

Wireless flatlands for North Lincs



North Lincolnshire Homes' head of ICT, Mike Eckersley (left) with Edgar Lunpum, technical specialist for network, telephony and security

The flat landscape of Lincolnshire has provided an unexpected solution to North Lincolnshire Homes' need to replace its wide-area network.

As the owner of the three tallest buildings in the area, NLH realised that it was well placed to implement a wireless solution to replace its land cable system. Mike Eckersley, head of ICT, North Lincolnshire Homes, said, "The area is perfect in that it is flat and, luckily, we own the three tallest buildings in Scunthorpe. This meant that we had everything we needed to provide wireless service – flat countryside and the ability to boost the service from the top of our tall buildings."

Working with EISON, an independent network integrator, work on the wireless service began in April 2008 and was finished in May, with only 20 minutes downtime for each office. The licensed microwave solution provides 10Mb links to each office, with a 100Mb backbone from the tower block to NLH's headquarters, replacing its 128k fixed cable from BT. The wireless service is up to 50 times faster than the old system and is saving NLH around £25,000 each year.



Front-line views on mobile working

Valerie Adler, HydeMartlet, and Chris Smith, Blackbay

We know that mobilising your workforce is a good way to drive efficiencies and capture key performance data in real time, all of which are good for your management team. But what is the effect on the workforce itself? How will your operatives react to leaving their paperwork behind and cutting down on their trips into the office?

Here at HydeMartlet, a housing association with operations in Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire, our responsive repairs tradesmen were nervous. Many expressed concerns about having to use 'fancy technology' when they went live with handheld PDAs running Blackbay Housing Connect.

Before going mobile, the tradesmen had to visit the office each day to pick up job tickets and drop off their timesheets. This caused a delay which meant that they often did not arrive at their first job until well into the morning. Now that they're mobile, they visit the office far less often, and can get straight to their first job. This translates into more jobs per day per man.

While that sounds like they are having to work harder, it's not necessarily true. Ray Groves, a plumber for HydeMartlet, said, "Going mobile has really taken the pressure off. I used to get my paper run sheet with all of the day's jobs on it and worry whether I would be able to complete them. Now, as I only receive one job at a time on the handset, I can focus entirely on that. I know that the schedulers back at the office are managing all of the plumbers' diaries, so that everything gets done, even when one of us is over-running."

He added, "The reduction in paperwork has made my life easier, as once I have processed the repair on the handset I can forget about it. Not only that, I can be on my first job first thing in the morning and, depending on where it is, I can even leave home later than I used to and still achieve that."

It's a win-win situation. Our workforce is happy with the new way of working and HydeMartlet is seeing its performance statistics improving, as trade staff are giving their full attention to getting repairs completed at the first visit and schedulers are keeping the workload fairly distributed.

If you're thinking of getting your workforce mobile, help them to see what it will do for them. It is important to remember that people will be anxious about having to work in a new way and you have to manage that change sympathetically. You will win your workforce over by showing them how they too will benefit.

The last word goes to Barry Hocombe, a HydeMartlet carpenter, who said, "I was sceptical about going mobile, but after a couple of days' use, I was comfortable with using the handset. Now I don't have to worry about losing job tickets or materials issue sheets as it's all done automatically. It also means I don't have to make my daily visit to the office. I can just pick up my handset and go."

Valerie Adler is Martlet build implementation manager for HydeMartlet.