



e-Commerce Fulfilment Guide

Whistl outline the 10 key stages of e-commerce fulfilment

The Ultimate Guide, from Whistl

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Introduction



e-Commerce fulfilment is the process of storing, reworking, managing inventory, picking, packing and distributing fast-moving consumer goods, printed matter, promotional or business to business (B2B) items for sale and resale. Fulfilment services can be facilitated in-house by the retailer or brand, but are often outsourced with a [fulfilment specialist](#), due to their space and skills..

An increasingly operational strategic imperative, the global e-commerce fulfilment services market size was valued at [\\$70 billion](#) in 2019 and is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.5% from 2020 to 2027.

In October 2020 Blue Yonder surveyed 300 senior executives in omnichannel retail and e-commerce with responsibility for logistics and fulfilment. This survey showed retailers had seen an increase of 33% in revenue following the global pandemic. With an increase in orders, many retailers have looked to fulfilment centres to help meet the customers' demands.

While order fulfilment outsourcing is in demand, it's a major commitment. Whistl has outlined the 10 key stages of e-commerce fulfilment, to ensure you have a strong understanding of all the principles and process intricacies.



Whistl will work with your business and take the time to understand your challenges, providing the right services and solutions to support your growth

1. Onboarding



If you choose to outsource your fulfilment processes, onboarding is a crucial first step. Your business and selected outsourced fulfilment specialist should be aligned in terms of your offering, their expertise and the technical infrastructure of both parties.

Finding a fulfilment house that integrates seamlessly with your e-commerce platform, marketplaces and order management system will ensure all order and product data is orchestrated with the greatest accuracy.

The on-boarding stage should include a review with your account manager and integration specialist to map out your current product range, order volumes and SKUs to determine how much warehouse space you will need throughout the year, including potential peaks and troughs in demand.

At Whistl we will also assess whether we can offer added value to your business and challenges, such as [contact centre support](#) and the selection of the appropriate parcel carriers. These additional services can help businesses exceed their customers' expectations.

- 1. Discovery:** Whistl's account management team carry out a discovery session to understand all elements of business, orders, product SKUs and sizes. The review will ensure we have a complete understanding of your current challenges and long term goals.
- 2. Planning and implementation:** We review all elements from the discovery and propose back support solutions including any relevant criteria for success in any areas for ongoing risk assessment and development. The project plan is reviewed, finalised and approved by the client.
- 3. Execution:** Based on the agreed project plan Whistl manage all elements of the fulfilment process integration required including any systems and technologies, carrier preferences and customer service support through our contact centre. To ensure all elements are integrated correctly, we create transition tests.
- 4. Go Live:** Sales and orders are issued into our fulfilment centres based on given specifications and processes (agreed within the steps above). Communications and reports are then issued from our client services team based on set communication timescales.
- 5. Reporting:** Based on set KPI's and reporting needs, Whistl will continually review and validate the elements of fulfilment process and make recommendations for improvements.

2. Receiving

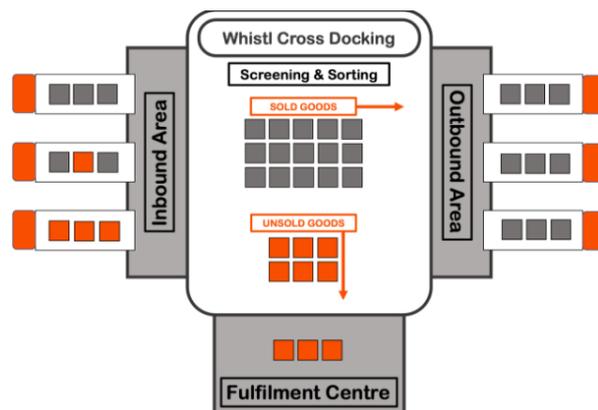
The first time your products arrive at the warehousing and fulfilment facility will be the first 'receipt of goods' from your suppliers. Once your products arrive, the goods-in team will sign a confirmation note so that you have documented proof that the team has received your goods, along with the time and inspection details. The goods-in team should also check receipt of goods against the inventory, to ensure volumes and products match what you have ordered.

