New app improves fresh produce industry business automation

Claims made by customers regarding the quality of produce erodes the value that gets paid back to the grower in the fresh produce marketing industry. For Tru-Cape Fruit marketing, reducing claims is as important as delivery only the correct fruit. Because of Tru-Cape's size, the volume of claims can amount to millions of Rands which is why managing director Roelf Pienaar, tasked his team to find a way to manage and if possible reduce them. While analysing the business and its processes they discovered holes that needed to be plugged.

"In the end, we understand that claims are part of the business, but it is in our as well as the customer's interest to minimise claims and waste," says Pienaar but adds that the business also needed better intelligence to improve planning and to provide accurate feedback to growers and packhouses. "We decided that we needed a technology solution in the form of an application that customers can use as well as a desktop dashboard that will track claims in real time and provide us with meaningful reporting to better make planning and packing decisions," he says.

Tru-Cape's quality assurance manager, Henk Griessel, explains that with a natural and perishable product some degradation is expected but the Pomona's Eyes app, named after the Greek goddess of orchard fruit, helps Tru-Cape prevent excessive claims and take human guesswork out of determining if and how a claim should be met.

Automating business, developing the Pomona's Eyes app

"We approached Nick van der Vreken who had created a successful fuel station management application for our shareholder Two-a-Day.

"Although I have a full-time position as National IT Manager for WastePlan, I take on development projects in my own time so was pleased to receive an enquiry from Tru-Cape", says Van der Vreken. "As I specialise in analysing structures and automating business, developing the Pomona's Eyes app was a good fit for my skills set. The mobile application has been built on top of the Cordova framework, and the desktop application is based on the node.js framework. These frameworks allow for fast development and a real-time cloud integration with Tru-Cape's SysPro system."

Aside from wanting to reduce the quantum of claims, the company also wanted the technology to enable greater productivity which I think we well achieved," Van der Vreken explains.

According to Griessel, a string of manual processes are now all automated which, he says, "frees me up to focus on making sure we pack to the agreed standard and troubleshoot quality issues before they become problems. As a preservative free, wholly natural product, apples and pears, like all organic matter, begin to die as soon as they are picked from their orchards. The reporting functionality Pomona's Eyes provides allows for automated flagging when defects are discovered. This often allows us to repack the fruit before all of the fruit from a particular bin is delivered and rejected on arrival.

The system also automatically generates credit notes, converts from the foreign currency exchange rate at the date of purchase and, all the while, providing an audit trail that includes all the correspondence relating to the claim available, again in real time, to anyone with the login details irrespective where we may be. Most importantly it makes claiming more than once for the same fruit impossible. It also takes the human factor out of the equation when it comes to determining the severity of a claim allowing the technology to determine the result."

Van der Vreken added that the system he developed also makes it easier to share and collaborate on claim calculations through a number of various options; including quickly sharing the claim information with preconfigured contact groups, exporting the claim data to Excel and forwarding a claim and all or specific supporting documents. Claims can also easily be allocated to several staff members. Currently, the app is designed for use on Android platforms but it will be converted for iOS as soon as the testing mode is complete.

Benefitting from savings

"Many businesses can benefit from such an application," Van der Vreken says, "which has moved a process previously just in the hands of a few people into a system that can be used by anyone with the permission to do so. This is especially valuable when it comes to succession planning," he explains.

"In Tru-Cape's case, being able to draw reports about claims by customer, delivery market and even by apple or pear cultivar gives powerful information about areas that may need greater focus. The maxim that you can only manage what you can measure is truest here and I'd venture that there have already been significant savings as a result of using the app - far greater than the investment of 300 programming hours. I don't think it unreasonable for a similar business to save over R100,000 each month by automating checks which, purely as a result of human frailty, can and do fall through the cracks." he ends.

The app is available for download in the App Store and there is a YouTube how-to video available for instruction.