

Let's not lose the human element

Terry Walpole says technology has its uses, but don't forget it's people who make the movement of goods work

Freight forwarders

IFW was already in existence when I joined the UK freight forwarding industry in 1974. On my first day at work, a copy was presented to me and I was told that this publication would give me a good idea of what it was all about.

Over the years it has served a similar purpose on many occasions: presenting newcomers with a view of the scope of our business, giving more experienced people the opportunity to enhance their knowledge, see some of the issues and personalities involved, and occasionally look for a new job. The assimilation of information and knowledge is quite important.

It is impossible to count the number of times I have been asked the question: "What do you do for a living?" and had my answer followed up with: "Oh, really, what exactly does a freight forwarder do?"

There are lots of fancy answers available, like comparing our activity with things to what a travel agent does with people, and the issue gets even cloudier when that word "logistics" enters the equation.

I always thought that the key element was that we were able to earn a living by filling a need in the marketplace between a sender or receiver of cargo and a carrier, to ensure the best possible transport of "things". This involved having lots of knowledge and access to information.

Machines take over

This simplistic view of our activities begs another question.

Thirty-five years ago (and probably a long time before that) the acquisition of information and the development of knowledge was very much a people-oriented activity. We learned the business from our colleagues. We received shipping schedules and rate sheets through the post; we filled in documents with pens and typewriters; and we spent a lot of time talking, listening and sending things back to people in the post. Our computer systems were adding machines and our communications systems revolved around a telex machine.

Now, we have data systems beyond our understanding, all

the "information" we used to keep in our black books is available to anybody and everybody with a couple of prods on a keyboard. We justify our existence by e-mail.

If we believe that the basis of a sound business is the relationship between buyer and seller, then we have to ask if e-mail is an appropriate form of communication to foster these relationships.

We at BRI have often discussed this and as a matter of policy do not use voicemail systems or answering machines. Callers to our offices speak to individuals. They will not be asked to make decisions about the best number to press.

Information will certainly be conveyed by e-mail, but can an e-mail exchange adequately convey the essence of a complex transaction?

The use of technological



Walpole: no need for voicemail

advances is, however, essential to the continued development of our business and all freight forwarders need to be at the cutting edge.

Yet, miracle of miracles, we still exist. Not only still exist, but continue to grow as an industry and prosper, so we have to ask if the basis of our activity has been affected by the means of communication now available.

While haulage companies have become logistics providers, warehouses are fulfilment centres, and carriers offer one-stop shops, is it really any different?

It is still a struggle to define the role and in some cases justify the existence of freight forwarders.

However, you can conclude that for all the "systems" that now exist, the information highway and the simplification of all procedures, there are still



Bellville Rodair International doing what it does best: moving things

people involved.

Regardless of the process, it is people who make things work; people who have personalities, preferences, ambitions, bad

days and good days; people whose livelihoods can be affected in the short-term or long-term on the successful conclusion to a transport issue.

I like to think that the benefits of a publication like *IFW* are that it continues to remind us that it is people not systems that make the whole movement of goods thing work.

Focusing on issues that people need to be aware of to assist in their daily grind and telling us about good things and hurdles which need to be overcome, needs to find a place.

Future movements

Speculating as to what changes we can expect is difficult, because life and our businesses are in constant flux.

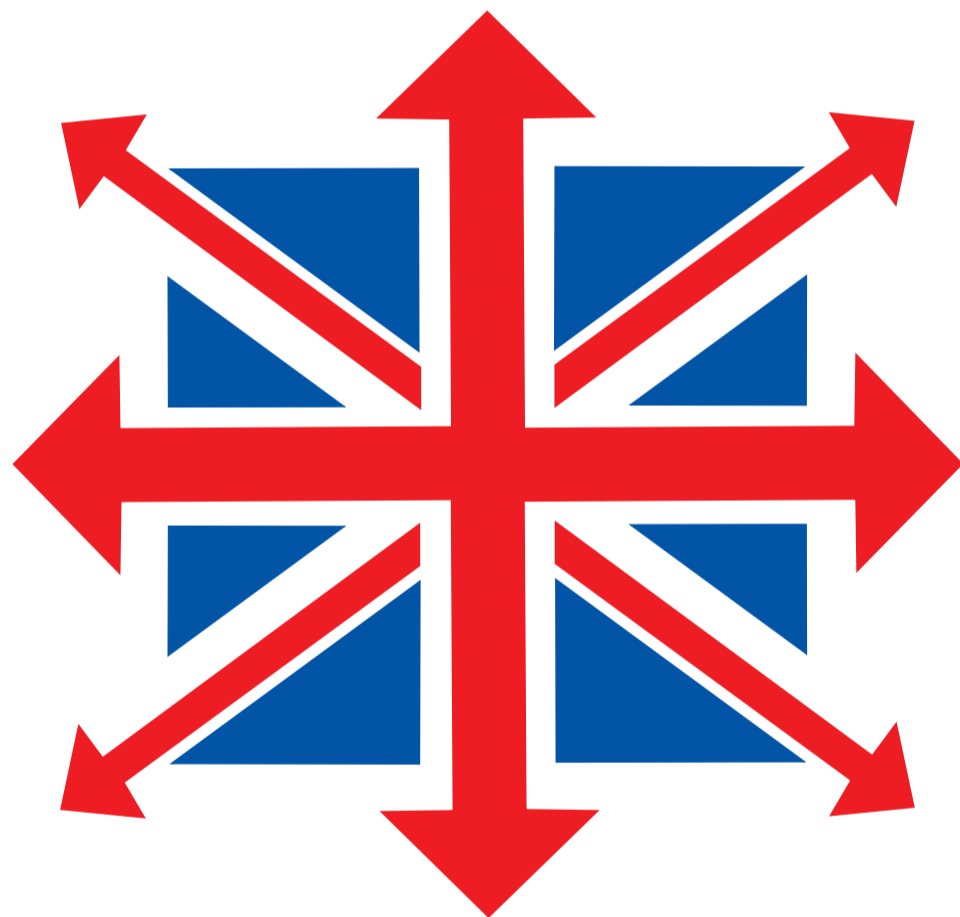
There will be new systems and processes and

simplification and fuel crises and bigger ships and faster aircraft; heaps of fresh challenges to keep the "middle man" on his toes.

But I can't help thinking that having survived and prospered during the massive changes of the last two generations, it is hard to envisage the market changes that would affect the basis of our industry.

We could run out of fuel or we could all become self-sufficient individuals who don't shop for anything, but basically as long as there is movement of "things", there will be freight forwarders around to grease the wheels and ease the pain. They are going to need an *IFW* that plays a part in the whole game. ●

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