

**RETAIL** Companies revealed how improved communications could boost the bottom line at the Retail Solutions 2005 show, and Microsoft unveiled plans for RFID software

## WORKFLOW SYSTEMS

# B&Q boosts efficiency and cuts costs by replacing e-mail with workflow software

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DIY retailer B&Q has improved efficiency and saved almost £1m a year by switching from e-mail to structured workflow for assigning and managing in-store tasks.

The use of e-mail to allocate daily tasks to store managers is a major problem for larger companies, according to retailers and consultants at last week's Retail Solutions 2005 show at the NEC in Birmingham.

Many are likely to follow B&Q's shift to structured workflow software for handling information flows between head office and branch managers.

Colin MacLeod, B&Q implementation store execution manager, said managing stores via e-mails from head office to local managers had created major difficulties for the retailer.

He said B&Q had been using e-mail as a workflow tool, but store managers were being overwhelmed by the volume of e-mails coming from head office.



**Right tool for the job: structured workflow software handles information flow between head office and B&Q managers**

Internal research found that B&Q store managers were being sent 2,000 pages of information per week and it would take 65 hours to go through it all. Stores were having to employ a full-time assistant to disseminate the information and gather feedback at a total cost to the business

of £900,000 a year.

In addition, MacLeod said, "We estimate we were wasting £2m a year on miscommunication."

Following a successful pilot in 55 stores in January, B&Q rolled out Store Task Manager to 2,000 users. The system is built around a browser-based workflow tool

from Reflexis called Precision Workflow Management.

The software runs over B&Q's existing network infrastructure and is accessed via PCs in stores. MacLeod is now looking to use the software for workload planning and to provide a way to capture structured feedback from

store managers and survey forms. He also aims to provide mobile connectivity to enable end-users to access information on the shop floor.

Experts say e-mail is not suitable for managing field-based teams, such as store managers in large retail businesses.

Paul Mason, managing director at retail advisory firm Paul Mason Consulting, said, "There is no feedback loop with e-mail." He said e-mail communications between head office and stores did not provide a way to check that tasks had been completed.

"E-mail is also very expensive to maintain across a huge estate of stores," he said.