

Spirit makes life easier for ABP's meter readers



Handheld data capture devices have transformed a vast array of tasks that were previously carried out manually. One example is meter reading. When Associated British Ports was looking for a handheld unit for measuring and billing the energy use of its tenants, it consulted Spirit Data Capture Limited. Spirit recommended the M3 Orange rugged PDA, which has streamlined the process whilst also boosting the accuracy and reliability of the readings.

Associated British Ports (ABP) is the UK's leading port operator and owns 21 ports (and other transport-related businesses) in England, Scotland, and Wales. The group handles approximately a quarter of the UK's seaborne trade. Each port has a large number of tenants, who consume electricity or water and have to be billed by ABP for their energy use.

The Projects team, part of the group's IT department, recently explored more effective ways of measuring the tenants' energy and of billing them. This led to the roll out of new billing and consumption management software. Business Analyst, Baljit Rakkar, explains: "Previously, our meter readers would use meter books to record the readings. These were then manually typed into a legacy billing application. We decided to change from the old method to avoid this duplication of effort, to improve the validation of the readings and to simplify the whole reading and billing process."

The team then started looking for a versatile handheld solution that would interface directly with the new software. Baljit continues: "One of the most important aspects we were looking for was ruggedness, as these devices will be used in harsh working conditions on the docks. They also needed to be very reliable, as our meter readers take readings from 200 to 300 meters over a period of just a few days."

The ABP Projects team conducted a Google search of possible suppliers and came across an established independent consultancy, Spirit Data Capture Limited. Spirit recommended

M3 Orange devices, and also suggested that ABP should try some specialist mobile meter reading software from Winton Consulting. The M3 Orange is a lightweight but very rugged and durable PDA with an IP rating of 65. It has a choice of operating systems as well as Bluetooth, WLAN and GSM / GPRS / 3G connectivity.

Baljit comments: "The M3's specifications met all of our needs and we particularly liked its ruggedness and its battery life. We have recently started using the software in our South Wales ports. Our meter readers are exporting handheld tours from Optima billing software into the mobile readers. The tour is then synched over using GPRS. The meter reader collects the readings and then synchs them back to the hosted mobile readers solution ready for review.

"Our meter readers find the M3 devices easy to use and carry. One of the main benefits is that anyone can go and read a meter by swiping the barcode - so they don't need to know anything about the meter itself."

Spirit has also been providing support for the M3 handheld devices. Baljit concludes: "Spirit's service has been really good. They were very helpful in recommending the devices and showed the best options for the specific requirement we had. They also recommended the mobile readers software, which we otherwise wouldn't have found. We fully intend to use Spirit again in the future for any other handheld requirements we might have."

