A brief guide to mobile working in local government

abavus

Much of the work in local authorities is conducted by teams of operatives out in the field – dealing with fly tipping, abandoned vehicles, reports of dead animals, pot holes, tree surgery, health and safety in parks, delivery of social care and other community-related activities to name but a few. Managing teams of mobile workers like this is a huge expense and can be a logistical nightmare.

Time and again we speak to local authority managers who know that the whole process could be done more efficiently and effectively but aren't exactly sure how to take the next steps. Technology now can help any local authority to manage its mobile workers more effectively, leading to improved customer service, long term channel shift and substantial savings of both time and money.

Here are 10 reason why your organisation should be looking to exploit the opportunities offered by fast to implement and easy to manage mobile working solution.

1. Paper-based systems tend to mean that officers have to return to base in order to collect new work or update records from closed cases. Productivity studies show that this way of working can reduce their productivity by at least 20%, meaning jobs take longer to complete than they need to and officers spend unnecessary time travelling to and from base.

2. To date, local authorities have tended to focus on offering automated self-service processes for customer-facing services, whilst overlooking the massive benefits that the same automation technology can offer their staff and contractors. UK local authorities can and need to be tackling both. Now!

3. Automating internal processes builds resilience into your infrastructure as well as delivering time and resource savings. Resources have never been tighter in UK local authorities than they are now and implementing mobile worker technology solutions means authorities can still deliver an improved service experience to their customers, even when resources are so tightly constrained.

4. The time and resource saving delivered through the automation of internal processes enables UK local authorities to offset the increased demand for services that can result from the advent of multi-channel, customer self service offerings.

5. Effective digitally enabled mobile working platforms (declaration of interest – such as My Council Service's Mobile Worker module) allow flexible configuration, enable the setting up of tailored rules and allow for offline working when network access is not available for whatever reason. With these capabilities in place UK Local Authorities have the ability to streamline existing processes making them more straightforward and more cost-efficient.

6. One block on the road to a technological mobile worker solution is the perception that it's going to be complex and time consuming to implement, or that it will take a long time to prove its worth. Both these perceptions are simply wrong. With the appropriate technology support and the right approach to process design, a well-designed mobile working solution can be up and running in a few months and delivering significant resource saving within 6 months of implementation.

7. Managers are sometimes concerned that their field operatives won't adapt to a new way of working. However in my experience (gained working on mobile worker implementations across many different Authorities) field operatives, across all service areas, are invariably keen to adopt new ways of working that make them more efficient and enable them to do their jobs more effectively. Time and again I see how these initiatives are good for organisational morale and lead to operatives taking even more pride in their work.

8. Austerity and budget constraints are set to continue, regardless of the political persuasion of the next government, so transformational change is a requirement for all UK public sector organisations. In this context, quick-to-implement, configurable and cost-effective mobile working solutions offer the next major opportunity UK public sector to demonstrate its ingenuity.

9. Effective mobile working platforms provide a cornerstone of cost-effective multi-service and multi-agency working. When properly thought out and pragmatically implemented, the savings derived can be remarkable.

10. Digital access and process automation is not just for UK public sectors customers to use. It offers manifold opportunities for our public service organisations to thrive in challenging times and to re-invent the way they plan and deploy increasingly scarce resources; both human and financial.

Over the last few years there's been a significant focus on the delivery and enablement of e-services in local government. I've worked with many councils who are embracing this agenda, moving towards digital delivery and introducing many new channels through which citizens can interact with them. Understandably, the focus of many transformation and channel shift projects is on the delivery of e-services for customer-facing transactions.

However it's also possible to achieve very substantial cost savings and efficiency gains by applying the same principles of automation and self-service to back office internal processes. Indeed, it can sometimes be the case that there are easier and quicker wins to be had by addressing the automation of back office processes first and then applying the same principles to customer-facing transactions. Yet overwhelmingly the focus is on the front end with relatively few organisations really seeing the opportunities that back office automation presents.

