Driving Enterprise Mobility and H&S with Neptune Software
New Zealand farmer-owned co-operative Ballance harnesses app mobility solution for streamlined, safer business

Sometimes it’s something seemingly so simple that can make a big difference.

For Ballance Agri-Nutrients, an app which mobilises its SAP S/4 HANA system to automate the ordering process for fertiliser collection, has created a safer, simpler, faster and more cost-effective system for both the company and its shareholders.

THE OLD-SCHOOL PAPER JAM AND REDUCING SAFETY RISKS

David Scullin, Ballance Agri-Nutrients Chief Information Officer, says the Loader Driver app which was developed in Neptune and a plug into Ballance’s SAP S/4 HANA developed by Ballance’s trusted partner Soltius, has significantly streamlined business processes for the company.

A New Zealand farmer-owned co-operative which has fertiliser manufacturing, supply, sales and advice as its core business, Ballance was looking to automate its processes for collection of fertiliser.

Spreaders, employed by farmers, collect and transport tonnes of fertiliser from Ballance’s service centres around New Zealand.

“The challenge we were facing at service centres is that we had to use a lot of paper and dockets to process orders on behalf of customers when spreaders come in to pick up product,” Scullin says.

Technical notes

- Ballance chose SAP’s Next Generation ERP S/4HANA as the foundation for their future innovation.
- With SAP’s S/4HANA in place, Ballance’s next step was to create mobile apps that would improve efficiencies across their largely paper based processes.
- With no out-of-the-box SAP Fiori applications suitable for requirements, Soltius recommended a purpose-built app using the Neptune Software platform.
- The Loader Driver app, built by Soltius on the Neptune Software platform exceeded expectations for delivery and ease of use by end users.
- Neptune Software leverages SAP’s own source code ABAP and combines it with SAPUI5 HTML5 visualisation to allow rapid development and enable organisations to maximise the use of existing SAP environments.
Dockets printed in the office were given to a spreader, who would then return to their truck and wait their turn, before walking up the steps to the loader driver and handing over the docket. The completed docket would later be returned to the office to be entered into the system.

It was a process Ballance knew could be far more efficient.

Says Tim Lloyd, Ballance Infrastructure Manager, “Early on we identified a problem. We just didn’t know what the solution was then.”

But time wasn’t the only factor when Ballance looked to automate things.

Greg Delaney, General Manager of Supply Chain for Ballance Agri-Nutrients, says the company was also keen to improve safety.

“There had been a few incidents over time of people slipping as they’ve come up and down the stairs of the loader. It’s a huge win to reduce that risk.”

Tim Lloyd, Ballance Infrastructure Manager

While the company was keen to automate processes and reduce risks, there was a problem – there was no out of the box offering suitable.

“We had a specific set of requirements and we needed a powerful solution,” says Brett Costello, Customer and Distribution Business Analyst for Ballance Agri-Nutrients. Ballance turned to its trusted partner, Soltius, who suggested using Neptune, a plug-in to SAP which enables the company to quickly develop highly flexible mobile solutions.
DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND MOBILITY IN ACTION

The Loader Driver app builds on Ballance’s earlier work laying the foundations for digital transformation, which saw the company become the first New Zealand business to go live on SAP’s next generation ERP offering, SAP S/4 HANA, back in June 2016.

Lloyd notes that the new app, which took six months from concept to being up and running, mobilises the company’s SAP S/4 HANA system providing ‘a shopping cart in your cab.’

“Now, when a spreader goes in to confirm they’re picking up their order, data is sent electronically to an iPad in the loader. Once the order is completed the goods issue is automatically sent back into Ballance’s SAP system, removing all the paper and manual handling for the process.”

Greg Delaney, General Manager of Supply Chain for Ballance Agri-Nutrients

It’s funny, you’re only talking 30 seconds or a minute sometimes, but it all starts to add up. Even if it’s not materially noticeable it helps with the growing perception that Ballance is investing in technology to help customers,” Delaney says.

