New digital road-freight platform launched

Bidvest International Logistics (BIL) has launched a new road-freight portal that will allow clients to manage deliveries from start to end. "It takes away the pain of having to procure transport service providers and still manage them," says Marcus Ellappan, director of road freight for BIL.

Image source: Gallo/Getty

Bidvest International Logistics' Bidtrans Portal provides real-time collaboration and interaction between clients and their deliveries, via an online platform, streamlining compliance matters, service deliveries, tracking, transport proof of deliveries (PODs) and invoicing, and freeing up clients to spend more time running their businesses rather than managing the movement of their products.

The move online for freight-forwarding hasn't been entirely without its hitches.

Global freight-forwarding companies that are involved in digitisation have run up against industry-specific obstacles, according to a report released last year by Deloitte's transport practice in Germany.

These include

• Platform owners' neglect to offer a customised service depending on the shippers' specific requirements;

• A more consolidated way of invoicing, pricing that's fixed, and guaranteed loading capacity; a service that's unquestionably reliable and robust;

• The need to involve several parties in the movement of the shipment;

• The temptation to expect immediate financial returns from investment in a platform;

• A conventional way of thinking; and

• The scarcity of capabilities to simultaneously explore and exploit, coupled with freight-forwarders' digital talents.

"We're not for one second questioning the validity of digitisation in freight-forwarding: it's inevitable and makes business sense, especially in South Africa with the ground-transport issues the industry faces," says Ellappan.

"However, we're aware of the unspoken realities that industry incumbents or startups are facing as they've tried to establish digital platforms. Often players are swayed by the hype without understanding what the real challenges are, and then not being in a proven, credible position to effectively address them – there's nothing worse than raising expectations and not delivering."

The Bidtrans Portal will allow the company to source loading capacity seamlessly, and meet client demand throughout the year. This in turn will allow BIL to offer an automated booking space service through the portal. Phase 1 of the platform's launch is aimed at contracted customers, while phase 2 will be aimed at the broader business-to-consumer market which will be more of an ad-hoc tariff structure.

Eliminating manual management

"As the Deloitte report suggests, robust and rigid reliability are critical in transportation, so Bidtrans Portal's simple, easy-to-navigate look and feel will integrate the battle-hardened BIL systems to effectively manage load collection, tracking, delivery, POD uploading and invoicing on time.

"That said, the portal will still be flexible in how it responds to client requests, by conforming to agreed service-level agreements that may differ from one client to the next. Should clients still prefer to liaise with key personnel at BIL, they have the option to do so, and as before, those people are available on a 24-hour basis. The portal will enhance the existing customer experience, specifically for those customers who want to enjoy an automated service offering.

"What many well-intended market disruptors sometimes forget is that the Uber model is based on people 'loading' themselves, and the reality – and, in this case, our model, for example – is based on a solid understanding of what it is to load a 20kg product or a 36-pallet shipment on the correct transport asset," comments Ellappan.

"We operate a multitude of warehouses, so we're aware of the potential delays associated with loading and offloading points, and therefore have incorporated a tracking module to proactively mitigate the risks surrounding a potential miss in on-time delivery in full."

Issue of multiparty involvement

Addressing the issue of multiparty involvement with moving shipments, a driver will be briefed on new collection points and any special requirements, but the process will remain basic and resilient. The market has to start eliminating the huge amount of manual administration involved with simply booking a load, and we're under no illusions about that," says Ellappan. "The phonecalls to various parties trying to secure space, or emailing a delivery instruction, can be a very lengthy process when compared to the seamless nature of online ordering."

The Bidtrans Portal will eventually launch an application for mobile use as well, and one of the key features to combat a

conventional way of working is Bidtrans's escalations offering – loads not assigned will be escalated for management action in the company.

"As with any new product, users may take a while to warm to it because of an ingrained tendency to use what's familiar and tested, but we're of the firm belief that once they experience the reduction in manual activities, the track-and-trace function, the ease of online ordering, and, equally important, its ability to uphold solid compliance management, people won't want to go back to the manual way of working," comments Ellappan.

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