As the workforce becomes wireless so does the enterprise - or vice versa?

by Jennifer Friedman, VP of Marketing, TOA Technologies

The widespread availability and constantly accelerating expansion of wireless networks and applications, and the intensified development of network-centric hardware and software, offers great opportunities for the enterprise, but they will have to rethink their operations and policies to obtain them. Increasing employee use of smartphones, netbooks and laptops is just the beginning; but to make the best use of them enterprises need to look at mobility as a strategic option and not just another tool.

Jennifer Friedman is Vice President of Marketing at TOA Technologies. Prior to TOA, Ms Friedman served as the Vice President of Marketing and Customer Acquisition for Clear, the fast pass for airport security. Previously Ms Friedman spent more than 11 years at American Express culminating in her role as Vice President of Global Marketing in the Travel Division.

Jennifer Friedman has a degree in history from Cornell University and a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University.

The age-old question of the chicken and the egg might very well be applied to the professional world: Has the employee become mobile because the enterprise went wireless, or has the enterprise gone mobile because the employee did so? Whatever the answer is - the modern American workforce is increasingly more mobile, and so are companies. According to an IDC forecast (Worldwide Mobile Worker Population 2009-2013 Forecast) 75.5 per cent of the global workforce, or 119.7 million workers, will be on the move when accessing enterprise systems by 2013. With this number, the US will remain the most highly mobile workforce in the world. The challenge for enterprises is how to embrace mobility with the same intensity that the consumer market has.

As wireless technologies and user behaviour evolve, enterprise technologies and applications must change to meet these new needs. Concepts such as cloud-computing and on-demand applications and services give enterprises previously unknown flexibility. New applications and services improve operations out in the field, as well as in the back-office, and enable companies to improve customer service by offering their customers options that change with their usage patterns.

Mobile customers change the way enterprises do business

The past decade has seen a shift in the way we use information technology. Wireless technologies - and the availability of web-enabled mobile devices like smartphones, netbooks and tablet PCs - have opened up a whole new universe and brought the Internet to the user anywhere, anytime. People communicate with their friends, family and colleagues through multiple channels - phone, text, email, social networks - and they do it more frequently than ever before. And consumers are not willing to change this behaviour when dealing with companies they buy goods or services from. They expect high-quality service at any time and communication through their preferred channel. Plus, with information available instantly, they have far less patience than past generations. For consumers, wait has become a four-letter word.

More than any other, companies with large field workforces, or non-office-based mobile workers as IDC calls them in their report (versus office-based mobile workers and home-based mobile workers), are struggling with these expectations. Increasing competition in industries like cable, telecommunications and utilities means customers are now in the driver's seat, and customers who have a poor experience regarding initial installation or delivery are more likely to switch to a competitor and are more likely to have ongoing lower customer satisfaction ratings. What this means is that now, more than ever, the right customer service technology can make or break a business.

Bringing mobile workforce management up to speed with the everything-wireless world

In an 'everything-wireless' world, mobile workforce management (*MWFM*) is one of the essential - although

oftentimes overlooked - pillars of success for an enterprise with a large field workforce. MWFM is undergoing a disruptive transformation, driven by heightened expectations of customers, new technologies and the speed of the Internet. In this context, cloud-based, on-demand Software-as-a-Service (*SaaS*) solutions are ideal for the mission-critical tasks of managing technicians and customer communications. They do not require major up-front costs, are quick to deploy and automatically updated. Because Return-on-Investment (*ROI*) is more quickly realized with SaaS than traditionally installed software, Gartner estimates initial project savings of 25 to 40 per cent due to the shedding of expensive licensing fees, burdensome installations and in-house tech support.

