Software can take much of the sting out of the need for customs clearances, says Sam Blakeman, product marketing manager at Customs4trade (C4T). While the prophets of doom were out in force ahead of the UK’s departure from the Single European Market and again, before HMRC’s switch from the longstanding Chief computer to CDS, both events have in fact passed off reasonably smoothly, at least for C4T’s customers, he argues.

“We have one customer that uses our CAS software and in November they cleared 1 million declarations with zero customs errors. It’s management by exception – you send the data in, and get the acceptance back. Yes, there are always going to be some exceptions, such as licences being required for certain commodities, but for the vast majority of entries, it’s a very straightforward process.”

Often, entries will be prelodged and cleared before the truck has even left the exporter’s premises. And in the relatively rare instances where clearance is not made automatically, it will at least be known about long before the truck gets to the port.

Blakeman adds: “I think there was a big misconception before Brexit; people in companies imagined brokers keying in masses of data and they thought that if they self-filed, they would need a large team themselves. However, systems like CAS can do all the heavy lifting – we’ve moved away from paper documents and emailing PDF file attachments.”

Some of C4T’s customs don’t use brokers at all, although a more common model is a hybrid one whereby traders use software to make the majority of their entries automatically but retain the specialist knowledge of a broker to deal with errors or more complex entries.

Smaller traders who may not be able to justify installing software to handle a handful of entries a year may also use brokers, and there are also brokers that specialise in the complexities of particular commodities.

The switch to the HMRC’s new CDS customs computer system has likewise passed off very smoothly, says Blakeman – at least as far as the software platform’s own customers are concerned, he says. While there have been some issues with the CDS system itself, including incorrect VAT calculations, migration from the old Chief system has gone very smoothly, he explains.

Chief has been around a long time, of course, and while changes to long-established working patterns are never exactly welcome, C4T’s CAS software makes the transition as smooth as possible by including the old SAD box numbers alongside the new data elements.

Only a few of C4T’s customers needed to take advantage of the extension for the deadline to switch to CDS imports last year, the deadline for CDS exports has now been extended by eight months until 30 November 2023. (Exports using the Goods Vehicle Movement System can in fact migrate now, but not those using a CSP.)

While it is true that a CDS entry involves more data elements than a Chief entry, CAS automates the process so it should not really be an extra burden as far as traders using the system are concerned, says Blakeman. “Assuming customers hold the data required, it’s not really a change – in fact, the process is quicker than before.”

CAS can also reduce the workload through single message declaration filing – in other words, where customs in the two countries involved are operating compatible systems – Belgium and the UK, for example – the data used to create the export entry in one can also be used to create the import declaration in the destination country.

As more EU countries switch to UCC (Union Customs Code)-compatible systems, the possibilities for doing this will increase, says Blakeman. Even where there are no compatible systems, C4T can offer ‘last mile filing’ whereby the import declaration can be created in the customs broker’s system instead of directly with Customs.

The EU has started to switch all countries to UCC-compatible systems, but the process is likely to be a long one.

There is also a move towards a single customs window, whereby all interactions with government agencies – customs, health authorities, safety and security and so on – would be dealt with in one transaction without the need to present the same data to multiple agencies.

“Certainly, for a company such as ours involved in automation, that would make life a lot easier, as it means we could use just one API (application programming interface),” says Blakeman.

The UK has issued tenders for its Future Borders Strategy to achieve this, while the EU has started discussions on alignment of data; however, New Zealand and Singapore are well ahead of the rest of the world in this respect, with Single windows already in place. Experience in the former country, which has had its single window since 2017, suggests that there are indeed major benefits in speed of clearance and reductions in bureaucracy.

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