

Touch Memory

Guarantees Overnight Delivery



Neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet keeps this technology from delivering Sweden's mail on time.

Anders Anderson, CS Dataprodukter AB

Until the beginning of this year, Posten AB, which was part of the Swedish government, was responsible for distributing all mail, excluding parcels, in Sweden. Today, the organization no longer has a legislated monopoly, but outside Stockholm it is still the only company that provides postal service.

Posten AB's approximately 55,000 employees are spread over 13 regions. Each region has one or two distribution centers that collect the letters and parcels in their area, sort the mail, and distribute it. Letters are collected from mailboxes located throughout the country, each posted with a sign that informs customers of mail pick-up times. If letters are mailed before collection time, Posten AB guarantees overnight delivery anywhere in Sweden.

At times, this guarantee has posed problems. About two percent of the mail volume fails to reach addressees in time. Failure can be the result of a number of factors--delays in transport, overlooking a letter in the box, failure to empty a box, or early mail pick-up.

In the past, Posten AB tried to keep problems to a minimum by checking to make sure that its employees emptied all boxes at the proper time. The most common method of checking was to send a "control letter," that is, a letter or card marked with a unique identification number that was easy to identify when mail was sorted at the distribution center. Once a month, the service person in charge had to draw up a list of the mailboxes that needed to be checked, make a note of which letters were put in which boxes, and drive around to mail the letters. Then, he/she had to give instructions to the sorting personnel in the distribution center so that they would note each control letter found. The service person would then make up a report detailing which mailboxes had been emptied on time. Not only was the procedure time consuming--it covered only a small percentage of boxes at a time.

With an eye toward improving the situation, Bernt Modigh, quality manager at the mail distribution center in Orebro, started looking for an alternative method. Hoping to use bar codes in a manner similar to that employed by security companies, he envisioned placing bar codes at locations where personnel could then use a handheld bar code reader to scan the code as proof that he/she had been there at the right time.

After some searching, Mr. Modigh selected CS Dataprodukter AB, a company in Orebro that develops systems and supplies the hardware and software, to help find a solution. CS, in turn, advised him to contact Concredo Systemulveckling AB, a value-added reseller that specializes in software for surveillance/quality control.

Concredo, together with CS, recommended Dallas Semiconductor's Touch Memory 1990 environmentally sealed stainless steel buttons containing electronic license plates. One factor in Posten AB's decision to go this route was the durability of Touch Memory over a bar code label. Another factor was cost--the Videx TouchProbe reader is relatively inexpensive, works at least a year on rechargeable NiCd batteries, and is ruggedly constructed.

The software is a standard package from Concredo called Rondex. With minor modifications, it was well suited to the task. In Rondex, each Touch Memory serial number is connected to information about the mailbox, its location, when it should be emptied, etc. The user can generate reports that tell whether all locations have been visited, when, and any special information, and can also choose among several reports that present statistics in different forms.

In July 1993, Posten began to equip all of the approximately 200 mailboxes in Orebro with Touch Memory buttons. By August, the system was ready to use. Today, every time an employee empties a mailbox, he/she reads the button, thus recording the exact time the box was emptied. At this time, the employee can also report any damage. Information is downloaded at the distribution center into a PC, where an immediate check is performed to determine that all mailboxes have been emptied. If they haven't, personnel are dispatched to empty any overlooked boxes.

Apart from some initial employee resistance, which was quickly overcome, there were no problems implementing the system. Since its installation, four additional distribution centers have bought systems of various sizes, the biggest two being in Stockholm, where they use approximately 600 Touch Memory buttons and 25 TouchProbes each. And while it's too early to estimate the economic gains, the greatest gain is improved quality of service and Posten AB's ability to guarantee overnight mail delivery.

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Company Name:

Posten AB

Business: Postal service

Hardware/Software: Videx TouchProbe; Dallas Semiconductor Touch Memory 1990

Primary Application: Analyzing mail delivery

Primary Benefit: Accurate and timely mail delivery

Resources:

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