

Looking at...

PDA's for health and safety

As the UK's new Corporate Manslaughter Act takes effect, David Crook, chairman of Expolink Software, shows how mobile technology can help cut the cost of workplace compliance

The number of mobile workers is on the increase and, with workplace legislation set to rise, so too are paperwork and administration.

Workplace legislation such as the Corporate Manslaughter Act, which takes effect this month, involves even tougher measures for senior management to ensure the health and safety of their personnel. Such legislation is requiring more resource to verify compliance measures, and therefore costs.

The dilemma for businesses today is whether to increase their IT infrastructure even more and empower staff with data capture technology whilst on the move, or to continue with the increasing burden of inefficient paperwork, so prone to manual error and duplication of effort.

Establishing a system

Setting up the people and processes necessary to manage such compliance need not be expensive. GPRS-linked hand-held technology today represents the most cost-effective computerized option for mobile workers, with low operation and set-up costs. But its advantages are significant. Such technology puts employees in control and provides all the management statistics and relevant audit trails required to assure their health and safety, with the focus channelled into proactive rather than reactive methods.

The Government has an active project – 'Project Nomad' – a technology initiative in the deployment of mobile technology as a way of enabling local authorities to spend more time away from the office, doing their real job. The private sector, too, is realizing the cost-benefits of PDA software for their remote workers, as this supersedes traditional pen and paper methods or laptops.

In applications such as health and safety, there need to be strict codes of practice – and rightly so, with the cost and risk of health and safety in-

fringements being so high. This is one area where preventative control is essential, since it could otherwise be potentially life-threatening unless essential periodic inspections take place. It can benefit considerably from the application of mobile computing, by automating the auditing process, gathering data, images and approval signatures as you go and making data immediately available for transmission and information-sharing.

Recovering resources

Increasing workplace efficiency and productivity is one of the overwhelming factors in favour of employing mobile technology in the workplace. According to the Gartner Group, the adoption of mobile communication solutions can increase efficiency by up to 40 per cent: that's equivalent to as much as two man-days per week, resource which could be applied elsewhere in the business.

Few companies have employed mobile technology without realizing the considerable benefits. Data transmission to and from the handheld is in 'real time' and is flexible enough to cope with just about any application. Health and safety is just one of the areas with increasing compliance requirements, where essential audits empowered through mobile PDAs are proving to be incredibly flexible and powerful tools. Equally, such software has an application in asset management, property maintenance, vehicle management and construction.

This data availability improves workflow, communication through immediate decision-making and, in turn, customer service. In applications such as maintenance and repair, job requests can be received 'live' via the handheld, allowing automation of the job-sheet process. Integration with back-end SQL databases for analysis and back-end helpdesk facilities provide even more advantages, with the processing of simultaneous job allocation to the right person – making such solutions even more advantageous.

The personal benefits

One area that must not be overlooked is the personal benefits such software can bring. Without the need for manual data entry, jobs are simplified. They also give the additional satisfaction of staff empowerment through access to data whilst on the move. In the case of an audit, attached cameras enable images to be taken to identify failures or any areas of risk.

On the downside, companies have to take that leap of faith and overcome any reluctance and fear of use in such technology through staff involvement in the decision-making process for their intended application.

With EU legislation on the increase, leading to regular inspection and audits, there is no doubt that mobile IT solutions are a cost-effective option worth serious consideration. Already they are being put to great use across a number of sectors and applications in their drive to streamline operational processes.

'Workplace optimization', 'value-added operations', 'reducing labour costs', 'improving productivity' – these are all possible strategies through mobility, a development that today should be considered a fact of life in the workplace. □

Cleaning up with wireless PDAs

The catering and cleaning services division at North Ayrshire Council has saved up to 150 hours a month by automating its compulsory risk assessments. These cover all aspects of the quality and safety of catering establishments, mainly in schools. The service standards are a prerequisite of the BSI, ensuring compliance with all the latest legislation and the need to meet performance targets.

The data formerly captured with pen and paper is now handled by mobile technology. Instead of having to be re-keyed into spreadsheet for manipulation, it can be processed automatically. This computer-assisted auditing is saving on average three hours and 40 minutes of administration time for each assessment. Thanks to the hand-held PDA and its software, the actual assessment time has been reduced from 10 hours to 2½ hours.

John Burt, of North Ayrshire Council, comments: "If we do 20 risk assessments per month, we save 150 hours, which is the equivalent to the resource of a full-time position. Not only have we seen considerable increases in productivity, we have also provided considerable cost savings for the council since the introduction of mobile technology."