The Processes, Plusses, and Minuses of Using Mobile Devices

Over the years we have talked about using mobile devices in the maintenance world many times. As many of you know that I haven’t always been a big proponent of them. By ‘them’ I mean smartphones, tablets, and laptops. I have changed my mind somewhat and in certain situations the use of mobile devices can be a great asset to the maintenance and facility management organization. Don’t get too excited, I am not 100% for mobile devices in all organizations. In many situations and business models, good old fashioned paper is still the best method for describing and documenting the maintenance process.

In this tip of the month I will talk about smartphones, tablets, and laptops or any other device which you can send, receive, or research data. For simple communication and organization of maintenance crews don’t forget about the old faithful walkie-talkie. They are excellent devices for communication between technicians and crews. The biggest problem with radios is the noise when you are working in an office environment. You find more radios being used in the manufacturing world than you do in the facilities world because of the constant communication needed during troubleshooting and equipment startups.

As we begin the discussion of which device is best for your organization, let’s first discuss a topic that applies to all devices, what is your maintenance culture?

Different cultures will cause you to use your mobile devices in different ways. You will also find a variety in levels of satisfaction and return-on-investment based on your culture. If your culture is one of 100% reactive management (or what I call chaos) then mobile devices will show some benefit to the organization. You will be able to create and move chaos around your facility faster than you ever could before you had smartphones. So if you are in the 100% maintenance chaos category, give everyone a smartphone. Then when an emergency work request comes in to raise or lower that thermostat one degree you can dispatch the work request to your maintenance supervisor, foreman, and several technicians and they can all respond and save the day! Your customer satisfaction will go through the roof. I wouldn’t consider tablets or laptops, they will just slow the response time down with all of the typing. You guys think I’m trying to be funny, but I’m not. Many organizations operate just like this every day...really!

On the other side of the chaos coin is Mikes World, where only 15 - 20% of your work is reactive. Even that 15 – 20% is organized by a well-run dispatch process; with an automatic priority system that customers and maintenance personnel developed together. 80 - 85% of all work is planned and scheduled on a written work schedule which is developed and published for all to see at least a week in advance.
So in a proactive *Mike’s World* culture how do handhelds add value to the process? To go a little deeper into *Mike’s World* and 85% of all of your work each week; all of the parts and supplies have been pre-purchased, kitted and staged in the work area is possible. All of the technicians have to do is complete the work. To explain this in a different way, if you have 20 technicians, 17 of them know what they will be working on a week in advance. All the parts are there, all the tools are identified, the customer knows when your team is coming, and when you will be finished. The question is; what do they need a mobile device for? The other three (3) guys do need a mobile device. They will be handling the reactive calls and will need to be able to look up parts, drawings, machine history, trouble shooting guides, pictures of past problems order parts, etc.

**So which device will work the best?** Even though most everyone is already carrying a smartphone they are not very good for doing the stuff I mention in the last paragraph. Maintenance fingers are too big and the screens are too small. So that turns us towards tablets and laptops. If you work out of a van or utility truck then some kind the laptop is a great choice, although difficult to remove from the truck or van and carry to the job site.

So my choice would be a tablet. They are easy to transport, can do almost anything a laptop can do, and if need be you can take pictures with them as well. The only minus is the key board, but most technicians only type with one or two fingers anyway so not big deal.

**In Summary** - have your planned and scheduled technicians use paper and your firefighters use tablets or laptops.

Remember if your work requests aren’t filled out well, your asset information is incomplete, and your work history is not complete. Thus mobile devices will only allow you to access bad information faster.