

Wireless solution saves time and cuts paperwork

by Lee Toop

New wireless solution delivered through Rogers mForms dramatically reduces paperwork, improves invoice times and increases overall customer satisfaction for service technicians in the oil and gas sector

The clipboard – a staple of company trucks all over, its stack of wrinkled and scrawled forms a regular appearance on job sites and in the office. Almost every company has forms that need to be filled out, for maintenance requests, billing, and all kinds of other tasks. That paperwork can be a time sink, especially for people working in the field who have

to spend time finishing them off either on their own time or back in the office.

A partnership between Rogers Wireless and TrueContext could just cut the amount of paperwork done in the field by letting those employees fill out their forms on handheld computers – a process that could save time, money and piles of paperwork.

Rogers mFORMS system is a software package that can be installed on handheld devices (currently available for Windows Mobile Pocket PC's; a Blackberry version to will be released soon), allowing field workers to get rid of their clipboards and produce professional forms on site before transmitting them wirelessly back to the office.

"We've been looking at field forms enablement for several years now; the challenge has been that it's expensive to do," explained Mansell Nelson, Vice President, Business Development, Rogers Business Solutions. "You had to buy

expensive middleware, do systems integration... it was only for big companies who could amortize that cost. We weren't selling a lot of the stuff, and it was only to big enterprise clients. We came to the conclusion that, drawing on the success of the Blackberry, we needed to make this a lot simpler to do."

Rogers worked with TrueContext, a provider of mobile business solutions that developed the underlying application, and HP, which provides the hosting for the solution, to develop the concept of a forms solution that could be easily implemented and accessed through a wireless format.

The result is a packaged solution that provides an easy-to-use application for field workers who can fill out forms, either basic templates or custom designed, on the spot, then transmit them through the mForms server and back to the office, where they can be quickly processed.

"The middleware solutions have usually been for 250 users and up, and what we're seeing now is that small companies, some with less than ten users, are being attracted to mForms. But, we are also in the midst of a deployment to some companies of 500 and up," Nelson said.

Essentially, the customers only need the compatible handhelds and access to back-office operating systems where the relayed forms will be sent. The reduction in capital costs means Rogers has the opportunity to provide pilot projects for companies that would not have been able to afford larger systems.

One company that has picked up mForms in an industry with plenty of paperwork handled by field employees is Emerson Process Management. The oil and gas sector is a key target for this turnkey mobility solution, and according to Reg Buffet, Emerson General Manager, Instrument and Valve Services, mForms has thus far proven to be a good selection.

"We have field service technicians that can be gone two, three, four weeks at a time. We do our sales through a sales channel – we're constantly having to give them our invoices and quote out what our work in the field is going to cost. Our guys in the field would be finished their work on site for two or three weeks and we wouldn't be invoicing them yet because the guys had to get back into the shop and do their paperwork," Buffet said. "This helps out our techs – they're not coming back into the office with three or four days of paperwork to do so we can get our billing out."

Buffet said Emerson has been doing some field testing before the busy season starts this spring. The company provided Rogers with copies of the forms that are normally filled out during field service work, which were then converted to electronic versions accessible through the handheld devices. Basic off-the-shelf forms are also available. Users then only need to open the program and can get to work on the spot.

"You can have the forms there or have work pushed out to you by the dispatcher so it's on the machine when you turn it on... the ten jobs you need to do come up,

you click on the job, and the form comes up," Nelson described. "The sections of the PDA document are broken up like a traditional form might be sectioned out, with drop-down menus and other items preloaded for the users. These technicians are filing the forms out in a much more complete and accurate manner than they were with traditional paper-based systems."

Buffet said Emerson is finding the mForms is a cleaner and easier way for technicians to work.

"Anything electronic is better than anyone's handwriting – guys who have worked in the field for 12 to 14 hours, the notes and the way they fill out the document can get a little sloppy," he noted. "This makes it more of a professional presentation to the customer, with the bill and the charges all laid out."