Is it now time for local authorities to think about transformation, channel shift and technology enablement far deeper into their processes? Spoiler alert – at Abavus we think the answer to this question is a resounding and emphatic yes!

At Abavus we have had the privilege of supporting and enabling UK local authorities to tackle both internal and customer-facing automation. Having worked on many internal automation projects now we've learnt that the channel shift and automation of internal processes delivers very significant returns not only in terms of saving money and making more efficient use of resources but also in of delivering improved services. This last one is key. It's often assumed that internal automation is just about saving money and being more efficient, but that's not the case. It's also about delivering better services to the end customer. It really is win/win, for managers, staff and customers.

An example of this can be seen in a recent project that we worked on with Stafford Borough Council, who wanted to automate much of their Streetscene (part of the Council's Environmental Health Department) workflow and processes. Here are a few of the headlines:

- **Faster and more accurate reporting of jobs** – by giving staff access to mobile reporting channels (rather than the paper-based system they had previously used), the team is now able to capture, process and resolve service requests both more quickly and more efficiently. The process of reporting jobs operate much more smoothly now with virtually none of the paperwork, delays and duplication of effort which were features of the previous system.

- **Dealing with problems before the public notice them** – the new technology enables many more incidents to be noticed, captured onto the system and dealt with before a single complaint or notification from a member of the public is raised. This shows that the investment in mobile working has not only resulted in internal efficiencies but also led to much better public-facing service delivery.

- **More information about tasks and less duplicated effort –** time, resources and money are all saved because issues are captured, recorded and resolved correctly the first time around. The new system enables the instant collection of much more data about an incident (such as geographically tagging it to the correct location, storing photographs and other useful information) so staff know what they're dealing with and can find and solve the problems much more quickly than was possible before.

Our experience of working on this project (and others like it) has shown us how much local authorities have to gain by looking at the automation of their internal processes, not just in terms of financial savings but also in terms of improving the customer experience. Don't think that channel shift is just about moving customers towards new channels. Giving your staff access to new channels can be just as effective a way of achieving transformation.

At Abavus we are big fans of mobile working. We firmly believe mobile working offers a massive opportunity for local government organisations, not only to reduce costs but also to speed up processes, work more flexibly and efficiently and significantly improve customer service. There's benefit both for employees who tend to find it motivating and empowering, and also for customers who see things getting done more quickly and effectively. In short, it's win win. That said, mobile working does come with risks that organisations need to be aware of before making the transition.

What are the risks associated with mobile working?

The biggest risk associated with mobile working comes from the fact that mobile working means that you have information stored and transmitted outside of your secure onsite network environment. Mobile workers may be using devices with relatively limited security features as well as wifi networks that you don't control. On top of this, mobile working means that your staff are using their devices offsite, perhaps in public environments where they can be overlooked, and of course there's always the chance that someone will lose their device or that it'll be stolen. In summary, the key risks associated with mobile working are as follows:-

- **Mobile devices being lost or stolen** – phones and other mobile devices can be highly vulnerable to being stolen because they're powerful and high value items. Additionally, they're easy things for people to lose.

- **Being overlooked** – it's common for mobile working to involve employees using their devices in public places. This means that they can be overlooked, with the possibility that sensitive or confidential information can be viewed by people who are not authorised to see it.

- **Loss of credentials** – most mobile devices offer the possibility to store one's access credentials in some way or other, perhaps in a browser or through keychain software. This then means that if the device gets stolen and the thief is able to access it, they may also be able to then access your organisation's network and the tools on it.

- **Tampering with devices** – if employees leave their devices unattended at any time the possibility exists that an attacker could then insert malicious hardware or software onto it, with a view to monitoring user activity or compromising organisational security in some other way.

- **Accidental compromising of security configurations** – depending on how their devices are set up, it may be possible for non-expert users to inadvertently make changes to their security settings which can then open up the device to the possibility of external attack from hackers.

How can the risks of mobile working best be managed?

