

# Controlling interests

## Making the most of a mobile workforce means implementing a sound mobile workforce management system, says Jennifer Dewar

Analysts, the Probe Group, are predicting the number of global enterprise wireless data users will exceed 160 million by 2008. At the same time, the European market for mobile devices is growing by 25.6 per cent compared to the same period last year, according to an IDC report. Clearly, European telecommunications service providers might be tempted to sit back and relax a little. But service providers cannot afford to become complacent.

Despite politicians' promises of an economic upswing, the current economic climate is not particularly buoyant. Global uncertainty and European Union growing pains, coupled with deregulation and vendor consolidation, have created a competitive and unpredictable environment for service providers. With increasing expectations of empowered customers compounding the situation, companies are struggling to differentiate themselves and remain one step ahead of their competition.

### Customers calling the shots

In today's marketplace, customer satisfaction is one of the most visible and crucial business goals of service providers, yet one of the most elusive. With increased choices available, customers have become heady with power and are demanding products and services faster, better, and for less money. A hard-fought battle for customer loyalty is ensuing from the conflict between escalating customer expectations and profit-driven management.

A slick public relations campaign cannot erase the damage caused by poor or inconsistent service. Cancelled appointments or hours spent waiting for a technician to arrive will quickly drive a customer into the arms of a competitor. However, service providers that effectively respond to customer requests, anticipate their needs, and build customer trust will survive the long haul. Indeed, top-notch customer service will buoy the bottom-line and secure customer loyalty, ensuring a consistent revenue stream and reducing costly customer churn.

So, how are service companies striving to optimise their

service lifecycle and build lasting relationships with their customer base? Many European service providers, such as Belgian telecommunications giant Belgacom, have implemented mobile workforce management systems to automate their field service workers, significantly increasing operational efficiency and improving customer service.

Service providers are confronted daily with the difficult task of optimally assigning work requests to their field force, dispatching work from the office to the field, monitoring the progress of the work, and responding to changing conditions. In addition, field service organisations must measure workforce performance in order to improve the quality of strategic forecasting and planning efforts. In contrast with time-consuming and inefficient paper-based systems, mobile workforce management systems manage, schedule, and dispatch work for mobile engineers and technicians – all wirelessly and in real-time. Work assigned to technicians is delivered wirelessly to the workforce in the field using laptops or hand-held mobile devices like Pocket PCs; as work progresses, technicians send completed information wirelessly back to the enterprise.

But automating the field force is just the beginning. In order to garner greater efficiencies, improve productivity, and create a truly customer-centric operation, service providers are looking to extend their workforce management solution to the entire enterprise. An enterprise workforce management solution delivers an integrated operational view of the mobile workforce and its workload, whilst leveraging operational efficiencies across departmental boundaries. With enterprise-wide visibility into all operational and departmental areas – customer service, inspections, maintenance, construction, outage, meter service, billing, among others – service providers can reduce operational costs, deliver improved customer care, and witness greater return on their investment.

Cy Tordiffe, Managing Director of EMEA for MDSI, the leading workforce management software provider, notes: "Service providers need to break free from the silo mentality; managing individual groups separately is no

longer a viable option. In order to avoid costly duplication and repetition, leverage economies of scale, and manage the workforce more effectively, companies must adopt an enterprise-wide approach.”

As the momentum towards enterprise workforce management builds, field service organisations are searching for solutions to maximise efficiencies across all levels of their organisation. In response to this demand, mobile workforce management software vendors must offer flexible solutions that encompass all functional units of the business and support a wide spectrum of enterprise applications and mobile devices.

MDSI Mobile Data Solutions Inc is an example of one company that is leading the way. Working with telecom giant Nokia, MDSI is extending Advantex – its enterprise workforce management system – to the Nokia 6600 mobile phone. This development will enable field engineers who typically use laptop PCs, hand-held PCs, and Pocket PCs to access information across the enterprise using just a mobile phone. In addition, this solution will enable companies to bring their enterprise applications to a larger, more diversified workforce and provide greater mobility at a lower cost.

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The Advantex Mobile Application running on the Nokia 6600 phone is a Java 2 (J2ME) application that enables dispatchers to communicate with field technicians using XML via HTTP/HTTPS over GPRS networks. This solution is particularly cost-efficient for certain enterprise workers, such as inspection workers, that may not require the robustness of ruggedised laptop PCs mounted in their trucks or the full functionality of certain Advantex tools such as mobile mapping. The nature of their work enables them to use a lightweight mobile phone to send completed inspection forms back to the office and fulfil their duties efficiently. Using mobile phones to communicate with the enterprise is also a very affordable alternative for short-term workers who are handling emergency situations such as outages or contract workers assigned to short-term projects.

“Companies are consistently striving to unearth cost-cutting measures. As there is often a high capitalisation cost associated with equipping the entire field force with laptops or hand-held PCs, mobile phones are an

ideal solution – especially for people who are doing simple inspections. Mobile phones are inexpensive and lightweight and can fulfil the requirements of many mobile workers within the enterprise,” explains Warren Cree, VP Marketing and Business Development, MDSI.

With Advantex and Nokia 6600 phones, service providers can extend mobile and enterprise applications to a larger and more diversified workforce in order to increase productivity, heighten customer intimacy, and reap marked cost and time savings. Companies can save the equivalent of approximately 1.5 hours of work time per technician per day, whilst reducing field operational costs by 35 to 40 per cent. Technicians are typically able to complete 10 to 20 per cent more jobs, and have real-time access to relevant customer information. Additionally, improved data quality, automation of time sheets and billing, and a reduction in paper usage translate into significant back office savings.

No matter how dramatic the savings or how revolutionary the improvements, buy-in from the field force is essential for a successful enterprise workforce management implementation. Field workers expect their mobile devices to be both intuitive and reliable

and they want to be able to use new applications with minimal training. What could be more user-friendly than the ubiquitous mobile phone? With the worldwide production of mobile phones reaching a record high in 2003, according to research by Nikkei Market Access, it is likely that many employees already rely on mobiles for personal or business use. With the MDSI/Nokia workforce management solution, the cultural transition will be minimised. And making the lives of the workforce easier and more efficient translates to happy employees, improved customer service, and loyal customers.

In a climate of shrinking profit margins, competitive pressures, and rising customer expectations, service providers must strive to evolve through continuous service innovation. Flexible, visionary solutions from companies like MDSI are helping companies to do just that. ■

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