the project group “Great place to work” revealed that employees suffer from high psychological pressure caused by the previously used pick-by-voice system – posing another convincing reason for Soennecken to look for a new order picking solution, which ideally should combine improved efficiency and a lower stress level for employees. Introducing a new pick-by-light system seemed increasingly appealing.

Costum Product helps with lowering Investment Costs

To put the pick-by-light method into practice, Soennecken had to research advanced technologies together with main contractor Unitechnik. Naturally, a pick-by-light solution of that size, with approximately 27,000 shelves, set a significant challenge – especially financially. The idea to control the picking process for not only one shelf at a time but **several racks on top of each other with one single pick-face** came up. The advantages are obvious: “The number of necessary pick-faces for the picking process would be kept as low as possible with the system still running **smoothly and very user-friendly**”, Leischner explained the general idea. The search for a suitable system put the innovative solution at risk.



Soennecken sent their enquiry to many companies, but with their prefabricated order picking systems and displays none of them could put the idea of the levelled racks into practice. Together with Unitechnik the ultimate solution was found with system electronics provider microSYST and its sales director and technical managing director Manuel Raß.

“With this request, Soennecken certainly pushed an open door with us. **Customer-specific solutions** as well as individual, custom-made products are our everyday business. Integrating all customer requirements in our order picking and display systems as effectively as possible is not mere advertising, but our first and foremost objective,” Manuel Raß confirms the high demand for customized solutions at microSYST.



In the context of the quotation phase, Mr. Raß offered the prospective customers at Soennecken the chance to visit and examine facilities running on similar systems, which already had been installed by the provider for system electronics. “This creates trust and shows how the idea is converted into reality, beyond the technical details – and more importantly: how well it actually works,” Leischer sums up his positive experience with microSYST so far. Due to the **customization to Soennecken’s individual needs** at their premises, the company got their requested pick-by-light system: comprehensible, logical and easy to operate while using only a small number of pick-faces.

Installation and Introduction during ongoing Operations on-site

Soennecken is still enthusiastic about the **smooth installation** and **change-over to the new pick-by-light system**. After Unitechnik had confirmed the order at the end of March 2015, microSYST already affected the first partial delivery at the end of May 2015.

In the upcoming two months, four other partial deliveries followed in accordance with the installation progress. The conversion to the new order picking system was organized by Unitechnik during ongoing operations. “Without microSYST’s **absolute on-time delivery** such an undertaking would not have been possible within such a short time frame. The autumn holidays initiate our absolute peak season. The time schedule was extremely tight indeed,” Dirk Leischner emphasizes the smooth cooperation. The progress in switching over to pick-by-light was organized weekly, one picking aisle after another. With seven picking aisles in total, this resulted in a total time frame of only seven weeks for installation and implementation. It goes without saying that the order pickers had already received operational training in advance and had been prepared for the upcoming changes intensively. Thanks to the **intelligent system**, a temporary switch back to pick-by-voice would have been possible at any time if any problems had occurred.



Pick-by-light provides significant Benefits

Switching to pick-by-light was an entire success for Soennecken. Most notably, a subsequent poll showed that all employees gave positive feedback, without exception. Thus, the decision for a more **operator-friendly working process** proved to be significantly advantageous. Simultaneously, the current **picking efficiency increased** by approximately 12 to 14 percent compared to the pick-by-voice solution.

“We are very pleased about that outcome – and so are our customers, whose orders are being processed even a bit faster than before. All of that with the **error rate still remaining at a low 0.07 percent**”, the responsible parties at Soennecken stated. The carefully organized introductory phase, which helped the employees with getting used to the new system and gaining confidence with the technology, was the key to the project’s success. The pick-faces, made entirely from **robust aluminum**, have proven themselves as infallible in the logistic department’s challenging everyday routine. “microSYST’s pick-by-light system is characterized by high performance, the introductory phase completely convinced us and our employees. The overall evaluation of the complete system solution is thus outstanding,” Leischner sums up conclusively.



Following their founding motto, Soennecken keeps streamlining “office work” – with their own order picking staff now enjoying the benefit of being able to work even a little bit faster and in a less stressful manner. Surely Friedrich Soennecken would be amazed.