

TEXTILE SERVICES

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Benchmarking Data: Resolving the Puzzle of Productivity

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American Textile Services: Technology Drives Growth

Software; mobile systems improve service, cut paperwork, while enhancing real-time communications.



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By Michael Macaro

Considering whether your employees would adapt if you brought mobile technology into your company? If the American Textile Maintenance’s experience is any indication, the answer is a resounding “yes.”



“We eliminated about 20,000 three-part paper invoices per week,” says CEO Brad Shames, noting that his company is glad to part with so much paper. “Now the invoices are just pushed right through.”

American Textile has two operating divisions; Republic Master Chefs Textile Rental Services and Medico Professional Linen Service. They employ 750 associates to serve a vast swath of Southern California from three operating facilities and three depots. Route service representatives come into contact with customers daily, while relying on their colleagues in the office for support.

Route reps spend their days on the road, dropping off and picking up napkins, work uniforms and just about any textile-based article in between. They’re the face of the company, and American Textile Maintenance’s success hinges on their treatment of customers.

LESS PAPER; MORE FLEXIBILITY

“Curveball” situations give reps the best opportunities to show their stuff. For instance, when a pre-made invoice doesn’t match a client’s needs,

reps must change the invoice on the fly. “Reps need to recalculate how much the customer owes for the day,” says American Textile’s controller, Gail Reynolds. Making those changes on paper meant manual calculation, carrying extra invoices and making extra time, time which reps don’t often have.

With the mobile devices they carry, reps “don’t have to do the math anymore,” Reynolds says. “They don’t have to carry paper. We do print invoices on-site if the customer requires paper. Otherwise they can e-mail invoices directly from their handheld devices.”

“It streamlines that part of their job, gives them more time to interact with the customer directly, which is what we want them to do.”

Reps can spend more time with customers, if they spend less time on the road. GPS, which is embedded in rep handhelds, keeps reps on the most efficient routes. This feature helps temporary, or new reps in particular. “They can see where their next stop is and get directions,” from their handhelds, says Reynolds.

As we continue to recognize patients and their families as consumers who have a choice of where to receive their medical care, uniforms have significant advantages beyond branding.

The system also frees up extra time with customers by cutting time spent entering data, once they finish their shifts. “At the end of the day, reps used to have to balance their route, add everything up,” says Reynolds, who notes this chore took between 30 minutes and an hour. “Now, at the end of the day, they just have to print a report.” And letting tablets do the calculations—rather than the reps—has made billing and tracking errors a thing of the past.

Since American Textile likes to have the same reps serving the same customers, they become familiar and customers are more comfortable asking reps questions not just about their accounts but also other needs. Reps can pull up information sheets, brochures and even videos right on their tablets—without running back to their trucks for paper (all the while hoping the information on that paper is current).

That’s a lot less paper to handle—a fact not lost on American Textile CEO Brad Shames. “We eliminated about 20,000 three-part paper invoices per week,” he says, noting that his company is glad to part with the printing, filing and scanning of so much paper, to say nothing of American Textile’s reduced impact on the environment. “Now the invoices are just pushed right through.”

The paper is indeed gone, thanks to Samsung Galaxy Note tablets running the M-LINX™ system from Mobile Computing Corp. (MCC). These tablets hold and update business records, content like marketing brochures and other information that helps reps do their jobs efficiently.

LINKING TEAM MEMBERS

Like route reps, their supervisors also need to be mobile to do their jobs properly. That’s why American Textile provides Samsung tablets to its supervisors too. These devices keep supervisors in the loop as they pay goodwill visits to clients, help with the installation of new accounts and, in a pinch, perform emergency deliveries (aka “specials”).

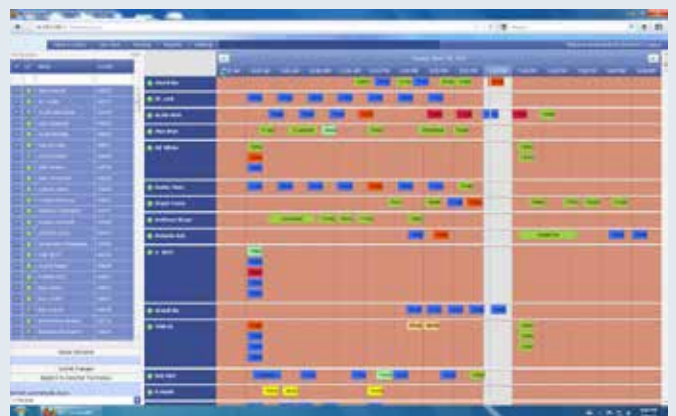
Using the M-LINX ScheduleLive component, which uses a combination of mapping and GPS, supervisors can see where their reps are while at customer sites. When the visual, real-time dashboard shows drivers running behind schedule, supervisors can take immediate steps to ensure that customer needs are met.