To maximise revenue opportunities, inventory management should be set to allow triggers that generate orders with suppliers when stock levels fall below set volumes and if the rate of sales exceeds predicted levels, products do not become out of stock or understocked. Well-optimised order fulfilment and [inventory management](#) will ensure maximised sales from managed stock levels.

Cross-docking processes might be required for part-sold or fully sold inventories. The process of cross-dock can minimise or remove some of the steps below if the goods are fully sold. For fully sold inventories products are received into the fulfilment centre and are simply despatched to the customer or final destination.

Tailored Cross-Dock Fulfilment Process, from Whistl:

With Whistl, our cross-dock fulfilment process is more flexible and is tailored specifically to our client's needs, their SKUs and product purchase cycles. Whistl manages the process completely, working with our clients based on each consignment, to understand any pre-sold percentages (instead of 100% sold consignments) for immediate [despatch](#) and [inventory](#) stock needs.



With a single scanning process, Whistl ensures that the following processes are captured, to improve cost efficiencies and speed of product despatch:

1. Recording the receipt of the items, within each consignment
2. Understand pre-sold orders and unsold goods
3. Unsold goods are moved to stock for future orders
4. Create customer orders for pre-sold goods ready for despatch
5. Print the relevant carrier labels (based on the client or customer preferences for despatch)
6. Send despatch notifications to our client for goods despatched
7. Send carrier notifications for the end customer via either the client or carrier (based on client needs)

3. Reworking

Following the receipt of your goods, the fulfilment house can perform a series of pre-agreed audits and inspections, including:

- Box numbers and pallets match your packing list
- Product volumes match the consignment orders

At Whistl our inventory management processing can include thorough inspections; for example:

- Checking the correct amount of apparel items are in each box
- Item quality and checks for imperfections or damages
- Checks for variable elements including sizes and colours have been supplied as per the order.

Many fashion retailers offer personal shopping subscription services, where they take the customer's clothing and style preferences along with demographics and tailor their clothing in a monthly or quarterly box. This means each order is completely bespoke and so the fulfilment team has to 'rework' the products into custom arrangements to suit each customer's specific requirements.

Some retailers may require boxes to be broken down and items moved into different packaging; in this instance, the reworking can be carried out between the 'receiving' and 'inventory storage' stages, but with bespoke fashion retailers, typically the [picking and packing team](#) will need to work with the reworking specialists to collect and return items from their stored locations to prepare a customised order.



Whistl stock management and sales inventory checks are coordinated, based on the retailer's unique needs.

4. Inventory Management

After the auditing of your products, the received inventory stock is updated into the fulfilment provider's warehouse management system. This software can easily integrate with your order management platform, ensuring total transparency of the supply chain journey through to the picking, packing and despatch to your customers via a carefully selected range of UK and international [parcel carriers](#) and mailing partners.

This integration of your businesses order management platform allows the fulfilment house to analyse the product range and sales data to store the product appropriately, to ensure the fast-selling 'in-demand' products are the easiest for the pick and pack team to access.

At Whistl we have over 1.5 million square feet of warehousing space throughout the UK, but despite this, demand outstrips supply so there is increasing competition between UK and overseas retailers for e-commerce warehousing and storage.



5. Picking

Constituting a large proportion of a fulfilment centre's operating costs, warehouse picking is the labour-intensive process where stored products are collected from their locations in order to fulfil customer orders.

There is a wide variety of picking methods deployed by fulfilment centres and retailers worldwide. Here are the four most common methods:

- **Zone picking** is the most commonly used method for complex orders that contain multiples items. Products will typically be pre-stored in locations called 'zones' to maximise the efficiency of this process and to ensure that picking staff don't need to travel far unnecessarily. Typically a picking employee will be assigned to their own zone.
- **Batch picking** is a method employed by picking staff that need to travel long distances throughout the warehouse. If they're already making that journey, they might as well collect other items in that area while they are there. As such, pickers will typically group orders at the same time, eliminating the need for multiple trips.

