Automating Daily Reports From The Field

Construction companies take advantage of a fast-changing technology landscape as they emerge from recession.

I t is no secret that the construction industry has borne the brunt of the Great Recession. After three years of dramatic declines, construction companies are working to achieve better results. Even the most myopic construction executives cannot help but notice the fast-changing technology landscape. Fueled by investments in infrastructure, cellular carriers have extended their coverage areas for high-speed data services, with improvements in cost and reliability. The confluence of faster, more ubiquitous wireless networks and an increasing variety of sophisticated devices (notebooks, netbooks, pen tablets, rugged handhelds, and smartphones) has opened new opportunities for construction companies to improve operations through mobile technologies.

Many progressive construction companies have leveraged mobile technology to collect reporting data from the field. These companies seek an advantage in today's competitive environment, using mobility to reduce costs and streamline operations. Timely information from the field allows for quicker decisions and resolution of issues.

Identify ROI Drivers

How do construction companies get started with mobility? A starting point is to identify important ROI drivers for the business. Most construction companies begin with a focus on time cards and other daily reports. This includes labor, equipment usage, and production reports. In addition to addressing the headaches of late or error-prone labor time reports, the benefits include reduced data entry staff, more accurate time and job costing, more effective equipment utilization, and a reduction of phantom payroll. Other common targets for automation include material or inventory tracking, job progress review, tool tracking, and safety reports.

Review And Compare Mobile Solutions

The next step is to review available solutions. Some important considerations when evaluating mobility solutions are as follows:

Flexibility. If you are concerned only with time card automation, a solution addressing just mobile time accounting may suffice. If your ROI depends on converting many paper reports, then consider a solution that can accommodate a range of reporting, including future requirements. Will it involve custom programming, or is the software configurable to handle a variety of reports? Can changes to the software be distributed over the air, or do devices need to be returned to the office for updates?

Disconnected Operation. If field personnel will be operating mobile devices outside of network coverage areas, a solution that provides local data storage and operation while devices are disconnected from the network server is needed. This means that a syncing method to ensure that the data in the mobile device that is used for selection lists (for example, jobs and employees) is always up to date with the server will be required.

Quick And Easy Operation. The mobility solution must be easy to use. This might be accomplished through a simple "point-and-click" interface. There should be filtering methods and user-manageable "crew" lists to keep selection lists short. Network connections should be automatic, involving little to no interaction from the user.

Support Of Data Capture Features. Make sure the mobile device and application support features such as GPS stamping, signature capture, bar coding, and any specific time tracking methods that are required to meet your automation objectives.

Back End Functionality. Verify that the system supports all required back end functionality, such as supervisor time record approvals, application of overtime rules, or other rules-based automation and interfacing to your accounting/ERP system for seamless data transfers.

Implementing Your Mobile Solution

The proposed solution should be documented up front so that both you and your solutions provider have a common expectation. Initial implementation should have a manageable scope in terms of the number of daily reports to be converted. Over time, the solution can be expanded to address other field reports. Leverage wireless technology for a competitive advantage and to position for a win in a slow growth economy. •

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