The divide between companies that embrace cloud-based solutions and those that remain offline grows wider with every new web-enabled smartphone or on-demand feature made available. One recent example is the iPad. Within a few months of its launch, it has dramatically changed the way consumers and companies use the Internet. An enterprise that utilizes SaaS for mobile workforce scheduling, routing and communications can realize previously unobtainable savings and efficiencies in a few months versus years with traditionally installed applications. Web-based systems can also be updated immediately and can scale to match company growth without needing major capital investment, because the flexibility of cloud solutions allows them to be integrated with existing systems far more easily than installed applications. To remain competitive, enterprises need to embrace these new devices and the power of the cloud or else risk failing their customers and losing revenue.

Connecting the technology with the business and the customer

When deploying a mobile workforce management solution, companies have two overarching business objectives. One is to increase efficiency and reduce cost by optimizing the workflow between the field and dispatchers. The second objective is to improve customer satisfaction by leveraging the appointment as a relationship-building opportunity. For many MWFM solutions these are separate initiatives, both in terms of business process and technology. However, companies should embrace more holistic technologies that address these dual business objectives within one modular platform and unify the workflow and customer appointment processes.

In order to achieve the two-fold objectives, companies are finding the following business requirements essential in a mobile workforce management solution:

- ability to address both contract and non-contract mobile employees;
- rapid implementation;
- ease of use with minimal training and maintenance;
- flexible pricing that can be paid for with the operating budget;
- continuous software updates deployed instantly.

Companies looking for a solution to address these requirements find a new approach in mobile workforce management. Rather than simply delivering work orders to field employees, MWFM optimizes the mobile workforce with a focus on the most critical touch point - the customer appointment event. The approach utilizes mobile technology, predictive analytics, and automated interactive customer communications to increase operational efficiencies and improve the customer experience at the same time.

Figure: A holistic approach to mobile workforce management puts the customer at the centre of the appointment management process

It's all about predicting as accurately as possible how long an appointment will take - based on factors like the skill set of mobile employees, location, traffic conditions and job history - and proactively telling the customer about his/her appointment status through regular communication. Mobile technologies and web-based cloud technologies are the backbone of any solution that aims to achieve this, allowing enterprises to collect, process and use real-time information to achieve a high degree of accuracy. Customers greatly value this accuracy when they wait just one hour for an appointment instead of wasting half a day or more of their valuable time not knowing when the visit will happen. Companies using a mobile workforce management solution have oftentimes experienced a surge in customer satisfaction ratings, because customers appreciate service providers who understand and respect their busy, mobile lifestyles.

With cloud-based mobile workforce management on the path to success

Considering the size of the American mobile workforce, the potential for improvement is huge. Gartner estimates 30 per cent of new customer service and support applications will be delivered via SaaS by 2012. With 70 per cent still being delivered as installed applications, we will see those enterprises using on-demand services and web-based applications profiting immensely, outperforming their competitors. In fact, some already do. Cox Communications, the third largest cable company in the US with over 6.2 million subscribers, has deployed a cloud-based solution to manage its field workforce of 7000 technicians in 17 states. The cable provider has achieved a 98 per cent satisfaction rate among its customers, rising from 84 per cent. In addition, Cox was able to realize considerable cost reductions amounting to US$60 million in annual savings or US$18,000 per technician annually. Technicians also worked 13 per cent more productively while at the same time driving 27 per cent miles less - not only saving money for fuel but also protecting the environment. Another company, Arhaus Furniture, has even more fully embraced mobile technologies as a part of their business strategy. They constantly look to improve their customer service and their operations with the latest technologies and in doing so have been successful pioneers in the furniture industry for many years. Their latest coup is to deploy Apple's iPad to its delivery drivers. They have already implemented a holistic mobile workforce management solution and with a customized iPad app they take it one step further to implement a paperless environment, saving tons of paper and about US$100,000 annually in addition to the cost-reductions already achieved.

Embracing mobility as a business strategy can have an immensely positive impact on business performance - by achieving unparalleled cost-savings and driving customer satisfaction to yet unknown heights. The everything-wireless world is full of opportunities enterprises just have to take. ●