

The Power of eBOL Standard Implementation

20 Million
SHIPMENTS A YEAR

3PL that solves logistics problems for companies across the globe

No third-party logistics company handles more LTL shipments than C.H. Robinson, with more than 5 million a year. So when C.H. Robinson adds an efficiency, it's not just a matter that affects a handful of shippers or a few carriers. What C.H. Robinson does affects the entire LTL industry. The company has to make good decisions about when to embrace new standards and technologies, and it can't miss on execution. The leaders of C.H. Robinson knew they had a moment like that when it came to adopting the Digital LTL Council's new standard for electronic bills of lading, and so did the company's carrier partners like Estes Express Lines. "C.H. Robinson is the largest 3PL in the country," said Sam Ralat, director of customer success for Estes. "Having someone like them adopt a standard creates a snowball effect where people think, 'Hey, C.H. Robinson got it, which means hundreds or thousands of shipments per day are going through this process. We probably need to look at it too.'"

Customers Have Spoken

Greg West is C.H. Robinson's Vice President for LTL, and the company's top executive on implementation of the eBOL standard. He looked at several factors that told him the time was right to embrace the standard – including the evolution of industry technology as well as the expressed desires of customers. "When you're doing 5 million-plus LTL shipments, doing those efficiently is extremely important," West said. "And of course, we've been doing most of these via EDI for as long as I can remember – maybe 10 or 15 years. But the industry's changing. There's better information – more accurate, more timely through the advent of APIs. And our customers are telling us it's extremely important to handle all of the nuances of their shipments as efficiently as possible. They expect us to do that for them." The eBOL standard developed by the Digital LTL Council is critical to those priorities. It's the lynchpin of any effort to digitize the lifecycle of the LTL shipping processes of:

- Getting PRO numbers quickly
- Getting charges correct, knowing what's being sent and how
- Getting accessorials sent correctly
- Getting all this information transmitted quickly and accurately

Electronic bills of lading are the key to all this, but when everyone in the industry is developing their own standards in a wild-west fashion, efficiency and predictability quickly give way to new forms of confusion.

Implementation Experts

C.H. Robinson knew the Digital LTL Council had the right idea with the standard, and all the more so when it called for industrywide implementation by July 20, 2023. Under the leadership of West and senior operations manager Jenny Johnson, the company went to work aligning its processes and systems with the new standard and getting carriers on board as well. One by one, the carriers got on board. Estes. Old Dominion. Dayton. Southeastern. Pitt Ohio. Averitt Express. Saia, etc. At the same time, software providers who serve the industry – like SMC³ and Project 44 – recognized the value of embracing a single standard rather than trying to design their own. "It was a very smooth transition," Johnson said. "We're using the Digital Council schema and implementing it across our carriers." Working through the process with the Digital Council's schema required a series of hourlong tests that went on for several weeks with carriers. "We're up to ten carriers now, and we've learned things as we've gone along," West said. "It became easier and easier on our end and on the carrier side, where one of the biggest benefits is that no one is trying to build customized standards."

“**C.H. Robinson is the largest 3PL in the country. Having someone like CHR adopt a standard creates a snowball effect where people think, 'Hey, CHR got it, which means hundreds or thousands of shipments per day are going through this process. We probably need to look at it too.'**”

Sam Ralat

Estes Express Lines
 Director of Customer Success

100,000
GLOBAL CUSTOMERS

“**We're up to ten carriers now, and we've learned things as we've gone along. It became easier and easier on our end and on the carrier side, where one of the biggest benefits is that no one is trying to build customized standards.**”

Greg West

C.H. Robinson Vice President LTL

The Power of eBOL Standard Implementation

From EDI to API

“**This is cross-functional. You need to bring in operations, technology, process improvement – everyone in the organization who will be touched by the standard...**”

Jenny Johnson

C.H. Robinson
 Senior Operations Manager

That harkens back to the days when EDI was the pre-eminent technology in the industry, and just about everyone worked with EDI under the same standards. With API, West said, the industry started with no common standards. The Digital LTL Council’s eBOL standard would change all that, and it would finally bring bills of lading into modern, digital times. “We hadn’t been electronically sending the bill of lading,” West said. “We’d been exchanging just about everything else but the bill of lading. So this standard came in at the right time. It was so well thought-out by a broad base of industry professionals, carriers, technology providers and 3PLs. And it met most of everything we knew we needed.” Reflecting on C.H. Robinson’s experience implementing the standard, Johnson offered some critical advice to any company still going through the process: “Don’t think working with IT alone will get the job done. This is cross-functional,” Johnson said. “You need to bring in operations, technology, process improvement – everyone in the organization who will be touched by the standard.” While most of C.H. Robinson’s shipper customers are working through the C.H. Robinson platform, some are also implementing the standard directly with carriers.



Industry Impacts

“**It’s elevated the speed and lowered the cost of maintaining those integrations for carriers who have adopted the standard, because they’re all following the formula...**”

Brian Thompson

SMC³ Chief Commercial Officer

SMC³’s Brian Thompson is already seeing industry impacts for companies like C.H. Robinson and their carrier partners. “It’s elevated the speed and lowered the cost of maintaining those integrations for carriers who have adopted the standard, because they’re all following the formula,” Thompson said. “It goes beyond mapping attributes to business rules, really understanding how the data that flows through is going to impact it. When you’ve got standards and you standardize the attributes, the interpretations and the business rules, it really does facilitate a seamless communication that’s less likely to be misinterpreted.” Add that to the basic efficiency of not needing to make phone calls chasing after basic information like PRO numbers, or having a common understanding of what’s sitting on pallets, or defining billing terms in ways that everyone recognizes – and you can see the advantage of the standard already. When a major player like C.H. Robinson decides this is where the industry needs to be and pulls off an implementation as successfully as it did, it signals to the rest of the industry that a critical imperative, and a great opportunity, are presenting themselves. The target date is drawing near.

450,000
 CARRIERS ON PLATFORM