Rather than going from point A to B to C to fulfil one order, provided that other orders are likely to contain the same products, it would make sense for multiple of each item to be collected at each stop-off, provided that they are also needed in real-time

- **Discrete picking** is the most popular method for smaller warehouses and retailers with a limited number of SKUs (stock-keeping units).

While more distance travelled is required on average to fulfil an order, picking accuracy is typically higher because each picking staff can focus on one order at one time. However, as the business scales, the discrete picking method is not as efficient. This emphasises the importance of working with an [order fulfilment provider](#) that is experienced in maintaining accuracy and efficiency as the retailer's sales grow.

- **Wave picking** is similar to discrete picking in that one order is picked at one time however, this method introduces scheduling windows as a means of optimising the picking team's time depending on the time of day. Wave picking is also useful for when picking staff are also responsible for packing, reworking and other areas of the order fulfilment process.

Most modern fulfilment houses will utilise a combination of the above, or as the retailer grows in order volumes, their fulfilment provider may evolve from discrete and wave picking methods to zone and batch picking to suit the business's current demands.

6. Packing

At Whistl our team of picking staff use RF technology (radiofrequency scanners), which work in harmony with warehouse management systems so that both your internal stock management and our systems are aware when a product has left its pick location and is on its way to the packing station, also referred to as the 'packing bench'.

While your products will arrive at the fulfilment warehouse in a container and/or pallets, the products themselves will be in boxes, often called 'outers' and 'inners'. However, these boxes aren't necessarily the packaging that will be used to deliver to your customers. Often the packaging will arrive from a separate supplier or the fulfilment house will offer to package the items as part of the service.

Your products may be pre-packed before being selected from inventory or packed to specific requirements by the packing team. It is important to decide whether you want to use generic packaging in the early stages of your business's growth.

As your business scales, it is likely you will look to implement [bespoke packaging](#) to enhance your customer experience and reinforce your brand.

Packing isn't just about putting an item in a box. You may also include surprise gifts to delight your customers, discount vouchers to encourage [impulse purchases](#) and returns information to ensure your customers have plenty of options available to them at every stage of their buying journey.



Packaging can be an extension of your brand and key to your customers' experience. Create a great impression, with every delivery.

7. Labelling

Once the item is packed, the next stage is to print a shipping label from your [carrier management system](#) to apply to the parcel.

If your product is being delivered domestically to somewhere in the UK, this is usually all you will need. However, if you are shipping internationally you will need to ensure you are meeting the guidelines for that country.

For example, if you are shipping into the European Union, you usually will have to include commercial invoices with the shipping label, along with stating your product [HS code](#), your own EORI number and depending on the item's insured and actual value, product type and country of manufacture, your customer may be required to pay customs duty to release the item.

HS Code Help & Support

Trade Tariff: look up commodity codes, duty and VAT rates
<https://www.trade-tariff.service.gov.uk/sections>

HMRC classification of goods

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ask-hmrc-for-advice-on-classifying-your-goods>

How to ask HMRC for advice

1. Send one email for each of the goods they are asking for advice on, failure to do this could cause rejection.
2. Email the Tariff Classification Service: classification.enquiries@hmrc.gov.uk for non-legally binding advice on classifying your goods.
3. HMRC aim to reply to emails within 5 working days. This could take longer if they have a high number of requests.



For retailers and brands selling goods direct from manufacturers overseas, Whistl can create a complete end to end service

(from importation with customs clearance, warehousing, pick and pack services to despatch and a returns solution)

8. Despatch and Shipping

Once your items are labelled and include all the correct documentation, at this stage the fulfilment house will group parcels by carrier and destination.

Each parcel will travel along a conveyor belt during this process Whistl's delivery fulfilment specialists will scan and sort each parcel, to ensure it is ready for outbound delivery when the relevant carrier partner/s arrives at the fulfilment house, to collect the parcels.

