

case study

Mobile Technology enables "right first time" service at Coast & Country with 1st Touch Mobile Workforce Solution

The challenge

Coast & Country is a not-for-profit local housing company set up in 2001 to take over the ownership and management of the housing stock and associated assets of Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council. The company manages over 10,000 properties. It aims to be pro-active in delivering quality products and services focused on the needs of the customer, and is required by its regulating body to be a viable, well-governed and well-managed organisation.

Chief executive Iain Sim explains the company's key objectives: "We want to provide the best possible customer-focused service. At the same time we want to ensure our employees are trained to a high standard and have the same ethos in focusing on customer needs."

An important aspect of customer service is repairs and maintenance, as Sim explains: "Repairs and maintenance is how we are judged by our customers. At Coast & Country we have over 60,000 customer contacts a year, which means we are being judged every day on how well we deliver service. Yet despite our focus on this area, we reached a plateau a couple of years ago. We were putting more resources in, but seeing no major improvements in service."

Head of Finance, Hazel Dale, describes how the company took the path of a major re-engineering of its approach to repairs and maintenance. "A team of consultants recommended implementing a scheduling system for greater efficiency, and we made the decision ourselves to take the next step into mobile working."

The aim of the mobile working solution was to replace paper-based data collection systems for the 100 plus operatives with a more efficient PDA-based system.

Dale explains that the chosen solution had to interface to a newly-implemented Housing Management System from Orchard holding all repair, job and property data. Coast & Country wanted the proposed solution and its supplier to demonstrate flexibility, stability, scalability and a proven track record.



From an IT perspective the company was concerned that implementation and support would not cause unnecessary pressure on its small in-house IT team.

"We saw the introduction of mobile working and hand-held technology as a step forward into the 21st century," says Sim. In addition, moving towards mobile working is recommended by the National Audit Office could offer ongoing support should we need it."

The solution

The 1st Touch solution enables organisations to replace paper forms with electronic versions provided on PDAs. Tailored to the specific organisation's needs, the forms technology reduces the amount of data operatives have to input and uses a familiar-looking form, but on a screen rather than paper, and sends it directly to head office.

"We are getting through the culture change successfully and are beginning to see some real productivity increases. In particular one very noticeable difference is that where we had 14% successful appointments last year, we now have 75%. That's a huge benefit for our customers."

Chief Executive Iain Sim

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In this case 1st Touch worked closely with Coast & Country to find the optimum way of interfacing the mobile and back-office solutions. Additionally, as the system went live, operatives were able to provide feedback to enable 1st Touch to make minor adjustments to fit their needs more exactly

The benefits

Before the introduction of electronic scheduling and mobile working, operatives would be issued with a list of appointments for the day. If any job overran, timings would slip and appointments would be missed. Under the new electronic system, operatives receive one job at a time, appropriate to their skills. As well as receiving jobs, they can use the PDA to report back immediately and directly on start and finish times, parts used and compliance issues.

Now operatives with the right skills can be more easily directed to each job. With less worry about meeting appointment times, operatives are able to focus more time on applying their skills. There are fewer repeat calls, and customer liaison advisers have more time to look at customer satisfaction and further ways of improving service.

Head of Property Maintenance, Anthony Brown, expresses satisfaction with the results. "We have greatly increased the efficiency and effectiveness of our service. We have cut down on paperwork, such as time sheets and job tickets, saving us time and effort. At the same time, we are providing what the customers wanted – a right-first-time service."

In meeting the requirements of the IT department, 1st Touch has provided a full support service before and after implementation. Says Head of ICT John Dunn: "The implementation went very well with very little involvement needed from our end. There were one or two support issues in the first couple of weeks, but then none. In fact, we now need to provide less support for that side of the business than we did before."

Future developments

The success of this first phase has inspired thoughts on how mobile technology can further be introduced for even greater increases in productivity. The next step, says Dunn, is "to build on what we've got with repairs, and look at areas such as housing management and void inspections – all the functions where it will be useful to have operatives gathering information and delivering it back to our core system."

There are also plans afoot to build interfaces to other systems, such as time and attendance, allowing operatives to log in through their PDAs.

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