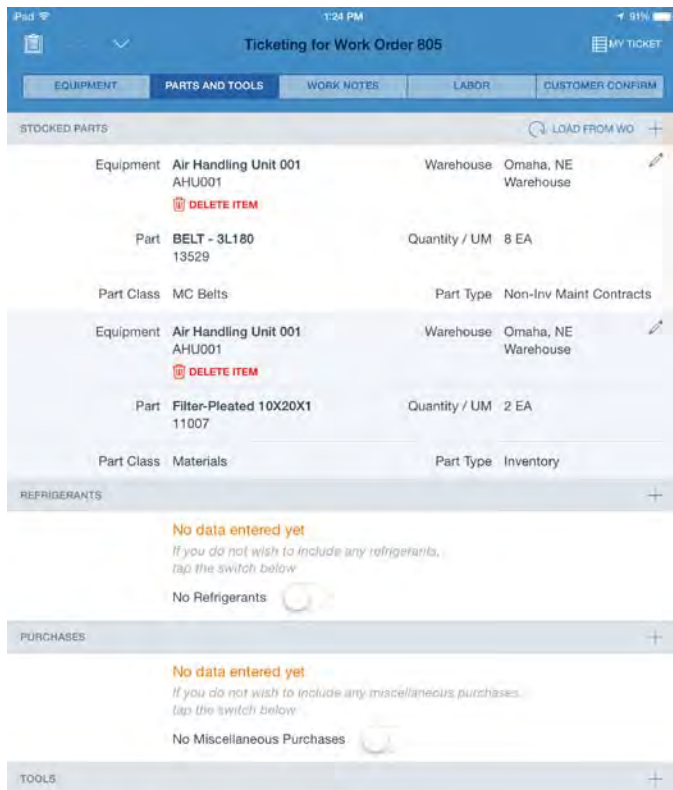# Five things
you can do to make your service operations
more
efficient

By Kirk Heminger

What can mobile communications do for your company? You would be surprised at the answer. Mobile communication capabilities -- to and from the field -- can provide a boost to a service contractor's bottom line that few other improvements can match.

Keep connected to mission-critical information on mobile devices

Whether you specialize in commercial or industrial contracting, a full-featured mobile field software solution deployed company-wide on iPads or other mobile devices does more than keep technicians connected to mission-critical information all through the day. It also simplifies work order activity and provides real-time management visibility of field activity. Here are just a few ways mobile field technology increases the efficiency of your service operations.

1) Save time and fuel

Field service technicians can receive dispatched work order details on an iPad to efficiently plan their routes to jobs, even pulling up maps and driving directions, with no need to return to the office to get assignments or turn in paperwork.

2) Know the status of jobs and work orders in real time

Your back office and management are kept updated by live technician work status updates such as technician time, equipment usage, parts and materials and applicable notes.

3) Give field technicians access to key info

Field Service technicians can view service history (including past technicians' notes and photos), maintenance contract and warranty information and preventive maintenance checklists. There is no need to contact back office staff to look up and convey this info – each tech has self-service access. Preventive maintenance checklists can reinforce a consistent process that you or the customer establishes. This makes it easier for your customers to demonstrate compliance with any regulatory requirements.

Having all this information in the hands of each technician significantly reduces the time he would spend on daily paperwork necessary to satisfy union job site requirements. It also saves time on daily payroll and other tasks related to management of equipment and materials at each job site.

4) Make your back office more productive

Beyond reducing the paperwork burden on your field technicians, mobile solutions reduce duplicate data entry (and the potential for human errors) for your operations staff. Where it was once common for two people's time to be simultaneously used (for example, a dispatcher looking up and conveying service history to the technician), such inefficiencies are eliminated. Work in the back office, in effect, becomes a matter of approval rather

than data entry. This allows your back office team to focus on activities that add greater value to your organization than data entry, often supporting more field techs without adding back office staff.

5) Faster Billing and Payroll

Instead of being in the field and having to record information to be sent back to a database and billing at a later time, work recorded on the technician's iPad is automatically deposited in payroll, accounting and billing queues for immediate review, approval and distribution by designated personnel. Missouri-based Murphy Company is a leader in delivering mechanical solutions to the commercial, institutional and heavy industrial markets. When they implemented PENTA Mobile Field Service software, they quickly reduced their average work order billing time by 12 days.
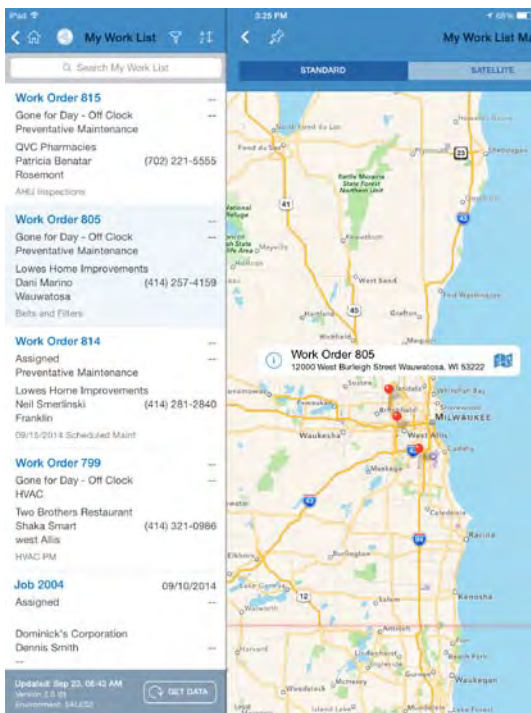

Work orders appearing on mobile devices

Convinced? Congratulations! Now your next step is to pick a mobile solution. Before you do, here are some factors to consider:

Interface. Make sure the vendor(s) you evaluate give a thorough demo of the interface your technicians will use. Involve your technicians in the process up front to get their input and buy-in that the interface will be easy to learn and use.