Scullin says among the key benefits the company has achieved through partnering with Soltius and the development of the Loader Driver app using the Neptune software, is the streamlining of business processes. This along with very easy to use software, no middleware and direct connection to the S/4 HANA ERP system in Ballance’s office where all orders are processed.

“And not underestimating our most overriding benefit is the health and safety factor of eliminating people having to walk across the yard and up to the loader to hand dockets up,” Scullin adds.
CHANGE MANAGEMENT – A SOFTWARE SOLUTION SO SIMPLE TRAINING ISN’T NEEDED

While change management is often a big issue with any SAP or software project, the Loader Driver app has proved so simple to use that Delaney says training was barely required. In fact, staff were so excited about the app they installed it themselves and were already using it when the trainers turned up.

Delaney says, “It was such a simple, easy to use solution and the benefits were so great that the change management problems you often get with digital implementations was easy to overcome.

“Simplifying business processes is one of the key pillars of our digital strategy along with customer experience and information and knowledge sharing. They’re all part of digitising Ballance for competitive advantage. That’s our catch phrase from a digital perspective and all those things align with our overall business strategy.”

Barbara Oldfield, Soltius Delivery Manager, says some of that simplicity and ease of use comes down to Soltius’ understanding of the Ballance business and the business challenges.

“It’s intuitive because we have a deep understanding of the business and what they needed,” Oldfield says.

Scullin agrees, noting Soltius ‘get in and understand your business’ – a crucial factor as companies increasingly seek to digitally transform themselves.

ENGAGING STAFF AND GROWING PERCEPTIONS

The ease of use also links in with another key focus for Ballance – staff engagement. The company is actively working to create world class engagement levels and sees the use of iPads in loaders as a way of helping make the job more enjoyable for staff.

“iPads in loaders makes things quicker, simpler and safer while using a bit of technology which is fun, and that connects to engagement as well,” Delaney says.

“We had a desire to help make our frontline staffs job easier after an era of creating a lot of complexity.”

Greg Delaney, General Manager of Supply Chain for Ballance Agri-Nutrients

IT’S STILL SAP AND THE SAME FUNCTIONAL BUSINESS PROCESS

While the Loader Driver app is simple to use, Glenda Godfrey, Soltius Senior Account Manager, stresses that it’s still SAP and leverages the existing SAP platform rather than creating a new system for companies to manage.

“We’re using Neptune to help mobilise SAP and keep it in SAP,” she says. “Neptune facilitates an easy to use design. The apps sit on the Fiori launchpad, the product line of SAP apps that have a device-agnostic user interface, so the users don’t see any difference in look and feel between a Fiori or a Neptune app. Soltius are mobilising SAP processes that Ballance are using and presenting them in a cost effective, easy to use way.”

Neptune sits inside SAP, allowing Soltius to mobilise the ERP system without the need for middleware.
“A distinct advantage we had here was that the process we’re trying to mobilise is already known,” Oldfield says. “We haven’t changed the back-end SAP, so the functional business process you’re trying to mobilise is proven and in place. What you’re trying to do is make it smarter and easier. So, we’re not trying to design the business process at the same time as trying to design mobility.”

Costello notes that the Neptune platform allowed Ballance to build all their requirements into the app.

“What we ended up coming out with was absolutely fantastic. It covered all the requirements of the business and it also checked the boxes for ease of use and pure simplicity,” Costello says.

The flexibility of the app means Ballance can also develop on the fly.

**CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

Scullins says Ballance still has a long way to go with its digital transformation.

“We’ve still got lots we need to address in our supply chain. That’s why it’s part of our digital strategy that we continue looking for opportunities for these apps and developing them and streamlining our business processes,” he says.

“There is a lot of opportunity for mobilisation on devices.”

And as to Soltius’ work, Lloyd dubs the IT provider ‘a delight’ to work with. “They were professional in every aspect and they came to us with solutions.”

“We have chosen to work with Soltius on this project because they’re a reputable SAP implementation partner, they innovate well with us and are able to find those niche solutions that you just can’t get out of a box with SAP.”

*David Scullin, Ballance Agri-Nutrients Chief Information Officer*

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