Your e-commerce and fulfilment requirements can be efficiently despatched with our broad choice of carrier specialists. Our network of carrier specialists ensures we can give your company a choice of shipping options to meet your order despatch times, all with cost efficiencies with our buying power for competitive carrier rates.

Whistl provides multi-channel fulfilment solutions, managing all elements of your product despatch needs, including:

- **Despatch Single Items:** Your sales and product orders are for individual items
- **Despatch for Multi-Products:** Your sales and product orders allow customers to buy different items
- **Despatch for Pallets:** Your retailers need large volumes of items palletised, wrapped and despatched as a single consignment
- **Despatch for Drop-shipping:** Your orders are processed and fulfilled directly from the manufacturer



As a multi-channel fulfilment company, Whistl can support your business to consumer, business to business and Drop shipping despatch needs.

9. Returns Process

Some studies have found that as many as **30%** of products ordered online are returned, compared to less than 9% for brick-and-mortar stores. It is therefore of great importance that you work with a fulfilment centre that can help minimise the incidence of returns happening in the first place, and manage your returns when they happen.

At Whistl we offer [returns fulfilment solutions](#) to retailers and brands throughout the UK. We work to your pre-stated product and quality guidelines; for your business, this could mean prioritising impeccable condition products for immediate resale or refurbishing slightly damaged items before re-introducing them to their respective warehouse locations (stock replenishment).

For fashion retailers, we offer garment steaming, along with shoe cleaning and re-lacing. Our team of specialists also carry out quality checks including inventory logging of returns codes, stock volumes and we can also issue faulty products back to the manufacturer on the retailer's behalf.

Whistl's Fulfilment Returns Process



10. Ongoing Customer Support



The customer journey doesn't end with receipt of their goods; our research found that 46% of consumers said they stopped using a company/organisation based on a poor call centre experience. While many fulfilment companies purely handle the storage and distribution of products, at Whistl we also offer [e-commerce customer service](#) to complement our fulfilment offering, so that you can deliver a consistent omnichannel customer experience.

If you choose Whistl as your outsourced fulfilment partner we can manage all aspects of your product and customer order needs, and support your business. With Whistl our tailored contact centre solutions can help you focus on critical business, as we manage your customers' contacts and interactions.

Contact Centre Services

Outsourcing your contact centre services gives you and your business more time to focus on growth as well as alleviating the stress and cost of maintaining an internal customer services team.

Reasons to outsource Contact Centre Services

1. Does your business require a dedicated UK based contact centre team for all enquiries?
2. Has your customer service team reached capacity?
3. Do you need help managing peak periods?
4. Has a change in headcount left a knowledge gap that is affecting performance?



With over 20 years of contact centre experience, Whistl offers a dedicated support team of over 500 seats, managed from our multiple UK sites, available 7 days a week.

Fulfilment That Fits



Deciding whether to outsource fulfilment services

Within this guide, we have delved into every aspect of the order fulfilment journey. Getting fulfilment right requires fastidious attention to detail and so whether you are managing it in-house or with a specialist, it pays dividends to have an expert taking care of each of these processes.

Above all else what's important is that you can process orders as quickly as possible, utilise the correct delivery services and respond to peaks and troughs in demand by minimising overstocking and understocking.

Get one of the ten elements wrong, this can be the difference between a repeat customer and a one-star review.

Whistl offers bespoke solutions for businesses, brands and wholesalers. We look to create services that help to assist sales growth and overcome challenges, that met your needs.

Whistl is a complete fulfilment partner offering fulfilment that fits!

Whistl's Full-Service Order Fulfilment Process



Contact centre support is available throughout each step of this service

To find out more about **Whistl Fulfilment** and how we can help your business **call us on 01628 232 254**

Thank You

Whistl UK Ltd

Meridian House, Fieldhouse Lane, Marlow
Buckinghamshire, SL7 1TB

01628 232 254
moreinfo@whistl.co.uk

www.whistl.co.uk