It's critical that if you're already using mobile working in your organisation or you're considering it that you have a proper mobile working security policy in place. This will cover things such as who is able to work offsite and what devices they have access to as well as the type of information that is stored on or can be accessed by mobile devices, and how mobile device use is going to be monitored and controlled. As a starting point I'd strongly recommend that you consider the following ideas:

- **User education and awareness** – this is critical. Your users need to be trained on how to use their devices safely and securely before they're allowed to use them in the field. They need to be aware of what the risks are and the steps they should take to avoid them. There needs to be a clear security protocol which users understand and are able to apply every time they use their mobile devices.

- **Protect sensitive data** – think about what data actually needs to be on the devices themselves and, wherever possible, keep this to a minimum. The device should only contain the data that's needed for the specific activity that's being performed. Users shouldn't be able to access data that isn't relevant to the tasks they themselves perform. If the device supports it, it's a good idea to ensure that all the data is encrypted so that even if the device does fall into the wrong hands, the data's not vulnerable.

- **Protect data when it's in transit** – one of the times that information is most vulnerable is when the user is transmitting data to and from your organisation's network. If they're offsite when they're doing this then the chances are that they're using an unsecured public network to do so, with the attendant risks that poses. Consider protecting the device and the information in transit by setting up a virtual public network (VPN) over which information is exchanged.

- **Technology and encryption** – you should ensure that your provider or your IT team (if you're doing things yourselves) is using Advanced Encryption Standards. What follows is not an exhaustive checklist but you should be looking for the use of Transport Layer Security (TLS) 1.2 protocol formerly Secure Socket Layer and now generally referred to as SSL for all data communications. This ensures privacy between software applications and your users on the Internet. Confirm that all data packets transmitted are encrypted as well by private public key and further encapsulated by industry standard SSL layer. It is the combination of these various cryptographic protocols that will provide the high levels of security required when data is in transit.

- **Review your organisation's incident plan** – even with all the best security protocols in place there will be times when things go wrong, perhaps for unforseen reasons. When that happens it's critical that you have a robust incident plan in place so everyone knows what needs to be done and who is going to do it.

- **Remote disabling of devices** – wherever possible you should set up your mobile working devices in such a way that they can be remotely disabled in the event that one is lost or stolen. At the very least you should be able to prevent a particular device from being able to access your corporate network once it's been reported as lost or stolen.

Stafford Borough Council serves approximately 130,000 residents in 55,000 homes, who rely on the many services it provides. Streetscene is part of the Borough's Environmental Health Service. It looks after the Borough's public spaces, ranging from cleaning public areas, removing fly tips, cleaning up graffiti and removing dead animals through to litter picking, road sweeping and grass cutting.

Drivers of mobile working at Stafford Borough Council

Historically Streetscene managed job service requests through its corporate CRM system. Members of the public would report incidents by phone to the Streetscene call centre at which point call centre staff would enter details of the job onto the back office system.

Senior supervisors would then print out paper copies of each day's job sheets and pass them to the appropriate team to do the work. If operatives noticed additional tasks that needed doing whilst they were out on their rounds they would record them using a paper-based system of referral sheets.

Streetscene required a system which would solve a number of problems that were caused by the paper-based system:

- The existing system relied on operatives completing the paperwork correctly and returning it at the end of each day so that the job could be signed off on the system. From time to time paperwork would disappear meaning jobs remained open on the system long after they had actually been completed.

- The paper-based system did not encourage any ownership of tasks and responsibilities and relied on senior supervisors to remember to whom they had allocated each job in order to be able to chase up missing paperwork and incomplete tasks.

- Supervisors would wait for a full day's worth of tasks to come in before printing them out and allocating them to operatives to work on during the next day, so there was a minimum of 24 hours delay between a member of the public reporting an incident and the time that it could be dealt with by Streetscene.

- The system relied heavily on a great many phone calls between the management teams, supervisors and operatives in the field. Staff from the call centre were phoning jobs through to managers, who would then phone through to field operatives to carry out the work, meaning that there was no formal record of the work having been requested or done.

