

Mobile Workforce 2.0

Rugged ultramobile PCs bring more features and better connections. **By Matt Hamblen**



The Panasonic Toughbook U1 comes with a solid-state drive, 1GB of memory and the Intel Atom Processor Z520. It's rated to survive a four-foot drop and has a sealed, all-weather design. It also features integrated Wi-Fi, a backlit QWERTY keyboard, USB and SD card slots, and a 5.6-in. WSVGA sunlight-viewable touch screen.

FOR YEARS, businesses have been deploying mobile software to help workers communicate wirelessly with back-office applications while on field service calls or sales visits.

Now, wireless mobility is entering a new era with more capabilities. For example, GPS-enabled devices have been made more powerful with richer middleware and synchronization software.

At air conditioning giant Carrier Corp. in Farmington, Conn., about 1,600 service technicians throughout North America have been equipped with wireless handhelds for several years. The technicians receive dispatch data for service calls and notify dispatchers when they have finished a job.

But Michael Hawman

has bigger plans. "Now, we want to move to the second generation," says Hawman, CIO of building systems and services at Carrier.

He wants newer devices that can capture data on a technician's work, including readings from heating and air conditioning units and the models and serial numbers of new parts installed.

Hawman would also like customer signatures to be captured electronically and transmitted to a back-office application. And with GPS capabilities in more devices, Carrier may soon be able to track technicians from the handhelds they carry rather than from separate devices on their trucks, he says.

Those are just a few of the advanced capabilities of new rugged handheld devices and second-generation tech-

nology such as ultramobile PCs, which Carrier has been testing. The company is currently giving the Panasonic Toughbook UI UMPC a trial run. Previously, Carrier tried and rejected the iPhone because the company found that it wasn't rugged enough for its service technicians, Hawman says.

HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE

Second-generation capabilities are enhanced by more sophisticated software and newer hardware, Hawman notes. For example, a software-as-a-service (SaaS) contract with Antenna Software Inc. will link back-office applications for accounting and inventory and provide GPS as well.

Antenna's service is especially valuable to Carrier because it provides tools that link to a number of Carrier's applications as well as to more standard Web applications. The company won't say exactly how much it's spending on Antenna's services or on hardware, but Hawman notes that Carrier has invested millions of dollars in its mobile strategy and as a result has seen a large increase in productivity.

"Our mobility strategy is a key strategy for us as we improve the customer experience," he says.

Antenna recently an-

Mobile Management

TeleNav Inc. in Sunnyvale, Calif., offers a number of GPS navigation services for individuals' mobile phones. The company recently launched a GPS-enabled mobile resource management service to provide real-time information for managing field operations and remote communications. It allows a team of field workers to clock in and out as a workgroup over wireless BlackBerries or other devices. Signature and image capture and other functions have also been added, TeleNav says. Pricing wasn't disclosed.

— MATT HAMBLÉN

nounced several improvements to its Antenna Mobility Platform with the release of AMP 2.0. They include the ability to quickly configure mobile connections to back-office applications and GPS, as well as a new mobile instant messaging application, according to Antenna.

Other improvements include AMP Studio 4.0 for building applications with components, AMP Component Library, AMP DocShare and support for the iPhone, says Antenna CEO Jim Hemmer. In all, Antenna can connect mobile workers with about 50 back-end systems, including Oracle databases and SAP software.

Hemmer says about 80% of Antenna's 125 customers use the SaaS model; the rest use Antenna tools in-house.

Many companies offer products and services to connect field workers to central offices wirelessly, and analysts say the benefits are real. But Gartner Inc. analyst Ken Dulaney said in a March research note that large firms still need to apply more strategic planning around mobile technology deployments. ■

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