

Aquila

Increased efficiency, faster communication, and enhanced visibility are gained over its workforce with General Dynamics Itronix ruggedized notebooks



To upgrade its technology and equip field technicians with a rugged wireless notebook that delivers a multitude of tools, Aquila chose the General Dynamics Itronix GoBook. Reliability, wireless capability, and price were key factors in the decision.

Products

General Dynamics Itronix GoBook III & XR-1

Application

Mobile operations for field technicians

Aquila is an electric and natural gas distribution company based in Kansas City, Missouri, that serves approximately 900,000 customers in five Midwestern states: Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri. To provide safe and effective customer service, the company's Mobile Operations department needs to be able to receive and respond quickly to service requests and emergency orders, and to effectively prioritize work orders while in the field.



Photo courtesy of Aquila

Problem

To keep the lights and the heat on in five states, Aquila dispatches 325 field technicians through its Customer Operations department to repair gas lines, maintain electric services, service meters and appliances. While Aquila has been wireless and paperless for 10 years, the technicians' WalkAbout tablets were not delivering everything that was needed, and the software was becoming obsolete. Aquila needed to upgrade, but concerns about performance and functionality with the newer tablets led the company to research other solutions.

"We put a focus group together consisting of various people throughout the organization—including service technicians—and we examined the Panasonic Toughbook CF29 and the General Dynamics Itronix GoBook III," according to Tim Taylor, business analyst for Aquila. Taylor is responsible for all the computer, software, and training purchases for the company's Mobile Operations department.

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Energy company increases efficiency of its Mobile Operations department and improves customer services with General Dynamics Itronix Products

With the tablets, Aquila technicians had only been able to access and process work orders in the field. "We wanted to give technicians greater capabilities, such as Internet access, updated facility maps, GPS, and access to our internal network," says Taylor.

SOLUTION

In order to upgrade its technology and equip field technicians with rugged wireless notebooks that would provide a multitude of tools and applications, Aquila chose General Dynamics Itronix GoBook III and XR-1 notebooks. Reliability, wireless capability, and price were key factors in the decision.

A few years earlier, the company had purchased six General Dynamics Itronix notebooks that had been extremely reliable. They offered all the wireless tools the company needed, as well as cost advantages over alternative products. So in October 2007, Aquila started a pilot program with the notebooks and by November 2007 the company began deploying them to the entire Customer Operations department. When the implementation is complete, all 325 field service technicians will carry a fully rugged notebook from General Dynamics Itronix.

The notebooks' wireless flexibility provides fast Internet access and e-mail as well as a host of other tools that help field technicians do their job. Not only can they view all their work orders from the road, but they can also see the address and priority of each job, which enables them to effectively plan their routes and change them on the fly as needed throughout the day. Technicians can also access Aquila's internal network to use company applications from afar.

Access to Microsoft® Streets & Trips navigation software helps technicians locate hard-to-find addresses and farm taps. Integrated GPS tools and the ability to download up-to-date facility maps help them pinpoint gas lines and transformers to fix leaks and outages.

"Our previous tablets had wireless access over analog dial-up, so technicians could send and receive work orders, but the connection was slow," says Taylor. "With the General Dynamics Itronix notebooks, we use digital air cards on wireless networks such as Verizon, Alltel, and AT&T, which provide fast Internet access and fully integrated GPS. Not only can technicians locate and complete jobs more effectively, but the dispatchers are also more efficient because they can dispatch the closest service technician for each work order."

IT can even access the notebooks remotely to troubleshoot issues, download log files, and install updates. "In the past, technicians had to connect to a LAN when they were in the office and stay connected for 20–30 minutes to download security patches or required updates," according to Taylor. "Now IT can log into notebooks while our technicians are on the road and install updates while they are traveling from one job to another."

Aquila also wanted a rugged notebook that could withstand the rigors of field work. Technicians often experience some rough rides when working in rural areas as their trucks bounce and vibrate across unpaved roads and farms. In addition, work sites are far from clean. Dirt, dust, and other irritants abound, and technicians can't be worried about keeping their equipment clean while trying to make repairs or restore service. The General Dynamics Itronix notebooks stand up to rugged terrain, extreme temperatures, vibration, water and dust intrusion, altitude and pressure changes, and even accidental drops. The unit is fully sealed to prevent damage from outside contaminants and has been extensively tested to ensure it can survive in real-world field situations.

RESULTS

Increased efficiency, faster communication, and enhanced screen viewability are just some of the benefits Aquila has been reaping since equipping its Customer Operations department with General Dynamics Itronix notebooks. With dispatchers fielding large volumes of work requests and technicians responding to as many as 50 job orders per day, speed and efficiency are key to providing good customer service.



"The system is so much faster now," says Taylor. "Our dispatchers can fill service requests much more efficiently because they can see where the field technicians are and assign jobs to the most logical resource. And our field technicians can better prioritize work orders and make repairs faster thanks to the advanced tools and reliability that the General Dynamics Itronix notebooks deliver."



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