- Field operatives regularly came across other jobs that needed doing whilst they were out in the field. For example they might come across an animal carcass whilst out on a litter pick. In this situation they would pick up the animal carcass and then complete a paper referral sheet to record the task as an additional item of work done for that day. The paper referral sheets were then passed to the contact centre who entered the jobs onto the system and then immediately closed it off to prevent it coming through as a repeat job. This was a time consuming and unreliable process and meant that tasks were often dealt with in the field but then not recorded on the system until sometime later, or even not at all.

In 2012 Streetscene engaged consultants to review its performance and identify areas for improvement. The issue of how jobs were handled via the CRM system was identified as key. The department wanted to find ways to cut down the time between a job being reported and being dealt with and to make the whole process much leaner using some kind of electronic automation. They identified a number of companies that could deliver such an electronic solution to replace their paper-based system, of which Abavus was one. After a due diligence phase Abavus was appointed to install its My Council Services mobile worker module in the Streetscene department.

> "The main thing for us was that Abavus had done this before and had obviously been doing it for quite a while, and well. They gave us referral sites, we spoke to the other sites and all the feedback from them was positive. Abavus offered a proven solution and they were willing to work with us and develop with us and not just offer an off the peg solution. The scope of the project has expanded considerably over time and the fact that Abavus were willing to go "yes, fine, no problem" was absolutely vital to us. It's made our lives a lot easier – nothing's ever been too much trouble. To be honest, Abavus have absolutely bent over backwards to do stuff for us and to get us to the position we're currently in and we're more than grateful for that."
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> — Spencer Cooper - Information Systems and Technical Support Team Leader

Details of the project

Phase one

The project began in January 2014. Teams from Abavus and Staffordshire Borough Council worked together to enable Abavus to fully understand Staffordshire's process and requirements. Work also began on developing a piece of 'middleware' which would enable the My Council Services product to be integrated with the Council's existing Lagan CRM system in order to create an end-to-end process. Work then began on creating a mobile app and back office system with Staffordshire's branding and processes embedded within it. Abavus trained a core team of 'super users' within the Streetscene team who would act as ambassadors for the project, as well as rolling out training to all the operatives who would be using the app.

Phase two

During February and March 2014 a small team of test users began field testing the product. As a result of this testing some additional requirements were identified, such as the need to overlay geographic boundary data into the app to enable automatic distribution of tasks to the correct location-based team. Thorough testing at this stage ensured that the final product was completely customised to Staffordshire's needs. After some final user acceptance testing the system was fully deployed to the entire department in June 2014 and was successfully embedded.

Next steps

The success of the mobile worker launch has acted as a proof of concept and shown that the My Council Services suite of modules can help the Council deliver very significant savings whilst enhancing customer service at the same time.

The next stage of the project is for the Streetscene team to introduce the citizen-facing version of the app. Currently the My Council Services mobile worker module is being used as part of the back office systems however in the next phase the citizen-facing self-service app will be launched, enabling citizens to report incidents and tasks that require the team's attention quickly and simply from their phones (or web browsers) without having to take the time to call the contact centre.

As a result of the success of the mobile worker launch within Streetscene the Council is now looking for other areas of its operation that might benefit from both the mobile worker and public-facing elements of the service and the decision has been made to roll out the Customer Self-Service and Digital Access module through the whole Council.

Spencer Cooper and Phil Bates, key drivers of the project from within Stafford Borough Council, won its annual innovation award for their work in adopting My Council Services Mobile Worker.

How Stafford Borough Council has benefited from mobile working

Quicker and more efficient handling of tasks

"It's much more efficient and jobs are dealt with in real time now. Before, we had this 24 hour time lag before we printed jobs off. Then unless you had a very good memory you couldn't necessarily remember who you'd given a particular job to, or when you'd given it to them and when they were supposed to complete it. My Council Services has all that stuff built in so you don't have to remember everything. Everything is automated.

