

Robotics and Workflow: Finding the Balance

by Will Lockwood

This pharmacist was thoroughly impressed with the automated dispensing he'd seen, and even more excited about the workflow technology that underpinned the filling process.

Tim's Pharmacy, run by pharmacist Tim Larsen, his wife and the business manager, Nancy; and their son, pharmacist Ben Larsen, will sound familiar to a lot of readers. But not because they've visited Yelm, Wash., and stopped in. Instead, it's because they'll recognize something of their own stores in Tim's. To start with, it's a 7,500-square-foot, family-run pharmacy in an area between Tacoma and Olympia that is growing quickly as it makes a transition from rural to suburban. Next, the Larsens and their staff not only fill an average of 350 prescriptions a day, six days a week, but also offer gifts, cards, and other front-store items. Readers will also likely recognize the challenges that Tim's Pharmacy faces, such as a significant loss of prescriptions to mail order and the pressure to increase dispensing efficiency and accuracy while finding the right staffing level. Finally, they may also find Tim Larsen's approach to technology familiar. As he puts it, "I love tools. Anything that makes our job easier. But I'm

not ready to buy technology as soon as it comes out. I want to see how it develops first."

Taking a Second Look

In keeping with this approach, Tim Larsen has had his eye on dispensing automation for a while now. In fact, he first looked at it, and took a pass, about six years ago. "I'd already been down the road with other technology that wasn't ready yet," he says. "So I was happy to wait." Of course, a lot changed between his first and second looks. The motivation to look again came when Larsen switched to a new wholesaler that offered to help finance an automation purchase. So Nancy, Ben, and Tim decided to visit a pharmacy using the Innovation products they were considering. "Nancy's not easily impressed with new gadgets," says Larsen. "But she noticed something she liked in that pharmacy right away. It was quiet." The Larsens finished their visit thoroughly impressed with the automated

dispensing they'd seen, and even more excited about the workflow technology that underpinned the filling process. "We knew that these were tools we could use to eliminate the chaos in our store," says Larsen.

Getting on the Cutting Edge

Larsen started out by installing the Symphony workflow system with three SmartScale counting stations and two SmartCabinet dispensers with 50 cells each. Since then, he has been able to take advantage of the modular nature of Innovation's dispensing technology by upgrading to robotics. The 100 cells in the original cabinets moved right into a ROBOTx system, and Larsen was even able to add 40 more cells to maximize capacity. These additions mean that the filling workflow at Tim's Pharmacy is state-of-the-art, from the Voice-Tech IVR, through the QS/1 pharmacy management system and Symphony workflow, and on into the Innovation robotic dispensing. Virtually nothing escapes this workflow, with the robot filling half the prescriptions, often directly out of the refill queue created by the IVR, and the SmartScales and Symphony workstations providing all the necessary bar-coded tracking and counting accuracy for the rest. It is a technology suite that brings order and confidence to the filling and dispensing process. "Ben and I have time to be real pharmacists, helping patients and their providers medically," says Larsen. "This is really cool."

Effort Pays

While Larsen is convinced that workflow and robotics have dramatically improved life at Tim's Pharmacy, he isn't the kind of person to sugarcoat the effort it takes to add new technology.

"The results have been fantastic," he says. "But it did take time to get everything running smoothly." Larsen adds that you should consider the interfaces you'll need to make your setup truly integrated. "We started with QS/1," he explains, "then we added Voice-Tech. That's an interface. Then we added

Nancy Larsen noticed the difference automation could make right away, says her husband Tim Larsen.



Ben Larsen, left, appreciates the time robotics allows him to be a real pharmacist.

Innovation, and those systems need interfaces. You need these to be strong and done right." There was a software glitch that reduced the effectiveness of the new workflow and robotics, which Innovation helped Larsen resolve. "Once they figured it out and upgraded our software, it's been heaven," says Larsen. "Even if you have problems," he continues, "you have to get through them. Ultimately, you will really appreciate what you've bought."

Being Adaptable and Flexible

The new technology also required changes in how pharmacy staff went about their jobs. These were positive changes. At Tim's Pharmacy, everyone was assigned clearly defined roles in the new workflow, but Larsen also emphasizes the need to be flexible. For example, one of the biggest bottlenecks is at intake. "Someone can

come in with 15 prescriptions," says Larsen, "but we still need our system flowing smoothly." His simple solution is to move his people to the spot where the work is — intake, in this case. The workflow stations then provide the structure and tracking to ensure that all filling standards and procedures are maintained. On the other hand, it isn't just the staff that's flexible. The workflow system and robotics can be as well. For instance, what happens when a customer comes in with a prescription that needs to be filled right away? "In an emergency, we can do everything at one station," Larsen says. This prescription can then be given a priority through the filling process and put at the head of the robot's dispensing queue. And what if it is one of those rare occasions when the robot happens to be down? "What's great about this robot," Larsen explains, "is that we can always open up the doors and keep working with the inventory in the dispensers while still using the workflow tools we have." All in all, the technology's flexibility comes with the important benefit of never requiring the Tim's Pharmacy staff to do anything outside of the workflow process — and this does a lot to make each prescription completely accurate, even if things aren't going quite as planned.

Recipe for Accuracy

Of course, when it comes to accuracy, it doesn't hurt that Larsen has an experienced staff, some of whom have been with him for almost 20 years. It is this combination of technology and experience to which Larsen attributes the dramatic reduction in errors he's achieved. "We follow each prescription from end to end without chaos, and all of the information collected

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along the way is available for me or Ben to review at the final verification station,” he says. “It doesn’t get any better than this.” Even in the rare cases in which there is an error, say at data entry for a new prescription, the fix is now quicker. This is because the workflow system puts the pharmacists in the right spot at Tim’s Pharmacy: at the very end of the process, verifying. “We have fewer mistakes and more time to deal with them when they do come up,” Larsen notes.

Balance Achieved

In the end, Tim, Nancy, and Ben have found themselves in the same situation as many an independent: trying hard to find the balance between staffing levels and tech-

nology investment that will allow the pharmacy to thrive while providing the best service possible. The staffing challenge has even hit close to home for them. The family’s older son, Andy, is also a pharmacist and worked with Tim, Nancy, and Ben until leaving for medical school at the University of Washington. Then, the Larsens lost a part-time pharmacist who was helping out. Still, Tim figured that with the right staff level and his wholesaler’s support, he could pay off the Innovation purchase in a year. “We did it faster than that,” he says. “We’ve worked a little harder, but all to make sure we’re getting the return on our investment that we need.” Now that the Larsens have their finances in order, Tim Larsen feels comfortable adding a pharmacist again

three days a week. All in all, it means that Tim and Ben have the time to do what they love best — be professional pharmacists who help patients with their medications — while still wearing the other hats they have as independent pharmacists, such as helping Nancy with the business side and working on insurance issues. But the real reward, in Tim Larsen’s view, is the boost that workflow and robotics have given their professional role. “Now we really have time to educate our customers about what we can do for them as pharmacists,” he concludes. **CT**

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