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UNFI makes changes to improve its supply chain

United Natural Foods Inc. is taking actions to significantly improve its supply chain capabilities and overall customer experience as part of its four-part transformation agenda to provide increasing value to its customers and suppliers, effectiveness and efficiency in its operations, and enhanced value for its shareholders.

These actions include improved operating procedures, increased associate training programs, and the deployment of technological improvements, such as the rollout of Systems Application Enterprises Inc. scanning technology, and plans for a new Symbotic Inc. A.I.-powered robotics and software automation system to be installed at its 1.15-million-square-foot Centralia, WA, distribution center.

“The efficiency of our supply chain is fundamental to our customer experience. We have been engaged in a detailed review focused on broadly improving our operations,” said Erin Horvath, UNFI’s chief supply chain transformation officer. “This includes strengthening our standard operating procedures across our 56 distribution centers, training associates for improved speed and accuracy, and implementing technology and automation tools to enable greater network capacity, scalability and profitability. Our goal is for customers to benefit from the comprehensive and innovative product offerings we provide, while continuing to make doing business with UNFI easier, and our end-to-end supply chain more efficient.”

For the past year, UNFI has been working with SAE, an industry-leader in barcode-based business tools, to implement three of its core distribution technology solutions to help modernize UNFI’s distribution capabilities:

- Selector Pro, which directs scan-based selection activities to improve order accuracy while providing real-time workforce visibility throughout the warehouse;
- Loader Pro, which directs scan-based loading activities to ensure accuracy and efficiency of outbound deliveries; and
- Driver Pro, which focuses on “proof-of-delivery,” providing scan-based validation that each customer order has been delivered accurately.

These tools are being utilized in 18 UNFI distribution centers today with plans to implement them into additional distribution centers over the balance of 2023 and 2024.

In September 2022, UNFI and Symbotic announced they had entered into a commercial agreement to implement Symbotic’s A.I.-powered robotics automation system at five UNFI distribution centers over a four-year period. UNFI’s Centralia distribution center will be the first facility to receive the new automation systems.

Symbotic’s end-to-end solution provides robotic case pick capabilities and will be used within Centralia’s dry grocery area to enhance operational capabilities and efficiency, improve order accuracy for customers, and better organize products on pallets for an improved customer experience at the store level.

“Our Centralia distribution center supports a large customer base in the Pacific Northwest, including

retailers in Alaska and export customers through the port of Washington,” said Horvath. “To support our growth and a robust retailer base in this region, we’ll be deploying automation to improve the service we provide retailers, better manage external labor resources, and create a more efficient operating network system in the Pacific Northwest over time. These actions are key pillars of our overall transformation agenda, including our mission to invest in service, quality, and efficiency improvements for our existing and future customers and delivering more profitability for our shareholders.”

UNFI’s preparation work for the installation of the Symbotic automation system in Centralia is scheduled to begin later this month with plans for testing, training and the full rollout of the new system anticipated in 2024.

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