

Spirit 'wastes' no time in helping BIFFA

Organisations with large vehicle fleets and field workers often rely on mobile computing solutions to enable them to capture data quickly and effectively. One such company is Biffa Waste Services, which has been using automated data collection for some time. When it decided to upgrade recently, it first went through a very thorough evaluation process. Ultimately, it selected the M3 Sky, a versatile device supplied by Spirit Data Capture.



The M3 Sky rugged, IP64-rated PDA-style mobile computer has been fitted into all of Biffa's service vehicles and is now being used on a daily basis.

Biffa Waste Services is a market leader in the UK's waste management sector. The company provides waste collection, treatment, recycling and disposal services to industrial, commercial and local government customers. This includes the collection of waste from over 70,000 customers and around a million households. Biffa is also a significant provider of renewable energy.

The company runs a fleet of some 1200 waste collection trucks. Some years ago, these were fitted with Biffa's own data collection system, BINS (Biffa In Cab Notification System). This enabled Biffa to provide real-time

confirmation of its services to its customers, via the corporate intranet. Each servicing depot was also able to follow the progress of its trucks and the status of each job on a specially designed screen.

A fresh approach

BINS was developed from an SMS messaging service, which then progressed to XDAs (Windows Mobile PDA phones), with GPRS-activated SIM cards and integral cameras. This provided the company with real-time service information, including photos. Unfortunately, the hardware was unable to cope with the rigours of a harsh working environment and became unreliable. Biffa's Traffic Office personnel and its drivers often struggled to keep the devices functional.

The company therefore started looking for alternative solutions. When it had

previously purchased the XDAs, one of the suppliers it had considered was an independent consultancy, Spirit Data Capture. Although Biffa had chosen a solution from another supplier, the company had been impressed by Spirit's professionalism and technical expertise. It therefore selected them as one of a group of potential suppliers.

"Spirit soon proved themselves as being more than capable, and were quickly selected as our sole supplier," commented Brian Lancaster, business systems analyst for Biffa Waste Services. "We wanted a device that would give us all of the functionality of the XDA, but which would be more suitable and more reliable. We also wanted a unit that used a Windows Mobile operating system and incorporated GPS and WiFi capabilities. It needed to have a good screen size, to be rugged but compact, and also easy to use." >>



Lancaster continued: "Spirit offered us several devices to try out, but we settled on a choice of two, one of which was from M3 Mobile. We sent samples of both devices to our nationwide depots and the potential users were given a feedback form to complete. A large majority of users selected the M3 Mobile unit as their preferred option, due mainly to its size, weight and ease of handling. An added advantage was that the vehicle cradles were much easier to fit in a wide range of trucks and it had an RS232 facility for capturing weight data."



The roll-out

The latest model of the M3 Mobile devices – the M3 Sky – was subsequently fitted into all of Biffa's service vehicles and is now being used on a daily basis. The M3 is a rugged, IP64-rated PDA-style mobile computer. Over 200,000 are in use by customers across the world. The M3 Sky has a range of sophisticated features and includes Windows Mobile 5.0 and an integrated GPS module. Spirit helped by carrying out all of the staging for Biffa, both importing the product and preparing it fully. This included fitting asset labels and screen protectors; replacing the standard application with Biffa's own software; carrying out a full end-to-end test; and then shipping the units directly to the site.

To reduce paperwork, route information is uploaded onto the new M3 Sky devices via GPRS or Ethernet cradles for each shift. The range of applications available with the M3 Mobile units provide real-time information covering a variety of areas. These include vehicle safety checks; mileage and driver details; job details; disposal details; image capture; signature capture; and GPS position. The information is displayed on the company's intranet, which is available to depot staff. Customers can also sign up to the email service via the Biffa website.

The six month roll-out of all of the devices was completed in March. "Both Biffa and Spirit are extremely pleased with they way in which this has been achieved," remarked Lancaster. "It

relied heavily on careful planning, trust, and complete co-operation between both of our companies throughout. The users have already given us some very positive feedback about the new devices. Their ruggedness makes them much more suitable and their reliability and additional features are also much appreciated. The M3 Sky units are already helping to reduce our administration costs and are providing more accurate data for invoicing and for optimising routes. The GPRS capability also enables data to be transferred to and from the units in real time."

Future developments

Lancaster concluded: "Throughout the whole process, Spirit have been reliable, helpful, professional, honest and friendly. They're a pleasure to work with, and I would be happy to recommend them to anyone. We've signed up for their Bronze Warranty, which provides us with a very reliable repair service if and when we need it. This gives us a Service Level Agreement with a turnaround of three days. We fully intend to contact Spirit for advice on future developments in our mobile capability." ●



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