

A wireless solution for a tireless profession

How do you keep in touch with your mobile workers when your communication costs are growing faster than your turnover? And more importantly, how do you improve service delivery at the same time?

As a specialist in IT network installation and maintenance, Gijima AST's call centre has always been at the heart of the company's operations. This includes providing support and maintenance on one of its largest contracts - the national police force network system.

However, between expensive cell phone calls and a huge national customer support base, the business was losing track of its field technicians, as well as vital progress and costing information. Costs were rising, service levels were dropping and the company was failing to deliver on Service Level Agreements worth millions of Rands each year.

"Besides spiralling cellular costs - which averaged at R100 000 every month - technician reports were typically long overdue and invoices were delayed," explains Hanno van Dyk, financial director of Sizwe. "Additionally, our customers had no way of tracking the progress of their requests.

"We wanted a solution that would enable the call centre to dispatch and monitor tasks more effectively, allowing for faster response times and better overall performance. Besides reducing costs, we wanted to improve our accuracy, professionalism and ability to deliver the service we'd promised."

Quentin Cronje, manager of Gijima's call centre, explains that the centre receives anything from 500 to 650 maintenance calls from their customer base each day. These are logged at the helpdesk and then dispatched to a dedicated team of technicians.

"Each call-out typically involves at least six phone calls to record details such as when a problem was reported and dispatched, when the technician arrived at site, when the problem was resolved and what feedback was provided to the end user," he says.

"Previously we tried using SMS codes to manage this reporting, but it proved to be too complex to maintain."

THE SOLUTION

Sizwe Business Networking, along with Microsoft-certified partner, Digital Matter, were called upon to create a realtime system that would service Gijima's 150 field technicians working on support calls throughout southern Africa. Technicians were provided with hand-held imate PDA 2k devices that combine computing, telephone, fax and networking features. The call centre software was extended to the devices' front-end, enabling technicians to receive and update tasks on these imates.



Thanks to the lower overall cost of GPRS versus voice calls, Sizwe Business Networking recouped the cost of developing this solution within the first three months of use.

Digital signatures allow for immediate sign-off of jobs and quicker invoicing. This has reduced Sizwe's debtor days by almost half.

A partnership with cellular provider MTN provided the voice and data connectivity that the technicians needed to communicate electronically with the call centre from just about anywhere in the country. An existing relationship between Digital Matter and MTN meant that the mobile hardware was supplied free of charge as part of a two-year connectivity contract, translating into a saving of about R6 500 per device.

"The range of imate devices running the Microsoft Windows Mobile operating system offers a truly converged user experience, providing real user functionality and business efficiency," says Digital Matter's Norman Colling.

Cronje adds that the front-end software is flexible and easy to use. "Once a call is logged and allocated to a technician, the details are sent via the imate, and the technician then accepts, rejects, or forwards them," he says.

"He can use the imate to send email on the move, log kilometres travelled and constantly keep in touch with the call centre. The device is also linked to an automatic messaging system that sends time and date signals to the call centre every time the technician logs a particular action. It makes their jobs simpler, while enabling the centre to keep track of their progress."

ABOUT Digital Matter

Formed in May 2000 by Ken Everett, Digital Matter is a development business that provides software and mobile computing solution development, including the design and testing of electronic circuit boards and firmware, focusing on the Microsoft suite of products.

In order to integrate the solution into the existing call centre, Digital Matter used Microsoft's range of development tools for databases and the mobile environment. This included Microsoft's PocketPC operating system and GPRS connectivity protocols.

THE RESULTS

The entire project took only six weeks to plan and implement, and the benefits were immediate.

"The availability of real-time, accurate data for our staff and clients has added huge value to our business," says Hanno van Dyk. "It has reduced the number of cell phone calls to the call centre, and – thanks to the lower overall cost of GPRS versus voice calls – we recouped the cost of developing the solution within the first three months of use."

Digital signatures on the imates also allow for greater control when client authorisation is required. These signatures, which comply with the regulations set out in the Electronic Communications Act of 2002, are integrated into Sizwe's call desk and billing systems. Hanno adds that immediate sign-off on jobs means quicker invoicing, which has reduced Sizwe's debtor days by almost half.

"Now that's what I call Return On Investment".

ABOUT Sizwe Business Networking

Sizwe is a 100% black-owned, A-rated empowerment company that provides total IT and print solutions to government and private organisations. As a network installation and maintenance specialist, Sizwe's product range also includes printers, scanners, software, PCs, notebooks, servers and data storage.



Technology used:

- Microsoft PocketPC 2003
- Microsoft IIS
- Microsoft SQL Server
- .Net Compact Framework
- VB .Net
- Visual Studio .Net