In the past, supervisors once verified deliveries and performed reviews of the day’s work at the end of the day. The system would simply batch the day’s activity. Supervisors

Going Mobile...Features & Benefits

Today’s mobile computing technology can benefit textile services companies in various ways, with features including real-time data accessibility, POS payment processing, routing/scheduling optimization, GPS reporting, tracking of vehicle telemetry information and many more.

This technology can give companies a competitive leg up by helping them track assets, promote ‘green/paperless’ billing, gain real-time visibility into field operations, reduce AR billing cycle times and more. Bottom line? You can do more with existing resources.



didn't know if a route rep was behind until he or she returned late. It wasn't possible to do otherwise.

"Now, they can start their reviews in real time," says Reynolds. "They can check invoices to see what's been delivered, what changes have been made. It cuts down on checks to do at the end of the day."

For the first time in the history of the company, supervisors have real-time insight into where their people are and what they're doing."

That at-a-glance insight comes in handy when the company needs route reps to deviate from their planned activities to accommodate "reaction" or "demand" activities. "During busy times, we push planned activities aside because, for instance, if a customer calls in for specials during the holidays and it didn't make the route, you have to use those people who had planned activities that day," Shames says.

He also uses his desktop to check routes. He scans a screen on which dots represents individual accounts. He examines multiple routes on his screen at the same time. "It's fascinating to see how a rep ran his route," Shames says. "I can contact a supervisor, noting that the rep crisscrossed the map all day, overlapping other routes. I can ask 'Can't we do this more efficiently?'"

Reynolds adds that, "It's an easier way to analyze what drivers do on their routes, and it's easier to ask about these changes when drivers get back, instead of having to go through the paperwork."

Count route-accounting office staff as part of the group that doesn't shuffle paper anymore. The M-LINX system feeds information to other American Textile systems such as inventory, accounting, order entry, payroll and others.

Office staff, "used to have to key in the information that route reps wrote on paper, and then they would file paper," says Reynolds. "All of that is gone."

And none too soon. "We've shifted their jobs," Reynolds says. "We've been growing, and we've done acquisitions" during this route-technology implementation and merging its routes into American Textile's operations.

Onboarding people from the acquired company wasn't difficult, Shames notes. "They were on handhelds too from another company, so it wasn't a foreign object," he says. "You know how a handheld helps you do the job you're doing, so if you get handed a different one, adapting isn't difficult."

As American Textile hires "digital natives" as route reps and supervisors, it also can expect to bring them up to speed more quickly using the tablets.

In a sense, route reps, supervisors and other mobile workers are customers of American Textile. By providing tablets to help them do their jobs better, the company has proven a tangible investment in their success, and the return on that investment flows naturally to their textile services customers.

"Route reps hated doing all the math, they hated the end-of-the-day check-in," Reynolds says.

For the first time in the history of the company, supervisors have real-time insight into where their people are and what they're doing.

American Textile implemented changes to their system during the busy holiday season with help from their technology partner, MCC. The holidays coincided with the acquisition of another company and its accounts.

The implementation supported both the holiday rush and new route integration, a fact that both Shames and Reynolds appreciate. But they look forward to getting even more done with the new system.

DESTINATION: CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Additional features at the top of their list include the ability to assign soil tickets for soiled merchandise that's coming back to the plant and the ability to order garments, a common request when a customer needs to order workwear for a new employee. "The order goes into the handheld and straight into the stockroom," says Shames, who is pleased that the company will rid itself of even more paper once these features go live.

"There are other things that we'll think of that can be automated and make our work easier, more streamlined." Examples could include vehicle telemetry (to track criteria such as idle time and fuel consumption) and more sophisticated route optimization.

Camille Peters, president/CEO of MCC, says the implementation of new route technology has proceeded smoothly.

“We’ve done some systematic route optimization with American Textile,” she says. This “trial run” happened during the aforementioned acquisition. “Using our optimization tool, we helped them lay over the new routes into their existing routes, so that they could get more efficiency out of existing routes.”

Reynolds and Shames plan to optimize routes on their own, since the optimization tool doesn’t require advanced training. Any changes they make to routes will travel automatically to rep tablets.

As much as they both appreciate what the technology means to the future of American Textile, they also recognize the contribution of their technology partner. “MCC is a great company to work with. Whenever there’s been an issue, the support has been there for us,” Reynolds says.

Peters adds that, “American Textile has been on a journey with us. Improving a business is a project that never ends.” TS

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Michael Macaro is director of business development for Mobile Computing Corp., Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. Contact him at 800.392.8651 or mmacaro@mobilecom.com.



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Contact:

Angela Freeman, 877.770.9274, ext. 111
afreeman@trsa.org
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