

The IT Gift

As the magical eve of Christmas draws nigh, when a certain jolly old elf makes his rounds, I can't help but think Santa has an easier time of it than the typical less-than-truckload carrier does on any given day.

I mean, Santa has two lists — who's naughty and who's nice — and for all intents and purposes, he can crumple up the first one and throw it away. That leaves a straight-forward bill of lading: Suzie gets a dolly, Billy gets a bicycle, big brother gets an Xbox (as if he deserved it).

Everything goes into the sleigh, and everybody gets his or her shipment well before 10 a.m. the next morning.

Contrast that with the task of LTL carriage by mere mortals.

First, the carrier receives a customer's order. Is it by phone, by Web site, by EDI transaction? Got to handle them all. Then somebody has to determine a pickup schedule — which city truck and when; how is the truck going to be routed most efficiently? — and coordinate eventual delivery of tons of multiple pickups to the crossdock.

When the local truck arrives, dock workers need direction on the sequence of unloading and correct placement on the outbound linehaul truck. Ideally, this would be a well-orchestrated ballet with an economy of movement, choreographed with details from the original shipment purchase order, which should be readily at hand for immediate review.

Some concomitant lane analysis is warranted: Enough trucks going to Atlanta, or should we add one? Then repeat the process when the linehaul truck arrives at the destination terminal and the load must be broken down and prioritized for

On Topic

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local delivery. During all this, the customer wants to be able to track the shipment's progress.

And there's customer invoicing. How's the shipment rated and who's keeping track of all the negotiated deals? Invoices have to be cut and prepared for delivery to the customer by e-mail, EDI or postman.

Speaking of paperwork, for reasons of efficiency and accuracy, LTL carriers more and more have to control and store transactions electronically, which includes imaging documents — even signed delivery receipts.

Mr. Claus doesn't have to go through all this, so he doesn't bother with information technology. After several centuries, he's pretty much got the multi-stop environment down pat. But it's a harsh and constantly changing world for the LTL carrier. And that is why Ken Weinberg and others have developed IT help, especially for fleets that don't have huge (or any) IT staffs of their own.

Ken is one of the originals in the field, an alumnus of IBM who very early on saw how evolving computer power could be put to use in moving freight. So, he co-founded Carrier Logistics Inc., one of the first software firms to expressly address the needs of the LTL world. He and I chatted after the conclusion of CLI's executive summit in September (the firm likes to summon a few visionaries and some of us in need of a vision to an idea-fest each September).

What amazed me was the range of LTL activity that can be computerized today. Except for physically picking up and putting down the boxes and driving the truck, virtual elves can rationalize just about everything. For example, CLI's software analyzes incoming and outgoing freight; considers the actual distance, in feet, between terminal doors; adds the time factor; and recommends the placement of trailers for the night's unloading/loading sequence to streamline dock movements. Supposedly, workers would travel the least amount of footage in the least amount of time, following directions on their handheld readouts.

That's only one of many, many ways in which software provides decision support. Ken Weinberg said this level of IT is an exquisite tool, not a replacement, for the manager.

It's also readily available.

Just in time for Christmas. ♦