Barbour revolutionises its AP department with Ephesoft Transact

For many years, Accounts Payable (AP) departments in businesses all over the world have been irritated by the unstructured delivery of invoices: some are delivered physically in the post, others as attachments to emails, or even shared via an online portal. There has never been a uniform approach to AP, causing frustration and wasting time in many businesses.

Over their 125-year history, J. Barbour & Sons Ltd has handled its fair share of invoices. Based in the north-east of England, Barbour has been a family owned business since the company's inception in 1894. Their functional country clothing - particularly their classic wax jackets - have been a staple of British rural life for generations. From film stars to the Royal family, Barbour's reach and appeal as a lifestyle brand is unparalleled.

The company has come a long way since the first imports of oilcloth back in the nineteenth century, but the way it previously handled its invoices had not matched the rest of the company's growth. With a customer base that now stretches to over forty countries worldwide and a complex supply chain befitting of a modern-day retailer, Barbour decided to make comprehensive changes to invoice processing.

Barbour.

Customer
J. Barbour & Sons Ltd

Partner
Cobwebb Communications

Sector
Retail

Use Case
Accounts department

Results
- increased number of invoices processed per day by more than 400 % with each invoice taking only 36 seconds to process
- Ensures accurate data, free from human error
- Offers more managerial visibility into company workflow
- Contributes to Barbour's sustainability efforts

The Challenge

Barbour's AP department processes approximately 50,000 invoices a year, arriving from different countries and in various formats. But until recently, Barbour had been struggling to keep pace with the number of invoices that circulate in such an established company, relying on the manual efforts of its AP department to sort, arrange and process each invoice by hand.

In 2018, Barbour began the process of modernising their invoice processing. To successfully manage the sheer volume of supplier invoices coming through the business, they needed to replace the old and laborious manual processes with streamlined document capture technology. Under the old system of processing, the accounts department were required to key in the data invoice by invoice, occupying most of their time and allowing room for human error. And without an electronic document management system in place to store the data, all this information was kept in physical records that were often hard to track and difficult to file, particularly during peak periods.

The Solution

With the support of Cobwebb Communications, Ephesoft's long-standing partner, Ephesoft Transact was successfully implemented into Barbour's existing enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, Infor M3, and in July 2019, Barbour officially began using Ephesoft Transact to process all of their AP invoices. The result is a fully integrated smart document capture solution, delivered into the heart of Barbour's business management technology.

Once the invoice images are loaded into Ephesoft Transact, the solution captures and scans the key information – from the invoice number to the issue date to the name of supplier – before extracting the data and exporting it directly into Barbour's Infor M3 ERP system.

"We were keen to get our hands on the Ephesoft Transact solution," said Lori Sproat, Group Management Accountant at Barbour. "We had access to the product before it was fully integrated into our end-to-end system, and were therefore able to get a feel for it and put it into practice before it went live. This really is a testament to how simple the product is to use and with Cobwebb's helpful and knowledgeable assistance throughout, we've been able to get the system up and running as quickly as possible."

The Benefits

The solution has freed up the time of the accounts department and has provided those in managerial positions a better understanding of how they can use this time effectively. "The benefits we're seeing since we implemented the solution are twofold," said Gareth Dixon, Group Financial Controller at Barbour. "First of all, we're able to process invoices at much faster rates than before as well as speeding up the approval process from our suppliers. But perhaps more crucially, the technology gives us insight into the wider workflow context of our entire ERP – we can now clearly see what's pending, what's processing and what's been processed throughout the business."

In terms of volume, the accounting team can process two hundred invoices into Infor M3 in two hours. Before, with the repetitive and labour-intensive manual methods, the team would struggle to squeeze two hundred into one day. During Barbour's peak periods, this would become a real issue.

At the busiest points of the year, it wasn't unusual to have week-old invoices sitting outside of the system. This meant that invoices were paid late and the possibilities of discounts could not be used. But now all invoices are processed within twenty-four hours of receiving them and Barbour saves money by using cash discount deductions.

"From a manager's point of view," says Sproat, "it affords me much greater peace of mind. As well as being much quicker than before, the technology also removes the risk of human error on the input side, so I know that the data in front of me is accurate.

"But what I value most about the product is that it gives me much more visibility of volumes across the team – I can see what's in Ephesoft and I can see how many invoices are waiting to be processed into the ERP. Before we acquired this technology, all I could see was a pile of paper on desks, the volume of which I was never quite certain. Now I can manage my time and the team's far more efficiently."

Sustainability Initiative

Beyond the business benefits that Barbour has felt since the introduction of Transact, the technology is also supporting their sustainability efforts — one of the company's six core values. "From an environmental perspective," says Dixon, "using Ephesoft is obviously far more sustainable than processing everything on paper.

Before, we would have stacks of invoices sent from all over the world, but now everything is electronic which is much cleaner. This is important for us. We're always delighted to invest in business technology that contributes to a more sustainable supply chain, and Ephesoft Transact is certainly doing that."

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