

Field Service Embraces New Mobile Devices

Smartphones, iPads, and other consumer technologies find a home in the service technician's toolbox.

No one doubts the value of using a rugged mobile computer for field service and maintenance applications. Semirugged and consumer-grade devices, however, are slowly infiltrating what was once the domain of specialized, rugged computers.

"The market has enthusiastically accepted that there is a place for consumer-style platforms," says Israel Beniaminy, senior vice president of product strategy at ClickSoftware. "Rugged devices are still important where the situation demands them."

There has been increased interest in new mobile platforms in the enterprise as a whole. Managers are evaluating new platforms as a way to reduce up-front hardware costs while taking advantage of new features found on smartphones, tablets, and other devices.

"For so long, field service has been ignored by new technologies," says Dave Yarnold, CEO of ServiceMax. "Innovations in devices and enterprise software have transformed sales, HR, CRM (customer relationship management), and other departments through the years, but until recently, field service has been left in the cold. We've seen field service leaders beginning to realize the considerable impact and importance 'smart' devices can have on their business."

By accepting a wider variety of devices, companies have created an environment where their IT staff and software providers have to support a mix of operating systems and platforms. "There is a trend toward utilizing new and powerful smartphones and tablets and moving away from rugged devices," says John Linn, president and CEO of Bella Solutions. "The iPad and iPhone have led the way, but Android smartphones and tablets are now equally used. Other hardware vendors are now providing options such as the Motorola Zoom, BlackBerry Playbook, and Windows 7 smartphones. Our customers are using all of these options for mobile access."

Complex Mobile Device Mix, More Capabilities

The introduction of new platforms has helped push software providers in new directions, as they adapt their applications to take advantage of different types of features and functions. Applications also have to be written to support mixed environments that may include rugged computers, notebooks, smartphones, and other devices.

"With the demand for mobile going up, we think there is great value in being as platform-agnostic as possible," says Marc Fey, president and CEO of BlueFolder. "We've added features and updated interfaces specifically for smartphones, such as signature capture. Many of our customers have found this to be a huge benefit in streamlining workflow and accelerating the billing process."

Mixed-use scenarios are likely to become more common, with rugged computers fitting a niche and smartphones and consumer-grade tablets playing other roles. There may be other permutations as well. "The mixed-environment deployments aren't just for having different roles use different devices; quite often, there is value in having the same role switch between devices," Beniaminy says. "The smartphone may be used for quick status updates and for receiving new assignments, while a rugged device could be used for more intense work (e.g., maps, mission-specific functionality, and hardware)."

Customers are also looking for solutions that include credit card processing, accounting features, GPS, and features that can go beyond dispatch and work-order management. Field service solutions typically include service history, documentation, parts ordering, interactive technology, and more.

"The touch screens of new mobile platforms offer opportunities for providers of field service management software to help users speed approval and simplify documentation



Israel Beniaminy
sr. vice president of
product strategy,
ClickSoftware



Dave Yarnold
CEO,
ServiceMax



John Linn
president and CEO,
Bella Solutions



Marc Fey
president and CEO,
BlueFolder

— letting the customer sign a billing summary electronically that can be captured with any touch screen device, such as an iPhone, iPad, or Android smartphone,” Fey says. “We actually see a strong preference for consumer-style mobile devices over specialized hardware.”

By providing access to vast amounts of customer data and product information, along with new functionality, field service organizations can differentiate themselves in the market. Increasingly, other departments and even outside companies will access this information, another factor that has spurred software providers to support new mobile platforms; while internal staff may access the solution via rugged devices, outside contractors will likely connect through a smartphone or another device.

“The scheduling process is bringing in and coordinating more people, more processes, and more roles,” Beniaminy says. “It started with coordinating just the field service staff, but it is expanding to communicate with, and consider the schedule of, many others: subcontractors, special equipment, parts delivery, network provisioning, and last but not least, the customer for whom the service is performed. When done right, the scheduling software automates them all where no minute is wasted, and each move smoothly flows to the next.”

Consumerization Of Field Service

In addition to an increase in smartphone and con-

sumer tablet use in field service applications, expect software offerings to incorporate other consumer-style functionality. The FaceTime application for Apple’s iPad provides video conferencing functionality that can be easily used in a field service scenario (technicians can let colleagues view a part in real time). Other solutions provide social network-style collaboration, such as Salesforce.com’s Chatter application. Cloud-based or hosted solutions will further open up accessibility by allowing everyone from technicians to the CEO to easily view the application from any type of device.

“With more powerful mobile devices and faster network connection speeds, we anticipate customers will expect to do even more with their field service operation from handheld mobile devices,” Fey says. “Highly effective field service operations require [hosted solutions] with strong management and operations features easily accessible from mobile devices.”

According to Yarnold, more of those devices will hail from the consumer market. “As use of these devices increases, I expect to see increased adoption in business,” Yarnold says. “The consumerization effect is happening in field service — and for good reason. These mobile devices/technologies can be a boon to service organizations, allowing technicians to be better informed and more productive. The service is better. The customers are happy. And the business makes more money.” •

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