

Inwardly mobile

A successful link up between a building services group and its IT partner has resulted in one of the biggest deployments of a PDA-enabled FM system in the UK today, satisfying engineers, customers and even the bottom line



Facilities managers would find it very difficult to run their operations without recourse to mobile communication – from increasingly smarter mobile phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs). But the more astute FM organisations are now looking to get even better value from deployment of PDA-based mobile solutions, reasoning that although keeping in touch with fieldworkers and service engineers is essential, the impact on the bottom line of streamlining processes and automating back-office administration could be quite dramatic.

This is backed up by a recent study by specialist research firm, Spectrum Consulting, which found that by integrating mobile devices with an organisation's management systems, companies could increase productivity by as much as £11,000 a year, for every one of their field service engineers. For a good-sized operation with 50 mobile workers, that comes in at over £500,000 a year.

Planned Maintenance Engineering (PME) – the mechanical and electrical engineering maintenance company, now part of Carillion – recognised the potential of hand-held PDAs to deliver productivity and customer

FM QUICK FACTS

- CFS's system is supporting over 3,000 users, handling 13,000 individual contracts for 8,000 separate clients

service improvements as long ago as 2004. By 2006 PME had turned the potential into reality, and was showing a handsome return.

The story started in 2004 when PME was faced with replacing an ageing mainframe system, PME Live, that was acting as a barrier to reducing operating costs. PME's vision was for an automated company, with paperless execution of all major processes, such as scheduling, timesheets, job completion, purchasing and invoicing. The company needed to re-engineer its organisation, deploy a complementary back-office administration system, and connect the field engineers to PME's information technology.

PME Live was itself an innovation when introduced. It had evolved to support a £100 million turnover business, with 150 office staff and 500 field engineers. To replace PME Live and revolutionise the way field engineers work with the company's customer care and back-office operations needed a carefully planned and executed change programme.

PME recognised that what it was looking for just didn't exist at the time – it had to be built from scratch. To help develop the new operating model the board appointed an IT partner, Enton Consulting and Technology.

The two companies appreciated that it would not make sense just to automate existing processes. Here was an ideal opportunity to put the entire organisation under the microscope and work together to re-engineer the business processes. It was quite involved but was essential to translating the system requirements into a solution specification.

Tim Harris, managing director of Enton Consulting and Technology explains the methodology: "Essentially, we unpicked the operation, deciding what needed to be retained, what could be dispensed with, what could be done faster, more accurately, more efficiently, more cost-effectively and more beneficially from a customer service perspective."

An FM back-office and PDA system, Fusion, that supports the delivery of the service in the field was specified as the solution. With this system, PDAs act as mobile terminals linked to the company's internal IT systems, giving engineers direct access to the information they need to do their jobs effectively.

At the time that PME was beginning to realise the business benefits of the system, Carillion was expanding its M&E services operation, which resulted in its acquisition of PME. Later that same year, Carillion acquired Mowlem, a major infrastructure group with complementary skills, particularly in support services and private finance. Mowlem's M&E businesses were integrated with PME under the banner of Carillion Facilities Services (CFS).

Roll out

Carillion elected to roll out Fusion and supporting business processes across the merged operation. Now, it is integrated with a range of supporting systems such as HR and general ledger, with over 1,200 field service engineers connected by PDAs to CFS's processes and information resources. This is one of the biggest deployments of a PDA-enabled FM system in the UK today.

At the heart of the back-office system is a contract management and costing engine that can handle the most complex of the company's service level agreements. It operates with the general ledger, human resources, document management and other corporate systems to support the straight through processing (STP) of all jobs. This also means that fewer back-office staff are needed to support each client, enabling the organisation to redeploy people to other tasks and bring down operating costs.

The PDAs are used to provide engineers with their work schedules, contract information, supplies ordering, electronic job completion and access to other corporate resources such as supplier information and email.

The PDA functions are integrated with the back-office, for paperless job processing and automatic population of forms such as invoices and time sheets. This helps reduce the administrative burden on the engineer and boosts productivity.

For much of the workforce the introduction of mobile technology has been something of a step change in the way they work and could have met with some resistance but this was smoothed through training, road shows and communications events as part of the change management programme undertaken by Carillion and Enton.

By first rolling out facilities that directly benefited them, such as automated time recording and job reporting, engineers quickly appreciated the reduction in the time

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FM QUICK FACTS

- The system processed more than 500,000 jobs, collected over 150,000 time sheets and issued more than 200,000 electronic purchase orders

- It has enabled contracts to be administered at a lower cost per unit than was previously achieved by either PME or Mowlem

they spent on administrative routines. As a result, they are able to spend more of their working day getting on with the job. An independent survey highlighted how well Fusion had been accepted, concluding that nine out of 10 engineers would not wish to go back to the old paper-based system.

Clear and easy

Customers have said they are pleased with the higher quality of service they receive through the system, commenting favourably on how quickly the company responds to changing service maintenance schedules, the consistency with which the service is delivered from multiple locations across the UK, and on the clear, easy to understand service reports.

It is anticipated that the system will be rolled out to three other acquired businesses, followed by implementation in regional building and social housing businesses within the Carillion group.

The original vision of streamlined paperless processing, improved engineering productivity and reduced administrative costs is a reality. With Enton's help, Fusion has transformed the way the business operates, delivering the aim of becoming an even more efficient, customer-focused organisation. **FM**

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