

Going wireless

Less paperwork, more billable time

By Simon Blake

Paperwork and inaccurate information can dramatically increase the non-billable time that the contractor pays his service mechanics, not to mention putting a heavy load on office staff.

Wireless technology has now reached the point where it can offer a solution at a price that is within reach of a busy service contractor.

"Everyone knows the technology exists to keep your guys plugged into the office through a variety of means..." says Martin Luymes, director, services and relations, Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Contractors of Canada. "But to be able to link what they are doing in the field with actual company computer systems (billing, work orders), customer records and things like that – that is a leap most contractors haven't yet been able to take."

That is changing as less expensive technology comes on the market. Today's wireless systems allow the transfer of documents – work orders, customer histories, technical and safety (MSDS) information – between an office computer and the mechanic in the field.

Three things have come together to make the technology viable for plumbing, refrigeration and HVAC contractors, reports Jamie Opalchuk of wireless software provider Mobilio

Inc., Oakville, Ont.:

■ The networks developed by companies such as Rogers AT&T Wireless and Telus Mobility have provided the basic infrastructure.

■ Small hand-held computers specifically designed for the trades have arrived on the market.

■ Internet-based wireless software programs have been specifically tailored for service contractors.

With the convergence of technologies, service companies can now implement solutions for their customers without adding complexity to their operations, states Carlo Marcanio, Canadian territory sales manager for FieldCentrix.

For example, contractors can allow customers access to an interactive e-service site tied to his wireless work order management system to place service requests, check work order status and histories without having to call and speak to the dispatcher or customer service rep. The customer benefits through instant access to information. The contractor reduces call volumes and offers improved customer service.

Workflow path

The workflow path in a wireless operation is basically circular, beginning and ending with the customer, explains Marcanio. The customer calls the contractor. The call taker or dispatcher enters the information into the work order management software system, creating a detailed work order. The dispatcher sends that, via the Internet over a wireless network, to the technician. The technician reads the work order on his hand-held computer, goes to the job site and makes the repair, noting the work done and parts used on the work order. When the job is completed, the work order is sent to the office, an invoice is generated and sent to the customer.

This creates enormous efficiencies that have a direct impact on the bottom line.

These include:

■ There is less chance of information being lost as it is passed from the call-taker to the technician in the field. "There is no broken telephone effect," notes Marcanio.

■ The technician has instant access to all relevant details about a job on the work order/service ticket prior to arriving at the site, including job scope and history.



Jamie Opalchuk gives Brad Arnold, seated, a few pointers.

One contractor's experience

Bradley Mechanical Services is a busy commercial/industrial service contractor in Mississauga, Ont. The company offers seven-day 24-hour service to its customers with a 20-truck fleet.

Previously on the MIKE cell-phone based system, the company had some key requirements in upgrading to wireless, reports Brad Arnold, company president.

The system had to function with the company's existing JONAS operating software (Gary Jonas Computing Ltd., Richmond Hill, Ont.). Bradley Mechanical uses this system for dispatch, payroll, general ledger, contract management, purchase orders, job costing, etc.

Arnold settled on the MobilioLINK™ system. Mobilio staff installed the wireless software on the company's existing computer system and trained staff.

Arnold had to select a wireless network operator. He cautions that it is important to compare the actual ongoing costs between the different services rather than the initial offer of 'six months unlimited service', for example.

The handheld device had to be durable and easy to operate by mechanics with no computer experience.

Arnold chose the Intermecc 700 Series colour mobile computer. It functions as both a cell phone and computer. Arnold expects even those with no computer experience will pick it up quickly. "Anyone can take a stick and point it at a picture," he remarked.

■ These factors often allow him to pick up the right parts prior to reaching the job site.

■ No paperwork. The technician adds parts, labour and a work order summary to the electronic file.

■ The office has instant access to recommendations made by the technician that may result in additional sales.

■ Because completed work orders are returned to the office electronically, there is a dramatic reduction in days to bill.

Wireless technology can be expensive, depending on the system and its features. "Many contractors will see the price of the technology and walk away," says Luymes. "There are economies of scale. However, the larger and busier the service contractor, the quicker the payback."

But that is changing, adds Opalchuk. He has set up operations with as few as three trucks.

He believes that even a one-truck operation can benefit if the contractor needs to be connected at all times to his office computer.

Different wireless software and equipment operators offer different payment options. In some cases the equipment can be leased. There may be licensing fees. And like any computer equipment, the technology is constantly changing so it doesn't pay to be locked into something that can't be easily upgraded.

At the end of the day, the contractor has to determine if savings brought about by reduced paperwork, quicker billing/cash flow and more efficient field operation justify the investment.

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