

1st Touch handheld technology helps HomeServe boost productivity and service

Whatever the domestic emergency, customers of HomeServe's insurance service expect to see a qualified technician pulling up at their house within two hours.

Plumbers, heating engineers, electricians, drainage engineers, domestic appliance engineers, locksmiths and glaziers, flood experts – all these and more are employed by HomeServe to deliver rapid response to customers on a nationwide basis.

Together with its service to insurance companies for scheduled repairs, HomeServe's emergency repairs insurance arm made the company the fastest growing FTSE 250 business last year, as the company moves rapidly towards its goal of being "The first place people turn to when it comes to fixing, improving and looking after their home".

The challenge

Delivering affordable, effective repairs on time is crucial to HomeServe's success, and customer satisfaction with excellent service is at the heart of the company's values. That means little room for error as Programme Manager Kevin Carter explains: "With some policies sold on a two-hour response promise, we need to have a highly responsive back-office system to support our skilled staff."

Not only that, but the system needs to support the company's rapid growth. To maintain the highest levels of customer care, HomeServe recognises that simply employing more staff is not enough. "We needed to streamline deployment workflows," explains Carter. HomeServe wanted a system that would ensure it was sending the best suited engineer to the job at the right time, armed with all the information they needed about each job. At the same time better feedback from engineers would improve job planning. "We saw this as a significant customer service requirement," says Carter.

The solution

To meet this challenge, HomeServe went out to tender for a dynamic scheduling and handheld technology solution. The company chose Servicepower to deliver the scheduling technology, but asked the supplier to work with 1st Touch for the handheld technology.

1st Touch provides highly adaptable technology to develop and manage tailor-made forms on handheld devices such as PDAs. Kevin Carter explains the choice: "While our pilot project was initially to be with the plumbing and drainage team, we had to ensure the system could offer a future-proof solution to potentially export the solution across all our trades. The configurability and flexibility of the 1st Touch forms technology meant that we would easily be able to adapt the solution to suit everybody's needs over time."

The 1st Touch and Servicepower technology solution replaces a system that depended on paper and phones. Previously, the office would call each engineer each morning with their list of jobs for the day, and the engineers would work through them one by one. If one job took longer than expected or needed other skills or parts, customers further down the list simply had to wait longer for service.

Now at the start of day the automatic scheduler matches up each job with the required skills, and assigns jobs to engineers accordingly via their PDAs. The engineer only gets details of the first job, giving the scheduler the opportunity to proactively re-schedule jobs to other engineers later in the day if timings are slipping. As one job is completed, the scheduler will assign the engineer a new job.

As well as receiving details about each job, engineers use their PDAs to provide feedback on their progress, to note parts being used, book future visits, get final sign-off from the customer, and make phone calls.

The benefits

Straightforward, real-time communication over a standard mobile network has replaced a complex and time-consuming paper-based system. The solution simplifies tasks for the engineer and greatly improves the efficiency of the working day.

“We are now actively enabling the best deployment solution for our staff, sending the best engineer for the job at the best time,” says Carter. “We can proactively inform the customer of any job progress.”

HomeServe is also expecting to see significant service and productivity benefits.

With feedback constantly being used to update the system, the scheduler can predict travel and job completion times, helping to keep customers up to date. Real and estimated arrival and completion times become part of an extensive management information system that managers can interrogate to discover areas for review and improvement.

At the same time, engineers can spend more of their time using their skills rather than on administration. “We are enabling our engineers to be more productive,” says Carter. “Instead of filling in pieces of paper or queuing for parts, they are able to focus on simply driving and working through the day.”

While the solution is helping to achieve greater productivity, reducing headcount is not the goal of this fast-expanding firm. “What we do want to do is keep ensure we have the best tools for our engineers to deliver world-class customer service,” explains Carter.

Using the PDAs to manage workflows is also helping to standardise the way that engineers work for the benefit of all. Routines required of engineers are built into the workflow to ensure that they are carried out. Safety checks on the vans must be completed and notified each morning before the engineers can receive their first job. Engineers are required to call customers to say they are on the way, and only then do they receive further details of the work. “Managing workflows in this way encourages and enforces the use of best practice,” says Carter.

Future plans

With aggressive plans for growth, it's no surprise that HomeServe has a strict timetable for rolling out the solution across its business. The pilot project started with 14 engineers, and grew to 32 users within three months. That figure currently stands at 160 but is expected to continue to grow.

Meanwhile there are numerous plans to achieve even greater productivity gains and improvements in customer service by further developing the solution. This will include fully integrating the technology into HomeServe's customer relationship management system.

Further productivity gains will be achieved by more efficient parts delivery. Previously engineers would keep a paper record of parts used, and take out time from their day to visit a plumbers' merchants to re-stock. In future details of parts used will be fed back via the PDA in real time after every job, so that replenishment of parts can be organised quickly and with minimal disruption to the working day.

HomeServe will continue to work with 1st Touch to expand and extend the solution. Carter reports that: “1st Touch has proved to be proactive and flexible, and the directors and developers have been as supportive as we could have hoped.”