Once the form is completed, Emerson customers can sign off on charges on the spot using the Pocket PC's device and data entry stylus, sending it wirelessly through the central server where it's passed along to a designated person in the head office, Buffet said. The server notifies that person by e-mail, and the form can be opened up, adjustments made, and the invoice sent out.

"The faster I can get my invoices out, that's a good plus – our head company is big on circulating cash flow quickly, so the quicker we get the invoices out, the faster we get paid," he commented.

That speed in cash flow turnover helps with return on investment.

"If you look at the time the guys have to use sitting in the office doing paperwork, or sitting in a hotel room late at night, sometimes it's hard to put a dollar value to something like that," Buffet said.

Using the Rogers Wireless network, mForms has a broad reach when it comes to coverage, Nelson noted.

"We've got one national network that covers 94 percent of the population, so network coverage is not the issue it used to be," he said. "And, the system works offline, so if you need a blank form and fill that out, if you're an oilfield person in the middle of nowhere, when you come back into range it will automatically synchronize up. That's very important for people who are doing what I'd call mission-critical work. Browser solutions when you're out of access are very limiting."

Oil and gas is just one of many sectors that can benefit from the mForms system, Nelson pointed out.

"It's one that we're seeing a lot of activity in – there are all sorts of forms, from health and safety to oilfield inspection," he said. "Anything that has a traditional paper-based system is ripe for this kind of thing."

mForms offers two distinctly different models: a straight out-of-the-box solution as well as a more customized form solution, both of which are simple to use, flexible and affordable, and will also be available on the BlackBerry.

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IMOS delivers energy cargo transportation solutions

Veson Nautical, a U.S.-based maritime software developer, has seen revenues grow more than 150 percent per year since 2003, partly due to its increased focus in the oil and gas sector.

"Our history goes back 27 years of building chartering and operations solutions for the more general shipping sector, but in the last two to three years we've seen a lot of interest within the oil and gas industry, and we've actually enhanced our product to work more effectively for these companies," stated John Veson, President of Veson Nautical.

Veson's flagship software system, IMOS (Integrated Maritime Operations System), delivers energy cargo transportation solutions to oil and gas majors. IMOS streamlines the process of managing the shipment of different kinds of energy commodities by creating a consolidated view of information for different departments. IMOS efficiently manages voyages and delivers a cost effective voyage every time.

Current customers include Coal and Oil Company, ConocoPhillips, Constellation Energy, Oil Refineries Ltd., PMI Comercio Internacional, Sonatrach Petroleum Corporation, TECO and Tesoro.

Neste Oil Corporation, an independent northern European oil refining and marketing company, recently licensed IMOS in its Shipping Division for all activities related to the company's fleet of tankers.

Veson Nautical's solution was selected from among seven other providers after Neste conducted a thorough analysis of needs and internal processes to ensure the new operating system would be able to handle all current and future requirements.

"There are two reasons why we chose

Veson's IMOS," explained Joakim Kärkkäinen, vice president of Neste Oil Corporation's Shipping, Finance and IT Department. "First, we think IMOS is the most user-friendly shipping software available today. Second, we needed a solution that would handle both operations and accounting functionalities. IMOS offered us the ability to do both in one package."

"Neste's Shipping Division – which is responsible for overseeing the company's diverse fleet of barges, tug boats and tankers – requires access to varying types of information in order to profitably complete their voyages," said John Veson, president of Veson Nautical. "IMOS provides a flexible and robust solution, capable of handling unique fleet requirements, while still maintaining a singular software platform. We are pleased to work closely with Neste's Shipping Division, and we look forward to a successful relationship with them."

IMOS will help Neste Charterers, Operators and Accounting staff improve their time efficiency, enabling them to enhance their productivity. IMOS will interface with Neste's accounting system and payments/receipts processing software that is currently installed.

Veson Nautical is in the final development stages of its latest version of IMOS, which is scheduled for release in March. Veson is investing in several new product offerings which will be available later this year. The company is also implementing a new installation and training plan for its customers. The new products, revamped offerings and enhanced training systems will make it easier for customers to purchase and install IMOS.

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