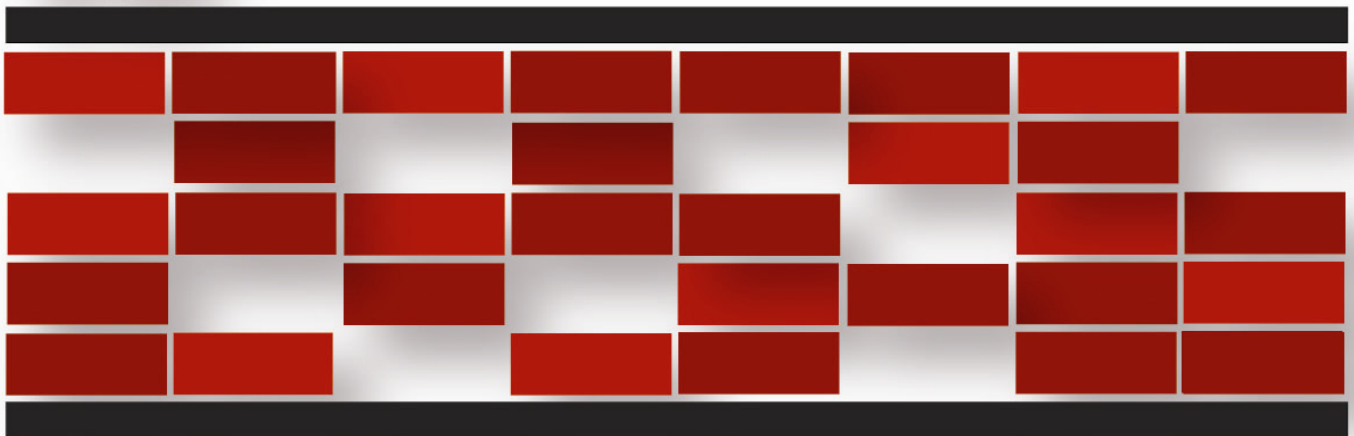


Article

Field Service for the Wireless Workforce: Think Smart!

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Field Service for the Wireless Workforce: Think Smart!

By David A. Miller, Vertical Solutions, Inc.

The good news for companies with mobile service workforces is that it's easier than ever to equip teams with technology that enables truly mobile field service. The bad news is, it's even easier to overload the devices with applications that end up hampering productivity. The following outlines common pitfalls to avoid when launching a technology-driven mobile field service force.

Be selective with device add-ons

It's true that the extended storage capacity of today's handheld devices means that companies can download just about every element of their field service management software. But just because you can doesn't mean you should -- an overloaded device runs slowly, which means a lot of wait-time for busy techs. Follow the 80-20 rule, and download only the 20 percent of features that are used 80 percent of the time by field techs to ensure maximum productivity. Another way to lighten the load for mobile devices is to make liberal use of SD cards for storing large files like parts lists.

One nice feature is mobile document management software. Most mobile devices can display detailed documents, drawings, and schematics, even on small form-factor devices such as Windows Mobile/PocketPCs. Users can select the desired drawing or schematic, navigate to the targeted section, and zoom in to the desired level of magnification. Parts lists and drawings interact and can instantly identify a part number by simply tapping the illustration in the drawing. Integration with your mobile services application can then allow users to automatically transfer the selected part into a usage or parts-order screen. These systems can be costly to implement, but can offer several operational advantages such as reducing part number errors and document distribution costs. The best choices are those that tightly integrate with your field service management system.

A feature to think twice about is onboard cameras. Many handheld units offer built-in cameras, which can be extremely useful in a field setting to help identify unknown equipment models, record job-site conditions, etc. However, many companies and government agencies prohibit the use of any device with a camera on their site. Keep this in mind when evaluating camera-enabled devices.



Spare the battery

Today's handhelds have tremendous battery life, but not even the best device will make it through the day if it's used inappropriately. Too-frequent synchronization with the host can be a huge drain, for example.

Tethered (online), untethered (offline), and hybrid mobile solutions all have their benefits in certain environments. With the expanded footprint of current wireless networks, Internet connectivity is available in more locations than ever before, making the real-time advantage of tethered solutions a reality for many organizations. Still, areas of non-coverage may be frequently encountered, making the untethered option a more viable approach for some organizations. This is particularly an issue for FEs working predominantly in factory or rural settings. However, for nearly all service organizations, a hybrid solution combining tethered and untethered operations can allow offline reporting of labor, parts, and expenses to address areas with no connectivity while also allowing real-time online access for enterprise visibility via ERP/CRM integration. And, as mentioned, the offline approach is a good way to spare the battery.

Other battery-hogs include the multitude of downloadable applications available from third parties. Companies need to establish a policy with the mobile workforce to determine authorized levels of movie-watching, game-playing, and music-listening to ensure that they are prioritizing work first, personal entertainment second, if at all.

Think twice about consumer devices

Wireless carriers offer a proliferation of affordable and readily available consumer devices, with a host of exciting features. So what's the downside? Companies design these devices for mass appeal to consumers -- so the feature you love today may not be available in the device you need tomorrow. The market is volatile, and has left more than one field force executive with an expensive bill to replace an entire workforce's devices. Take a look at the ruggedized market before you commit. They may be more expensive in the short term, but the market is not as volatile, and can save you money in the long run.

Another thought to consider is that "one size fits all" may not be appropriate for your organization. While much can be said regarding the benefits of deploying a single type of device (including fewer platforms to support, enhanced purchasing power when adding units, etc.), some mobile implementations might benefit from a multi-platform approach. However the choice to support multiple device platforms can have far-reaching implications.

Middleware providers develop bridges to multiple devices. They will work on a bunch of platforms, but not all providers work on all platforms. But they normally do more than vendors like us – we provide Blackberry and Pocket PC. I'd like to go thru and slant it toward what we do. You can go middleware, but they're not tightly integrated to the base package. (middleware competes with us)

Some – but not all – solution providers are capable of supporting multiple related platforms such as Windows Mobile/PocketPC and Windows XP. However, to be completely platform independent and capable of running on any type of device, you may need to work with a middleware provider who will develop a bridge between your enterprise solution and the various devices used in the field. Be forewarned that this type of flexibility may come at a cost in the form of a less tightly integrated solution or one that is more challenging to upgrade or incorporate additions to your primary provider's native functionality. While middleware can, in some cases, provide a cross-platform integration, it will almost certainly drive up the total cost of the implementation. Whichever approach you take, the solution and its components should employ leading technologies such as web services and .NET to optimize performance and facilitate easy interfacing between disparate systems.

Today's market offers an ever-expanding menu of technology choices to support a mobile workforce. Taking the time up front to consider these common pitfalls is a way to ensure that your mobile team is successful with its technology, and that your company experiences a positive return on investment.

About the Author

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