Device. One word: iPad. They're far-and-away the most popular among field workers because they're easy to use, easy to carry, reliable, and offer a lot of screen real estate. Case options make them quite durable for field use and, even if you have to replace a few units (and this is very rare), your total costs will
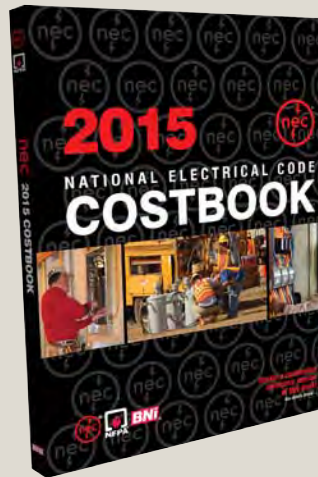
be far lower than investing in ruggedized devices, which can still fail. And if you pick a clunky device, you'll be setting yourself up for an uphill battle to get your technicians to embrace the whole initiative.

Connectivity. Can you guaranty that your technicians will always have a persistent Wi-Fi or cellular signal on every job site? Most contractors can't, because their technicians go to basements and all sorts of places where such signals never penetrate. Choose a system that allows technicians to keep working even when they have no signal. The data should automatically transmit when a connection is re-established.

Integration. The functionality of the mobile solution itself is important, but make sure it plays nice with other systems, like your service management, dispatching, equipment and financial applications. Data should flow into the core accounting app, giving you a single, indisputable source for all your key performance indicators. A word of warning: "integrated" is a highly-abused terms. For many contractors, a single, overall system with all the functionality you need is the smart choice.
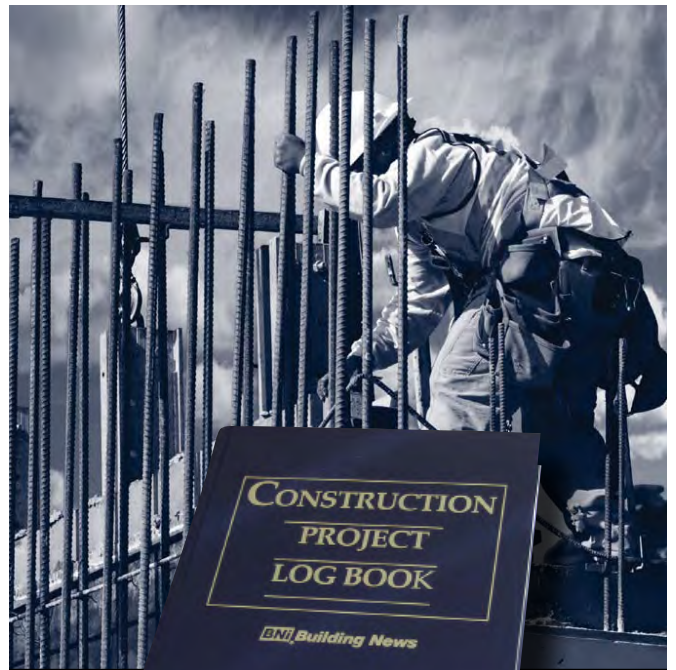
Customer Equipment Intelligence. Service operations were once purely reactive: when something broke, it was your job to fix it. Now, with help from your service system, you can also be proactive. For example, you can use detailed knowledge of your customers' equipment, added from the field via a mobile device, to provide proactive service recommendations that protect your customers from downtime and disruptive equipment failures. At the same time, you get more sales opportunities and closer customer relationships.

Scale. Make sure you won't be back in this boat a few years from now. Ensure that the mobile system (and the overall system) you choose supports as many users and lines of business as you can envision your operation needing a decade from now.

Analytics. Many contractors have service operations in multiple branches. Do you know which branch is most profitable? Which technicians? Which jobs? The answers to these questions (and many more) are in the system: make sure it can tell you…and your team -- preferably in graphical form, and via proactive alerts.

About the author: Kirk Heminger leads marketing for Penta Technologies, who makes PENTA Mobile Field Service and PENTA Service Management as part of the overall PENTA Construction ERP Software system. He has over 12 years of construction software and technology experience. Contact him at kirk.heminger@penta.com or (262) 780-2441.

Based in Brookfield, WI, for over 35 years, Penta Technologies has been helping commercial and industrial contractors improve operational efficiency and better serve their customers and team members through world-class enterprise software and services. Learn more at www.penta.com.