

How-to Guide

15 Order Picking Best Practices





Introduction

No matter what industry you're in, what size parts you inventory or how many orders you fill daily—order fulfillment is a labor intensive and time consuming task. Adding in a global pandemic and never ending supply chain disruptions has only made order fulfillment more complicated. Not to worry—we've detailed 15 order picking best practices you can easily implement to improve overall order fulfillment.

Implementing one or more of the following order picking best practices supports higher accuracy, improved productivity, greater throughput and faster cycle times in order fulfillment—ultimately maximizing your picking efficiency while boosting customer satisfaction.



Improve warehouse organization



Maximize space utilization



Increase picking productivity

Optimize your order picking operations

Each of these 15 order picking best practices can be implemented individually or in combination with one another. These strategies are designed to increase your overall picking efficiencies through higher pick accuracy, improved worker productivity, greater throughput and faster cycle times.

#1 Focus on facility flow

Organize your warehouse based on the order in which inventory travels through each functional area. That is, receiving to storage/putaway to replenishment to order picking to sorting/consolidation to packing and staging for shipment to outbound. Each area should logically lead to the next, eliminating the need to double back or pass through a later process on the way to an earlier one.



#2 Establish a receiving process

Set firm delivery times with shippers and establish time-to-unload goals for your staff. Create a clear process for inspecting and sorting goods as well as classifying and staging goods for forward pick replenishment or storage. Then quickly send goods to their destination to prevent inventory bottlenecks and worker traffic jams.



#3 Utilize bins, totes and dividers

Whether using shelving, racking or an automated storage system, using sub-divided bins or totes leads to faster fulfillment. Totes and bins are particularly ideal for bulk quantities of smaller items and allow more items to be stored in the same space. When properly labeled—totes, bins and dividers reduce search time and keep contents clean and protected.



#4 Reduce walking time

To increase labor productivity look for ways to literally cut steps out of the order fulfillment process. Consider storing items that are frequently picked together close to each other (staples/staplers, shampoo/ conditioner, etc.). Additionally, think about implementing a batch picking strategy or simply eliminate walk time all together with goods to person automation.

#5 Improve worker ergonomics

Create a safe, ergonomic workplace that reduces fatigue, minimizes injuries and decreases worker compensation claims. Add cushioned floor mats in workstations, increase training on handling heavy loads and place frequently picked items at waist-height to reduce the risk of injuries associated with reaching, pulling, bending or stooping.

#6 Choose the right picking strategy

There are a number of proven picking strategies (batch picking, pick and pass, zone picking, wave picking) designed to fill orders more efficiently in a particular fulfillment scenario. Most often, a combination of picking strategies (and technologies) is used to reach order fulfillment goals—each providing slightly different benefits when implemented.



 Not sure what picking strategy is right for you? Download our Warehouse Picking Strategies Guide

#7 Utilize light directed technology

Light systems mounted to a pick face, put wall or pick cart use a combination of alphanumeric displays and illuminated buttons to direct the worker to a specific location displaying transaction information such as quantity or part number. Light directed technology is easy to implement and proven to increase speed and accuracy in order fulfillment.

#8 Prioritize timely replenishment

Timely replenishment of forward pick zones and fast moving, frequently picked items should be scheduled throughout the day to prevent short picks and dwell time as the worker waits for restocking. Additionally, scheduling replenishment allows a worker already heading to the reserve storage area to grab needed items for restocking without making a special trip.

#9 Utilize a consolidation area

Operations using zone picking—where items for an order are picked simultaneously in multiple zones—require an additional area for sorting and consolidating the items into discrete orders. This is an often overlooked area that can be easily outfitted with a combination of static and automated equipment for a boost in space savings and productivity.

#10 Continuous inventory profiling

Armed with inventory data such as SKU velocity and pick quantities, you can properly slot—or group and store—items into the right zone and storage medium for the best picking efficiencies. Data should be continually reviewed and SKUs reslotted and moved into the most efficient storage location as the inventory profile data changes.



#11 Implement ASRS to reduce costs

Investing in an ASRS typically pays off in under 18 months. Vertical Carousel Modules (VCMs), Horizontal Carousel Modules, Vertical Buffer Modules (VBMs) and Vertical Lift Modules (VLMs) deliver a variety of cost saving benefits such as up to 85% floor space savings and virtually eliminating travel time to provide increased worker productivity.



#12 Implement a returns management process

Shopping online is here to stay—and so are returns. Establishing a process for handling returns is critical to order fulfillment success—including creating a returns area and quality control process to receive, unpack and inspect returned items. Introducing an automated storage solution to temporarily store returns can organize and speed up the returns process.

#13 Integrate scan verification

Use handheld or fixed-location radio frequency (RF) scanners or camera-based imagers to instantly validate an item based on its barcode—eliminating human error and dramatically increasing accuracy. Scanning barcodes placed on cases, pallets, totes, individual SKUs can quickly verify the worker has picked the right item for the order.



#14 Pick directly into shipping containers

Consider picking some—or all—orders directly into shipping cartons. While this effectively requires collecting and documenting each SKUs dimensional information in the inventory management software so the system can determine the optimal box size for the order, it ultimately saves time at pack-out and gets orders out the door faster.



#15 Establish key performance indicators (KPIs)

Use KPIs to identify areas for improvement. Most order picking KPIs cover: space (footprint and capacity utilization); throughput (how many picks or orders are completed in a given time frame); accuracy (both of physical inventory and picks) and labor (the cost of the people required to perform order fulfillment tasks).