Previously requests to deal with fly tips would come in to the contact centre, be logged on the system and then sent out to environmental enforcement officers who would change the queue on the Lagan CRM system in order to provide a job to the street team who would then go out and collect the fly tip. Now the system has completely changed. Any fly tip that gets reported, whether it's coming from the app, the operatives have put it in to the system themselves or the contact centre have raised a job from a call from the public, all go via My Council Services to one central device held by an enforcement offices in Environmental Services. From there, tasks are automatically allocated to the appropriate geographical team who get an email notification which pops up immediately on their phones. In minutes they can know there's a fly tip, look at photos of it if any have been submitted, then pick it up straight away. It's really neat. It's made the whole process really efficient."

— Phil Bates - Streetscene Area Co-ordinator

Staff taking more pride in their work

"There's a real air of responsibility now because the right jobs are going to the right people, and because it's in real time that means that people can deal with tasks within a very short timeframe.

The operatives have taken pride in using the MCS system. Initially we rolled the system out to just a handful of people to see whether it worked. Now we have 28 devices using it and we get regular requests from operatives who don't yet have phones to be added to the system. The volume of referrals put onto the system by the operatives themselves has been astronomical and they seem much more comfortable with the electronic system than they were with the paper system.

Streetscene has always been a bit like a secret service. We don't blow our own trumpets a great deal – we just go out and deal with stuff and that's that. We hope that when we go public with the citizen-facing app soon that it will raise the profile of the service and what it is that we do."

— Phil Bates - Streetscene Area Co-ordinator

Enhanced performance against key metrics

"We measure performance figures around things like volume of work, requests through contact centre, how many referrals we raised as a service area, and we report on end-to-end times for particular service requests. We can easily see how we're performing with the app and you can quite clearly see that it's an absolute no brainer in terms of comparison between where we were and where we are now."

— Phil Bates - Streetscene Area Co-ordinator

Phil Bates – Streetscene Area Co-ordinator

Integration with existing systems

"It's easy for us to roll out the system more widely as we've already got the integration in place between My Council Services and our front end Lagan system. Bringing other elements of My Council Services on board isn't going to be difficult as the integration is already there."

— Spencer Cooper - Information Systems and Technical Support Team Leader

Summary of key benefits

- **Less paperwork** – The app has now replaced the paper-based referral system completely. When field operatives come across additional jobs that need doing whilst out on their rounds the app enables them to raise the job electronically via their phones then and there and then immediately close it off without needing to involve the contact centre at all.

- **Quicker and more accurate reporting of jobs** – Prior to the launch of the app field operatives were submitting between 70 and 80 jobs per month via the referral sheets. They are now using the app to log details of between 200 and 250 jobs per month. Details of jobs are entered onto the system at the point at which the operative spots what needs doing rather than waiting until the end of the day or the next day to be entered onto the system by the contact centre. This means that there are no more duplicate tasks as jobs are entered onto the system in real time.

- **Automatic allocation of tasks to the right team –** Streetscene uses area-based working with particular teams of operatives focusing on their own dedicated areas. By using the MCS mobile worker app, incoming tasks can be automatically allocated to the correct geographic team and sent out to them via their mobile devices in real time.

- **More information about tasks and less duplicated effort –** The MCS system includes mapping functionality so that the geographic location of an incident can be automatically recorded. This means that if an incident is logged by a field operative and then at some later point a member of the public alerts the contact centre to the same incident, the contact centre operators can see by looking at a map that the incident is already on the system. Under the old system two separate jobs relating to the same incident would have been logged, leading to duplication of time and effort.

- **Issues being dealt with before they are noticed by the public –** More and more jobs are being put onto the system by operatives rather than being called into the contact centre by members of the public. Increasingly, when a citizen calls in to report an issue they are told that the council is already dealing with it. Issues are being dealt with much more quickly than was previously the case and communication between the council and its citizens has hugely improved.

Talk to us about your mobile working needs

Contact us today to find out more about how our innovative My Council Services suite of products can work for you.

Learn more

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