



# DIGITAL FLEETS HELP CAR

## “Unilode isn’t alone in facing challenges during these turbulent times”

Unit Load Devices (ULDs) are a vital part of transport logistics, ensuring simpler sorting, storage and movement of cargo. With 140,000 tonnes of cargo being transported every 24 hours, these devices ensure items safely make it from one destination to another.

Unilode Aviation Solutions, which has the largest fleet of ULDs in the market, with over 145,000 for more than 45 airlines across 550 airports, prides itself on being the market leader in this field.

With the air cargo industry embracing technological innovation, as the sector seeks to respond to the disruption of the past few years, Unilode is now aiming to go further by building a truly digital skyway.

### First impressions count

Ross Marino joined Unilode in February, bringing over 30 years of aviation experience to the role. “What really struck from the outset is that we’ve got great people in our business,” Marino said, discussing his first impressions of the company. “Having spent almost my entire career working with the ULD market...What really impressed me was the digital capability the team had produced and the huge potential for that.”

But, with any company, there is always potential room for improvement and growth, with any new CEO responsible for swiftly identifying that. “Continuous improvement should be in our DNA. We should never ever sit back and relax” Marino stated.

### A smarter supply chain set up

The invasion of Ukraine came only days before Marino became CEO of Unilode, with the subsequent fallout requiring companies to adapt quickly to keep their post-pandemic rebound alive.

Unilode isn’t alone in facing challenges during these turbulent times. Having come out of the pandemic years, the hopes of moving into smoother times were dashed by supply chain challenges and international instability. When asked about how Unilode is seeking to minimise the impact, Marino said “I am sure you’ll be asking that question to the leader in every business right now.”

“The delay in receiving stock and spare parts is the most challenging it’s ever been,” Marino revealed, “what may have taken a few weeks or a couple months to receive is now taking up to a year.” With there already being a well-chronicled shortage of ULDs

in the aviation industry, “we’ve got to be smarter with the management of our ULD inventory, in order for us to keep our customers happy. This is why it is so important for us to stay ‘ahead of the curve’ in terms of ordering new ULDs and spare parts,” Marino said.

These supply chain delays have compounded troubles caused by soaring inflation, rising property prices and increasing energy bills. “There is a huge amount to manage at this time...having all of these elements in sight, so that we can plan accordingly is incredibly important for the business.”

### Personnel is at the heart of the business

As with many similar companies during the pandemic years, Unilode had to scale back and scale down its maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) operations. However, with the business returning, the company is looking to ramp up operations, and improve its performance levels in its MRO department.

The MRO operations are “vast in terms of global footprint and scale,” Marino highlighted, as their branches span most continents. Although, with a sizeable operation comes the need to ensure it is as effective and efficient as possible. Marino will turn the company’s attention back to the roll-out of its lean programme for MRO facilities, after the company was forced to delay the project during the pandemic.

“If we see growth as an ambition, which we do, the ongoing recovery from the pandemic with our customer base is akin to winning a number of new customers anyway,” Marino explained, “we saw a huge decrease in activity during the pandemic and all of a sudden, our customer volumes are ‘bouncing back’ to pre-pandemic levels, and in some cases particularly in cargo they have increased further”

To cope with that, it’s crucial that Unilode has the stock available to our customers, so reviving ULDs that have been damaged, sat redundant or might not be in the right place after a couple of years of inactivity requires our attention. Achieving this requires a dedicated and hardworking base of employees, so bringing people back into the industry after furlough or time away during the pandemic is a challenge that must be overcome.

Many MRO businesses prior to the pandemic were working multiple shifts, while during the pandemic that was reduced down to one shift. “Trying to ramp up, so that we can improve our output



# CARGO FLY

have well managed stock levels that satisfy demand.”

Beyond the obvious markets of Asia, Europe and North America, there are new targets for the company though, having recently further expanded into the South American area. “Big movements with our ULD management customers such as Azul coming on board, which means that area continues to grow and be a key target,” Marino explained. “The South American market naturally feeds the North American market,” he highlighted, creating a virtuous circle for the company.

Further afield, Unilode sees opportunities in Africa, as that untouched by the company at this point. “We’re quite close to securing a foothold,” he revealed, setting a timeline for expansion into that area within the next six to 12 months.



and efficiency is a challenge but it’s one we’re meeting head-on,” Marino said.

“Attracting staff back into the aviation business is also challenge that the industry has to meet head-on”, you’ve really got to look long and hard at this aspect as many airport workers moved to other industries during the pandemic, we need to find solutions to this challenge” Marino admitted.

### Driving digitalisation

Despite this though, it’s not all doom and gloom, as, in times of difficulty, there are always opportunities. Right now, there is a strong cargo market and the passenger business is coming back.

Seizing on the growing demand for digitalisation, Unilode is looking to boost supply chain visibility through tagging ULDs. The company recently achieved a significant milestone, having reached an unrivalled 120,000 digital ULDs, which are now live in its container and pallet fleet.

But that success is just the start. “I’d really like to see us drive our digitalisation to another level,” Marino said, looking forward at the company’s plans to digitise its entire fleet of ULDs. The aspiration is for the entire ULD fleet to be upgraded to that standard within the next 12 months but Marino accepts that, this will be an ongoing process and challenge, as many ULDs can be ‘in use’ or go missing for significant periods of time before they get to one of our MRO facilities.

“That automation level for us on the digital side and some of our other IT development is incredibly important. We want to get to a point where our systems drive performance improvement. How much stock is there currently? How much do we have available and where is it needed? This helps us with the decision making for our people.”

### New horizons are calling

Building on the existing markets where Unilode already operates is a commercial propriety for Marino, as it’s important to “keep feeding that network.” “To be successful with our business model, we need scale,” Marino said, “when you run a pooling concept where you expect airlines to come into a particular location and have ULDs available, you’ve got to

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