

Case study

We Energies

Intermec CN3
Mobile Computer
is Put to the Test



At a glance

Industry: Field Service

Market: Utility

Application: Work Order Management

Product: Intermec CN3 mobile computer

Partner: Process & Technology Solutions

Handheld Computer Survives After Two Weeks on the Roadside

Designed to survive the rigors of the field, Intermec CN3 mobile computer appealed to We Energies because its gas technicians are constantly in the field enduring unpredictable conditions.

A We Energies contract employee recently tested the CN3's ability to survive extreme wear and tear. Mid-route, a technician set his CN3 on the bumper of his car and drove away not realizing he left it on the car. The mobile computer flew off the back of the vehicle and landed on the side of the road. Two weeks later, it was found by a county highway worker and returned to We Energies. Despite a few scratches, the handheld worked like new and all of the data was recovered. It was ready to be put back into the field immediately.

"We were extremely impressed that the CN3 was still in one piece after sitting on the side of the road so long," said Kris Ackerman, senior engineer, gas system operations, We Energies. "We knew then that we definitely made the right choice with Intermec and would get our money's worth from this investment."

Recognizing the Need for a Solution

We Energies, an electric and gas company with customers in Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, aims to provide cost-effective and reliable service to its customers. It is imperative for We Energies to keep natural gas flowing safely and reliably throughout its service area. Each year, the company performs more than 200,000 service leak surveys to inspect its gas service facilities to ensure that they are in top condition. Due to state and federal regulations, it is essential that the gas technicians provide accurate, timely data to guarantee all inspections are completed and all equipment is functioning properly.

We Energies recognized that its paper-based, bar code scanning data collection method was time consuming and inefficient. The solution required technicians to hold the leak equipment in one hand with paper routes on a clipboard in the other. The workers then documented the survey results on paper. A portion of each day was spent scanning numerous bar codes, each representing a specific condition or completion status of the survey, from the earlier results documented on paper.



“We realized that the gas technicians were recording their data on paper and then completing their bar code scanning at the end of the day,” said Ackerman. “We needed a new solution that was efficient in the field yet user-friendly for our employees in order to improve upon this process.”

Automating in the Field

In the fall of 2006, We Energies turned to Process & Technology Solutions to purchase Intermec CN3 mobile computers to improve its leak survey process. In April, the new mobile device with an in-house built application was implemented. Now, field workers simply download a route to their mobile computer at the beginning of a shift and then document any actions taken while performing the surveys in the field. The solution also features a bright display for use in direct sunlight. In the future, technicians will be able to document unusual conditions using the integrated camera.

As a result, the organization has dramatically reduced paper usage to reduce costs and become more environmentally friendly. The mobile computers have also eliminated the end-of-day scanning, enabling technicians to complete more

surveys per shift. In addition, employee morale has improved because technicians like being able to store and organize all of their data in one mobile device.

The data collection error rate has also been significantly reduced since deploying the CN3's. Since the gas technicians enter their data right on the spot there is less room for mistakes. Also, the CN3 is user-friendly and alerts the user when an item is not entered properly. Ultimately, the features of the mobile device let the field workers complete their surveys accurately and hassle-free.

A One-Handed Solution

With its previous solution, We Energies could not tailor the bar code scanner to meet its specific needs. However, with the CN3 the company has customized the buttons on the right side of the handheld as “enter” and “tab” keys. There are also scroll up and down buttons on the left side. Tailoring the buttons has minimized the need to use a stylus and allows users to enter their data with increased speed. It enables technicians to enter data with one hand while holding their survey equipment in the other. Since most of the gas facilities

are in good condition and do not require any follow up maintenance, using one hand to complete the process has allowed workers to complete more surveys per day.

In addition, employees are able to download their routes with all the specific data that is needed for the day. The device displays routes in a street address format allowing the gas technicians to perform the surveys in the most logical order. The application also has status summaries to ensure that all surveys are completed. Previously, workers would often have a route of 600 sites to survey but could only account for 595. There was no way the bar code scanner could tell the field workers what sites they missed. This was a large problem since it is imperative for all sites to be surveyed correctly. Now, users can simply refer to their mobile device to make sure they have completed their route in full.

“The technicians are saving time and completing more surveys because they can record their data and move on without taking time at the end of the day for data entry,” Ackerman concluded. “The CN3 contains features that make the work day easier and more efficient for all parties.”

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