



Lewisham leads the way

Using mobile computing to set new standards in local authority service

The London Borough of Lewisham maintains 30,000 tenanted homes on behalf of its customers and employs around 200 electricians, plumbers, joiners, gas engineers and other craft workers to do this work. Lewisham's challenge was to provide an even better service within current budgets. Part of that challenge was to enable more efficient management of the large field workforce, optimising the operational costs and increasing customer satisfaction. Lewisham realised that new mobile access technology used with workflow software could provide the leap in service they were looking for.

Lewisham reviewed a number of key areas where mobile computing access could deliver real benefit over the tried and tested but now dated current computer / paper based processes. This included each of the workers wasting 45-minutes at least once a day calling at the depot to receive and return their job tickets and work schedules.

TaskMaster mobile workflow solution

Mark Warren, Head of Building Services for the London Borough of Lewisham, was the key leader in visualising how the latest mobile technology could enhance the systems and processes: 'Whilst the outgoing system was efficient, the paperwork employed often didn't capture all the necessary details to complete a given job. This meant the workers would have to telephone the depot, or return to pick up more information or parts.

'Equally, voice calls and a comprehensive paperwork process were becoming costly to operate for the Borough, and the resulting amount of time workers were forced to spend at the depot was becoming harder to justify. Other issues such as reducing depot facilities and a shortage of parking also contributed. We needed a complete mobility solution.'

The solution required the joint qualities of solutions provider TBS and its set of TaskMaster applications and O₂'s PocketPC based mobile, the Xda – a leading edge handheld mobile that employs the best of computer and GPRS technology running Microsoft Mobile software.

An integrated package

TBS produced an integrated package that promised great improvement over the current system. The company's sales director, Brian Barnes explains: 'As an integrated mobile and Pocket PC that takes advantage of GPRS technology, O₂'s Xda was the obvious choice. And, it's on the Microsoft platform - perfect for our TaskMaster applications.

'TaskMaster is based on easy-to-use electronic forms and menu driven selection lists for specific jobs and tasks. It asks questions based on the user's previous answers and guides them through the forms in an intelligent way,' says Barnes. The benefit of this is being able to work with the operative as a 'connect' part of the company again.

At the start of each day, users turn on their Xda to receive details of the day's jobs. As they complete certain stages of their work, they automatically send back updates to a central customer relationship management system, complete with an electronic signature from the tenant once the job is complete.

'...voice calls and a comprehensive paperwork process were becoming costly to operate for the Borough.'

Mark Warren, Head of Building Services, London Borough of Lewisham

An effective fix

The fact that details of jobs (including emergency ones) are available through their Xda, wherever they are, means far less trips to the depot – freeing up time for more jobs and providing instant benefits in the shape of cost savings and greater efficiency.

Also, because the system doesn't require the central office processing paperwork it produces a major benefit in customer service in that information is now held, on our computer system, in "real time" not several days out of date dependent on how up to date work returns and inputting are. It also frees up office staff for other things. They can now concentrate on other productive roles, such as being more pro-active with tenants and keeping them informed of work progress.

The operatives can even see how much they are earning - a great user benefit!

And the bottom line?

Because it's GPRS, the customer only pays for the data downloaded, so it's easily accountable. The Borough expects to make an annual saving of £5,500 in fuel costs by workers not having to return to the depot and a further £6,000 through the reduction in paperwork and printing and, that's without the current bundle of workers' mobile bills or their saved time.

In fact total savings are quite substantial as Mark Warren points out: 'With our reduced accommodation needs, the handheld technology has already contributed to a saving of £60,000 per year.'

Also Lewisham is better equipped to run more efficiently as a Borough and meet the up and coming challenges moving forward. As with all local authorities, they're under constant close scrutiny from central Government to tighten up operations. Here, O₂ and TBS can claim to have helped in terms of better control, more efficient processes and a healthier bottom line. Most importantly of all the client satisfaction is up, the true mark of success.

Mark Warren is certainly pleased: 'We are always stretched for craft workers. There is enough work for many more, which means we would normally have to sub-contract out the work. This new solution frees up our own workers' time, enabling us to keep more work in-house giving easier control over quality and delivery of our services to our tenants.'

Any local authority's basic purpose is to provide for its community. With this solution, the savings will be passed back into the Borough and will work towards providing an even better service to tenants. That has to be good for everyone.

