

DOUBLE TAKE

Parallel OCR shows that taking a second look at problems can often provide the answer

TNT Post has demonstrated itself to be notably forward thinking. With a prime focus on growing its end-to-end letter business, TNT Post hasn't just adopted one OCR package but two. As well as the standard address-recognition system with its letter-sorter platform, it has also equipped all its UK sorting centres with Prime Vision's Address Reader.

Although the capabilities of the OCR products overlap, the PV Address Reader introduces a unique benefit to the mix. It excels at capturing hand-written information. In common with many companies worldwide TNT Post is using the PV Address Reader as a reject reader to process address images that are not picked up by the first-line OCR engine. However it is in the growing hand-written market that it will really come into its own – and for TNT Post this is an important business differentiator.

Downstream access has been key to the development of TNT Post's own end-to-end service. It has invested heavily in automation to provide a highly attractive alternative to Royal Mail's Mailsort for business customers whose volumes fail to meet its minimum quantity. TNT Post sorts this mail into batches that meet the Mailsort qualification criteria before returning it to Royal Mail for delivery.

Mail sorted for smaller customers also has different characteristics and these offer further business potential. First, the final delivery is common to a defined area rather than nationwide and TNT Post is fast developing its network to provide an end-to-end service for these SMEs. TNT Post's Northern operation based in Manchester is a flourishing example, providing a cost-effective 2-3 day postal service for more than 170 local businesses.

Another important difference with the growing SME customer base is the higher volume of hand-written mail being handled, and this is the sector where TNT Post anticipates that its Prime Vision technology will give it considerable edge.



Chris O'Malley is head of sort automation at TNT Post and was responsible for specification of the Prime Vision software. "We expected first-line OCR to read 90-95 percent of our mainstream, machine-printed addresses and this has now been proved," he explains. "We also knew that the incorporation of Prime Vision would have the potential to increase this read rate. In fact tests showed an improvement of up to 4.24 percent when using both OCRs. This, together with the potential to develop our ability to sort hand-written mail automatically prompted us to install a PV Address Reader on each of our UK sorting machines. This is a springboard for future services.

"Another benefit of the PV addition was its clear contribution to read rates at the deepest sorting level – house number, for example. This has the potential to improve the quality and profitability of the sorting product. Future enhancements will be on tuning handwriting recognition so that even higher sort rates will be achieved on this type of address."

The PV Address Reader is based on more than 50 years of R&D on OCR techniques that has led to Prime Vision's high-yield character-recognition technology. This uses different techniques from those employed

by other OCR systems and is the basis of many of Prime Vision's products and solutions. Recent enhancements have been in the field of additional character and language sets for example Hebrew, Chinese and Tamil.

"We're very happy with our OCR choices," O'Malley continues. "We've done some handwritten mail trials with the untuned and basic PV Address Reader. Even at this stage we are getting a better than 56 percent read rate. We are now collating written images from all our sorting centres so that the development work can start in earnest."

Also being evaluated is the possible addition of video coding. "It's all down to being able to develop our automation to meet customers' changing needs and introduce new services," O'Malley concludes. "Our aim is to rival Royal Mail in the end-to-end market and with our investment in twin OCR we have a powerful means to achieve that."

FIND OUT MORE

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