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Automated small parts logistics makes exceptional situation manageable - Praxisdienst

Praxisdienst secures supply of system-relevant products with AutoStore system from AM-Automation

Higher efficiency in the handling of a constantly growing order volume: with this goal in mind, Dieckhoff & Ratschow Praxisdienst GmbH & Co.KG from Longuich near Trier decided to use an AutoStore system. Thanks to automated small parts logistics, the supplier of medical products, which is active throughout Europe, can now reliably handle the unexpected exceptional situation of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Compresses and swabs, syringes and cannulas, laboratory balances or complete surgical equipment: Whatever medical professionals need for their work in terms of equipment or consumables is available on call at Praxisdienst's logistics center. Founded in 1953 in Wuppertal, the company successfully established itself as the first provider to deliver the complete range of medical products by mail order to all parts of Germany. With the move to Longuich, Praxisdienst expanded its catchment area from 1978 to include the neighboring Benelux countries and the entire DACH region, and since 2008 the entire range has also been accessible beyond this via the online store. Covering an area of more than 7,000 m², the range of products held in the logistics center comprises around 20,000 items distributed over 26,000 storage locations. Most of these are small parts, which were previously stored in two-meter-high shelving and picked manually.

Wasted space in high halls

However, as order volumes increased, Praxisdienst found it increasingly difficult to reliably cope with

demand over the past few years. "In order to continue supplying customers in a timely manner, the order processing time had to be drastically reduced," says Praxisdienst Managing Director Michael Heine. The company preferred a solution to make optimal use of the available space at the logistics center. This was because the manually accessible shelf racks took up a large part of the space, but with a hall height of 7.5 m, a lot of space was "given away" at the same time.

Praxisdienst's only alternative was an automated small parts storage system, which had to be implemented as quickly as possible without interrupting ongoing operations. "Initially, we considered a paternoster concept," reports Michael Jäkel, who is responsible for e-business and IT at Praxisdienst, "but the installation would have been quite complex and we would not have been able to achieve the targeted pick rates with it. In the event of an error, moreover, a large proportion of the items on a shelf would be temporarily unavailable, which could quickly lead to a backlog in overall order processing. Praxisdienst therefore felt that the AutoStore concept was the only way to fully meet the necessary requirements: Greatest possible compression of the storage area, fast provision of the requested items and minimum fail-safety.

Exceptional situation with time window

Praxisdienst could hardly have chosen a better time to deploy AutoStore. After AM-Automation was commissioned to implement the project in December 2019, the medical device supplier found itself in an unforeseeable exceptional situation soon after as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. Interest in hygiene products such as disposable gloves and protective masks reached unimagined heights within a very short period of time, while at the same time demand could be satisfied less and less in view of interrupted supply chains. On the other hand, this opened up a window of opportunity for the smooth conversion of intralogistics: After the preparatory ground work in spring, AM-Automation started the AutoStore assembly at the beginning of June. While the storage areas slowly filled up again with the urgently needed supplies during the summer, the automated small parts storage system was quickly completed and gradually put into operation as early as mid-August. “In view of the second wave of infections, this was perfect timing,” says Praxisdienst Managing Director Michael Heine. And Johannes Traub, sales manager at AM-Automation, adds:

“The schedule was central to the whole project, but fortunately we were able to provide all the necessary AutoStore components without any problems, despite restricted supply chains.”

Less space, higher performance

In the meantime, Praxisdienst’s small parts assortment has been completely transferred from the shelving racks to AutoStore and now finds space in 15,000 AutoStore bins, each with an external height of 330 mm, and a volume of 75 l each. Ten robots take care of the provision of the requested items on the top of the system, which are removed and prepared for shipping at four workstations at the base of the nearly 7.5 m high structure. “The space required for our small parts storage has dropped by two-thirds, while performance in order processing has more than doubled,” says Managing Director Heine happily. And even though there are

still temporary supply bottlenecks for certain items in the Praxisdienst range, the AutoStore system is now running at full speed in two-shift operation – Corona test kits are currently in particular demand. “By implementing the project, we were not only able to get a grip on the unexpected surge in demand, but also sustainably expand our market position overall,” Heine sums up. And to make sure it stays that way, AM-Automation is to expand the AutoStore facility, which has just gone into operation, to a total capacity of 27,869 containers in just a few months.

