



# Solway Foods, United Kingdom

How Ascom Wireless Solutions make for Quicker, Crisper Salads.

Solway Foods produces a range of chilled and short life ambient food products for leading UK Supermarket chains.

- Two Plants each 60,000 sq.ft. (5,600 sq.m.)
- 24/7 shift work pattern
- JIT Working

## Unique Production Demands

Solway Foods is part of the Northern Food Group and, in common with other manufacturers, in this market, lives with a production cycle unique among process industries. It does not know what it has to make until 6am on the day it's needed!

It's not so much JIT, more 'rabbit out of hat'! With this instant and daily demand cycle it is not difficult to understand that the one thing Solway Foods does not have a lot of is time – time for 'down time'; time for unplanned or unforeseen events; or even time to make mistakes.

They produce a range of products in two plants, Corby in Northamptonshire and Manton Wood in Worksop. They include pre-packed prepared salads, coleslaw, wet salads and pasta salads, with Manton specialising in fresh sandwiches. Both plants cover approximately 60,000 sq ft each and have a similar workforce of 700. Corby produces 24,000 tonnes of product a year, while Manton makes 55 million sandwiches – that's around 160,000 sandwiches per working day!

## Need for Change

About 12 months ago Solway Foods decided it must upgrade its existing hard wired phone, paging, wide area mobiles and PMR systems to something that could provide a quicker response to an increasingly demanding customer base and a wider, more complex product mix. The parent, Northern Foods, already had experience of Ascom Wireless Solutions at other plants, and Alan Webster, Regional IT Manager, was charged to see what could be applied here.

As Alan said: 'It wasn't a question of just signing up Ascom, the offered solution had to meet some very stiff criteria if it was to be accepted. Looking at the Corby site, for example, could the system provide absolute 100%



coverage in areas such as freezers, chillers warehousing, dispatch and offices, as well as the production areas? That's quite an operational temperature range. How would it work given the large amount of dense metalwork associated with process and storage equipment? Would it cope with the 24/7 shift work pattern allowing shift workers to 'hot-swap' handsets? Was it going to be easy to use? And given the hostile environment, where most of the plant has a daily pressure hose wash down, would it still function?'

The bottom line of course was whether the proposed system cut reaction times and led to greater efficiency and thus profitability.

### **The Ascom Solution**

Ascom Wireless Solutions carried out a detailed survey of the site and suggested a solution using an existing BP250 PABX, combined with an Ascom 9d24 based DECT platform. The survey showed that 100% coverage at Corby could be achieved with just 20 Base Stations and that both these and the proposed 100 Handset configuration would withstand the environment and provide the flexibility needed for the shift system.

The proposal suggested 9d24 Messenger Handsets combining two way speech and text messaging, along with vibration calling, vital in what can be noisy conditions. Other benefits included the ability to contact either existing internal hard wired phones or communicate off-site via the Company's PABX. One immediate cost saving was the elimination of nearly all third party mobile air time charges.

Alan Webster had already specified the job functions that needed to be covered. They ranged from senior Operations and Production Management to Engineering, Dispatch and QA Integrity Teams. The decision making process on the final acceptance of the proposal began with Production, Technical and Health & Safety management and was forwarded to the FD and MD for final approval.

### **Quicker Response**

Six months after installation the investment in the system has already proved it's worth. There are many instances of this, for example; with the old communication system lengthy response times could put the whole

procedure in jeopardy. Each plant is divided into different risk levels, depending on how close they are to the actual raw materials being processed. The highest risk area being the ingredient preparation and packing lines. If a problem occurred here it often involved, say, a Team Leader having to exit through a sterile barrier, remove protective clothing and go into an office or material store to sort the problem. Having done so they would have to reverse the journey, but this time go through a full cleaning regime before re-entering the high risk area - Lines and Labour standing idle while all this happened.

The hitch could be something quite unpredictable. The yield from fresh lettuce, for instance, can vary from the expected norm. Now, a 9d24 Handset carrier in the high risk area simply requests information on current stock holdings of lettuce, making instant contact with the Stores Controller, wherever they may be on-site, and either orders it's immediate delivery from the chillier stores, or takes other appropriate action. Concurrently, operations and production management are kept informed.

Alan Webster also quoted reactions from Engineering Management, who used to chase around the plant to contact maintenance crews. Now, as they said, 'that problem has gone away'.

As Regional IT Manager there is another benefit for Alan. He, along with other key staff in the Company, often travel between the Corby and Manton sites. The Ascom DECT system at both plants will recognise his 9d24 Handset Extension so he can receive internal and external calls seamlessly at either location.

### **Successful Investment**

Ease of use has been proven by the fact there has been no negative feedback from staff, and the 'help desk' set up to answer 'how do I' queries has not been used for months.

Overall, the introduction of an Ascom integrated solution at Solway Foods has proved to be a significant help in keeping them competitive in what is a very fast moving environment. So much so, that they are looking to develop the system further by linking it to fire alarm systems and other management controls. All in all, a quicker response.

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