

Owen Dance – “I thought I knew a bit about logistics”



Owen Dance, manager of quality services at GS1 New Zealand:
“In the strange world of civilians, I found that they worried about things I had until then paid only scant attention”

Owen Dance describes himself as ‘a broken-down ex-policeman’ as his early career was spent as one of the boys in blue, but in 1994 he had to leave due to health problems and started working for an organisation that no one had heard of. This is his story.

Shortly I will have been with GS1 New Zealand longer than the 25 years I spent in the police force. GS1 is the little known and even less understood organisation that, among many other things, administers the barcode system used right across retail.

Formed in the USA in 1973 as a not-for-profit to provide a standard system of identification and barcoding, it now promotes and supports standardisation in identification, data capture and data sharing throughout the entire supply chain. It is effectively the only standard used in retail globally.

Virtually every product retailed in the world has a GS1 number and barcode on it. This almost

certainly means that the same applies to its carton and very likely its pallet. If the company dealing with it has taken full advantage of the efficiencies the system offers, many of the e-business processes associated with the product and its movements will be conducted using GS1 standards also.

But back when I started in 1995, the GS1 system had been in New Zealand a mere 16 years and was used only in FMCG retail. The use of GS1 numbers and barcodes on cartons was still limited, they were rarely used on pallets, there were no electronic catalogues, no RFID, and traceability was pretty ad hoc and rarely discussed. The five of us who were the entire New Zealand complement at GS1 NZ had what I now realise was a pretty simple life.

The world of not-for-profit

I thought I knew a bit about logistics. As I had risen through the police ranks I had become deeply involved in operational planning and had managed the logistics

of some major operations, most notably Operation Rugby, the controversial Springbok tour in 1981. But now I was in the strange world of civilians and I found that they worried about things I had until then paid only scant attention.

Of course in the police environment I was aware that I was spending taxpayers’ money so I tried to be suitably prudent, but underpinning everything I planned and did was the knowledge that the job had to get done. If we needed another helicopter to look for a lost child, we got it. If the family-priced motel didn’t have enough rooms for the police contingent and we had to book some in the expensive hotel next door, we booked them. And so on. Finding the money was someone else’s concern. There would be grumbings from further up the food chain and exhortations to not spend any more than necessary, but at the end of the day, the cost would be met and the job would be done.

Now I was dealing with people

who behaved as though it was their own money being spent on stuff. What was the fuss? Half the time they would be working for some company that turned over scores or even hundreds of millions of dollars a year. While I admired the loyalty of these folk to their employers, I did wonder what their problem was.

Transitioning to a new order

After a few months of this, and of trying to keep up with conversations about concepts that had not applied to my prior experience – like stock turns, ROI, data quality, automatic reorder level and such like – I realised that I needed help to transition to this strange new world.

I signed up for the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) UK Diploma in Logistics, run by Walter Glass through Massey University at that time. For the next two years I struggled through exercises where I managed fleets of trucks, reorganised distribution networks, designed warehouse layouts, planned workflows and generally became a whole lot more humble about how much I knew about logistics.

With excellent help and support from Walter and from the more experienced students on the course, I emerged in 1999 with a new and invaluable understanding of what the people I dealt with were doing.

Growth beyond groceries

Since then, GS1 has grown beyond retail barcodes and low-level advice to being deeply involved in a vast range of services encompassing product photography, data validation, barcode quality testing, electronic catalogues, product authentication, traceability, product recall, RFID – the list goes on and extends into many sectors, as well as the original grocery.

Incredibly perhaps, I am still here and my successful transition into this new career has been due in no small part to Walter and the diploma programme that he now delivers through his consultancy, Corporate Logistics, under its specialist supply chain tertiary education arm, the Logistics Training Group.

The Professional Diploma in Logistics and Transport is offered in New Zealand by the Logistics Training Group; for further information, visit www.ltg.co.nz