



PRESS INFORMATION

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Logistex crane upgrades give big boost to United Biscuits productivity, service and safety

Automated handling systems designer and supplier Logistex has recently refurbished and upgraded 22 automated high bay cranes originally installed by the company in United Biscuits' Ashby-de-la-Zouch Midland Distribution Centre. A combination of innovative upgrading and refurbishment technologies has resulted in significant improvements in productivity, service and safety, including a 27% increase in capacity, errors down by nearly a half, and faster, safer repair and maintenance procedures.

The 305,000ft² distribution centre holds some 58,000 pallet loads of famous branded sweet and savoury snacks including McVitie's, Jacob's, Carr's, McCoy's, Hula Hoops, McVitie's Jaffa Cakes, KP and Mini Cheddars. Products arrive from various manufacturing locations and are held for shipment to the leading UK retailers and wholesalers.

In a fiercely competitive retail sector, United Biscuits' clients constantly strive to improve their customer service and performance and increasingly look to their suppliers to support their efforts. With a portfolio of much-loved brands going back over 100 years, the company continually recognises the need to review its operations to maintain its reputation and high standards of service to leading retailers and to its loyal consumers. With demand for its products steadily growing, United Biscuits experienced more peak outputs in 2010 than in the previous four years – and all in a market where customer service is Key.

Under the code name "Raleigh", United Biscuits management identified a number of key performance areas to improve still further its speed of response, flexibility and ability to accommodate retailers' changing demands.

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With the twin mantras of “Making good better” and “Maximising productivity through developing our assets”, the company worked extensively with long-term equipment supplier and partner Logistex to explore the options available to develop the equipment, systems and infrastructure to meet or exceed customer demand, and to raise plant productivity still further. Without improved performance United Biscuits might have faced the need to use external storage, adding cost with less control over their business and a potentially less efficient service.

Logistex proposed a hybrid solution of upgrading and refurbishing the existing cranes, which had the major attraction of costing far less than replacement - a virtually impossible solution given the need to maintain product deliveries – and could be carried out with minimal disruption to day-to-day operations. Such a programme also significantly reduces the risk of obsolete component failure - often the cause of much anxiety to management keen to keep meeting customers’ delivery expectations - which increases as systems begin to age. Losing functionality for a short time can be disruptive but extended downtime can have a far more serious impact to any service-focused business.

The programme included replacing the original Siemens S5 controllers with the latest Simatic S7 PLCs, specifically designed for automated systems and with Profibus capability. They provide a more powerful and improved real-time response with a larger program and data memory. With a range of expansion modules they can easily be adapted to respond to further developments and changes in demand, key factors for United Biscuits.

Replacing the hydraulic controls with electrical systems not only provides a more efficient and controllable process but also eliminates the product contamination risk – not to say the disruption – of oil leaks. With health and safety issues an increasingly important factor, Logistex have also installed on-board cameras, so staff can identify problems quickly and no longer need to climb up the crane to see what is required. With remote resetting another new feature, faults and errors can be overcome more quickly and safely. In addition, a faulty crane can make its way back automatically to a P&D station for attention thanks to the new control software, saving additional time.

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As a tightly managed and professional organisation, United Biscuits has monitored and measured the way in which the upgraded cranes have performed in the first few months and the effect it has had on the organisation. The results are impressive and show significant improvements across the business.

Individual crane movements have risen by a third, from a maximum of 22 per hour pre-work to 34 per hour on the machines with the new electric platens, with individual movements up to 35 per hour. Errors have dropped dramatically by 45% and crane availability has risen from 88% to 95%. As a result the upgraded crane zone is able to ship up to 1,050 more pallets per day, a significant increase in performance, with 20 more lorries leaving every day.

The project was carried out over the summer of 2010, with individual cranes taken out of operation one at a time to avoid disruption or delay, and with work being done whenever possible during quieter times. With regular dialogue between United Biscuits and Logistex teams, the project was completed within a tight time frame in September 2010, in time for the next peak period.

United Biscuits Mike Howells explained how the companies worked together on the project. "We have worked closely in partnership with Logistex over the past 20 years, during which time they have supplied our high bay automated crane systems and continue to provide an on-site maintenance team to support us. They understand what our business is all about – outstanding service to our customers – and with their experience of big projects it made obvious sense to involve them from the beginning in the Raleigh project."

"They quickly grasped what we were looking for and could see the risks and the opportunities involved, including the need to stay operative throughout the programme as we could not risk delays or non-deliveries. We were impressed too by the way in which their senior management team got involved, which showed their commitment to delivering the best result possible for us. It took time for the joint team to investigate and research the various options and they came up with a number of fresh and innovative ideas, rather than simply trot out a standard solution."

"As well as making sure we completed the project on time, Logistex took on board our strong corporate focus on safety and environmental issues. Features such as

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on board cameras and doing away with hydraulics, although not initially considered, fitted in well with our philosophy.”

“The project was meticulously and safely managed, with equipment deliveries fitting in with the demands of our operations. We did not hear a word of concern from our customers and while we used to think that shipping 5,000 pallets a day was good, we can now manage 6,000 without a problem.”

In summary we have what is in effect a new automated crane system using the latest technology and fit for a decade or more, but at a fraction of the price and virtually none of the disruption. It sets new levels of safety and productivity and means we can continue to deliver on our promises and meet whatever demands the big retailers make on us.”

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