

Tracing the future for the meat industry with supply chain software

by Robert Frost, CEO, LINKFRESH Software Ltd, Harston Mill, Harston, Cambridge CB22 7GG, UK.

It has been over 12 months since the horsemeat contamination scandal broke and the industry is still waiting on clear direction and regulation from the Government and advisory bodies on how to combat fraud in the food chain.

However, we are seeing growing use of IT in the meat industry. The horsemeat scandal has brought the topic of traceability across the supply chain to the forefront of industry news.

IT can give suppliers and retailers the tools to accurately monitor products from farm to fork and this is something retailers are keen to see. There are still, however, many meat suppliers who need to adopt new technologies to manage the supply chain process.

At any point of the supply chain, from farm to fork, meat suppliers should be able to pinpoint where produce has come from, what processes it has gone through and where it ends up, with the emphasis on providing this information instantaneously.

The need for technology

The horsemeat scandal has renewed focus on accountability and traceability of inputs and distribution of food products. Six months after the scandal broke, one in four Britons claimed to have cut down on the amount of processed food they ate.

Moving forward the ability to understand and comply with new Government regulations will require companies to invest in more sophisticated IT solutions to ensure they maintain accurate records.

However, at the moment the reality is that many food safety monitoring processes still use manual, paper-based checks which are time consuming and carry a high risk of error and non-compliance compared with using an automated electronic data capture solution.

Customer confidence needs to be



regained. Retailers want suppliers to be able to quickly and efficiently provide them with reliable data in the event of a problem with any product.

The issue with manual records is that the process of analysing the data becomes a logistical nightmare where large volumes of data are involved.

I predict in the next few years consumers and retailers will expect the food industry to be able to provide comprehensive traceability information at the touch of a button.

So how can the industry start to prepare for this? We have found forward thinking food processors and suppliers are looking to Enterprise Resource Planning systems.

Introducing ERP

Information Technology solutions, such as food specific Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems can help food businesses efficiently track and trace all aspects of a product's manufacture from raw material intake, through production, to where it goes when it leaves the factory.

Supply chain IT systems, such as LINKFRESH which is fully integrated into the Microsoft Dynamics plat-

form, help the meat and food industry efficiently manage every aspect of the food supply chain, including production, forecasting, planning, inventory management, quality, full traceability and logistics.

ERP technology also has other benefits for food businesses as it gives real-time insight into the entire supply chain.

Food processors achieve more efficient labour, reduced waste, faster financial reporting and accounting and increased profits.

Without real time insight, suppliers are open to supply problems and they will struggle to provide reliable data quickly in the event of a problem with the product.

It can also leave suppliers open to emergency product withdrawal (EPW) fees.

The benefits of traceability

A further advantage of being able to track and trace product throughout the supply chain is visibility of stock movements and improved quality control data.

In a manual paper bound process, the data is only available to people with access to the physical paperwork.

With its electronic equivalent, the data can immediately be shared with

the wider workforce. This can assist in flagging problems such as quality issues or order shortages as they occur. This enables management to take rapid, pre-emptive action to head off a potential customer relationship issue.

LINKFRESH in action

LINKFRESH is transforming the quality control and traceability processes for all of their customers.

One meat supplier reported it previously took eight hours to collate all the paperwork for a traceability report, it now takes 15 minutes. That is a 97% reduction in traceability costs.

To manage the quality control process through the supply chain, this customer used to carry out 11 reports; this can all now be completed within a few touches of a button on a handheld device. Updates take place straight away and there is no paperwork to be filed.

The technology has transformed how the supplier manages the supply chain, and has added profit to the bottom line.

Lessons from the scandal

Supermarkets and food suppliers were criticised for the time it took them to identify where the contaminated meat came from, in some cases the original source is still not certain.

The industry needs to take note and demonstrate it has the technology and the insight to pinpoint immediately any problems there may be in the supply chain and have the ability to recall any potentially unsafe food straight away.

Since the horsemeat scandal more food businesses are investing in technology to assist in managing the supply chain.

The reality is the availability of full lot traceability will become the norm in the future for any supplier to the major retailers. Forward thinking businesses which start implementing this technology now will be ahead of the game. ■