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Push More Work To The Field

▲ A software vendor and a utility company partner to develop and design a mobile field service solution that saves the end user millions and improves customer service.

by Ed Hess

There's a fine line between wanting and needing. You may want the BMW Z3 roadster, but you probably need a mini-van. You may want to take that trip to the Bahamas, but you probably need to visit your in-laws in Cleveland.

In the land of best-case scenarios, wanting and needing are one in the same. It's at these instances when decisions are easy. You want a new PDA (personal digital assistant) and you need a new PDA. Case closed — you're getting a new PDA.

Electric and water utilities company JEA (Jacksonville, FL) was facing such a best-case scenario when it came to making the call on implementing a new field service solution for its 500 mobile workers. The 2,500-employee municipality wanted to replace its inflexible legacy field service system. JEA also needed a new system



Panasonic Toughbooks keep field technicians connected to JEA's iMedeon system and can also withstand almost any abuse.

once it learned the legacy system's vendor was no longer offering support for its product. With almost 700,000 customers using its electricity, water, and sewer services, and counting on quality customer support, the decision was easy for JEA — get a new field service solution.

Vendor, End User Combine Talents

The concept of needing a new field service solution was

an easy sell to JEA management; however, specific software requirements looked like they might bog down the vendor selection process. "From a support perspective, our server group requested the software run on Hewlett-Packard. The database group demanded any new system run on Oracle. The development team wanted to make sure we were heading in the direction of Web enablement," recalls Bob Neyer, systems project leader at JEA. "Whatever solution we chose had to meet all of those requirements."

Having framed a tough RFP (request for proposal) that admittedly favored browser-based solutions, JEA submitted the document to nine vendors. iMedeon (Alpharetta, GA) was eventually selected by JEA as the solution provider. iMedeon offered both a technology and a unique opportunity that JEA couldn't pass up. At the time of the RFP, iMedeon was still designing its product and was planning to make a big investment in product development. "iMedeon was looking to partner with a company that already had expertise in using wireless field solutions. That's what we brought to the table," comments Neyer. "In return, we got a chance to be involved in the design and development of a product we would be using. We avoided getting a customized, one-off solution with a lot of maintenance issues down the road."

Mobilizing 500 Field Technicians

The partnership between vendor and customer resulted in the rollout of a field service and dispatch solution called iM-Work, from iMedeon. JEA's mobile workers use the system as they access each day's work orders on Panasonic Toughbooks. These ruggedized laptops are equipped with Sierra Wireless CDPD (cellular digital packet data) modems. The laptops, which were also used with JEA's legacy system, receive data over AT&T's CDPD network.

Before the work assignments can be sent to JEA's mobile workforce, customer calls must be logged and an order generated. Between 2,000 and 5,000 work

Installation Profile

Technology User: JEA is a municipal utility headquartered in Jacksonville, FL, with close to 700,000 customers. The company has 2,500 employees, including 500 mobile field technicians.

Problem: JEA needed to replace its field service solution. Not only was the system's vendor no longer offering support for the software, but modifying it was prohibitively expensive.

Solution: JEA partnered with software vendor iMedeon, Inc. (Alpharetta, GA) in an effort to develop and design a new field service solution. Both vendor and customer ultimately benefited from iM-Work, the resulting software system. JEA saved millions in implementation costs and iMedeon tapped JEA's expertise in wireless field solutions.

orders are generated every day and downloaded in batch from the company's CRM system to iM:Work. The Optimizer module in iM:Work then assigns the orders to individual technicians based on expertise, location, and daily workload. "Our technicians take company vehicles home each night. When they start the day in the morning, they log on to the system while they are still in their own driveways," says Neyer. "Within a couple of min-

utes, our techs get their assignments for the day. The first one is closest to their starting locations. From there, the orders are assigned based on distance."

Complete ROI In Three Months

While utilities such as water and electricity are constant necessities, JEA experiences peaks and valleys in terms of service calls. At the beginning and end of each month – when people are moving in and out of properties – JEA receives more than double the normal number of work orders. In all cases, however, iM:Work generates a template that is displayed on the technicians' laptops. The technicians fill out the templates, and the data is transmitted back to JEA headquarters in real time before heading to the next job.

Different templates are used for different jobs, and these templates need to be altered from time to time to accommodate a change in business practice. Changing the templates with JEA's legacy system was prohibitively expensive. "If we wanted to change a field in the template, we had to buy a modification package from the vendor," recalls Neyer. "That could cost more than \$25,000 per change." With iM:Work, that problem has been eliminated. The software package has built-in tools that allow JEA to create custom interfaces and easily alter the templates it has already created.

When it comes to technology implementations, all companies want and need a significant ROI. In this case, the numbers backed up its vendor decision. The implementation took only a little more than nine months, and the partnership with iMedeon brought JEA significant savings. Waynonyi Kendrick, VP of technology services, says, "We would have spent \$2.5 to \$3 million more had we gone with another vendor. So, we expect a complete payback three months from the date of going live." □

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