



# SHIPPERS' IT

## INTRTA seizes opportunities

A famous urban legend tells how one day in 1884, Harvard University President Charles William Eliot met with a pair of unassuming and by all appearances, simple people — a lady in “faded gingham” and a man in a “homespun threadbare suit,” the story goes. After supposedly keeping the couple waiting for some time, Eliot listened as the pair related how their young son had just passed away. They wished to establish a memorial to their son though the university.

Eliot, the scion of the wealthy and influential Eliot family of Boston, reputedly grew impatient with the unpretentious couple’s suggestions and suggested a simple scholarship in the boy’s name.

“We were thinking of something more substantial than that ... perhaps a building,” the woman reportedly replied, undoubtedly with the requisite pat of her dress eliciting a cloud of farm dust.

Eliot, in a patronizing tone summing up his opinion of the two, supposedly brushed aside the idea as being too expensive and the couple departed.

A year later, Eliot learned the plain pair were in fact the extremely wealthy railroad magnate Leland Stanford and his wife, Jane. After meeting with Eliot the couple had returned to the West Coast and established a \$26 million memorial named after their son Leland Stanford Jr., better known today as Stanford University.

We all love irony, however, it is highly unlikely a man as famous as Stanford would have been unknown to the equally celebrated Eliot. Contemporary accounts dismiss most of the story, but even this urban myth can reinforce an important life lesson: Don’t judge a book by its cover.

Businesses, however, can take from the story something slightly different, from the perspective of Eliot: Never let an opportunity pass.

Yet this is just what many logistics companies are doing. The importance of technology in the global marketplace has been stated so many times it is only worth mentioning here in passing. The truth remains that many firms remain wedded to their entrenched manual processes for doing even the most tedious and easily automated functions.

Take for example the time consuming process of transmitting shipping instructions for cargo containers. Everyday, firms around the world generate thousands of these instructions and fax them to shipping lines, where the information is re-input from the printed sheets to generate bills of lading.

The tremendous growth of labor outsourcing has seen the creation of massive data input service centers where hundreds of clerks labor away to re-input the information from the shippers and then transmit the documents electronically to the appropriate shipping line’s computer system.

These instructions — which detail reams of required numerical information about the shipment — typically start life in a computer spreadsheet of the shipper.

Wouldn’t it be so much simpler to just skip the whole fax/re-input scenario — which can introduce many errors — and transmit the spreadsheet data electronically to the shipping line? Isn’t that the point of the so-called “paperless digital world?”

This is exactly the problem that Parsippany, N.J.-based INTRTA’s new i-ACT SI portal system is attempting to solve.

The free Web-based service allows shippers to easily

create shipping instructions internally that can then be transmitted electronically to ocean carriers. Unlike other systems, the i-ACT SI system requires nothing more than a computer, an Internet connection, and an INTRTA user name (obtainable for free from INTRTA).

The current version, which went public Nov. 12, has been five years in development.

“We have focused on letting our users do the same work they are today, keep it in a spreadsheet, and make it faster and easier to transmit that information through INTRTA to the ocean carriers,” said David Burns, INTRTA’s product manager for documentation products.

The bottom line is cost savings and efficiency. “This creates a standardized platform for a firm and eliminates the need for separate processes or separate connections with each carrier,” Burns said.

Ease of use has been a critical focus for INTRTA during the development of i-ACT SI and it shows.

Users of the i-ACT SI portal are presented with a series of clearly thought out screens that allow the simultaneous creation of shipping instructions to single or multiple ocean carriers. Numerous time-saving shortcuts have been included in the system, including the ability to enter cargo information one time for multiple containers, saving a shipping instruction as a template to reuse later, and a powerful cut-and-paste tool. This one-click, cut-and-paste system allows information from shipper spreadsheets to be moved quickly into the i-ACT forms. An option to utilize a spreadsheet template offered by INTRTA makes the process even more efficient and seamless.

Once created, the shipping instructions created by the i-ACT SI system are transmitted to the ocean carrier, and notification is provided on screen when the documents are accepted. The system keeps track of the carrier’s cutoff time, and with the notification system users can quickly identify a problem, for example if a carrier’s computer network is down, and initiate direct contact with the ocean carrier.

Because the system is Web-based, a firm can utilize it as a second network within a firm’s own internal computer network, managing all shipping instruction through the single platform. Multiple users within the firm can access the system and create documents simultaneously. However, as each person is identified as a unique user, this allows for a great degree of internal oversight, redundancy and support. Managers can view the status of work being performed by individual users within their firm, track the status of individual instructions or allow other users within the firm to pick-up incomplete instructions and finish them for transmission.

In addition to the system being available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, INTRTA provides round-the-clock support for the system via a live-chat feature.

The system also provides a high degree of customization, notably through its built-in organizational tools. Instructions can be sorted by customer, by port, by carrier or by date.

INTRTA has also built in multilingual support, with English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Chinese, and Thai provided and future language support planned.

The system is also highly upgradeable and because the user only interfaces with the portal pages, INTRTA can make modifications that are nearly seamless to the user. Periodic upgrades are planned that will incorporate major modifications, which INTRTA is developing based on user input and requests for further functionality.