



Goulburn Valley Water revolutionises meter-reading process with mobile solution



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- Gail Hines,
Manager of Revenue and Billing,
GVW

Company Overview

Goulburn Valley Water (GVW) is a statutory water management authority formed in early 1995. It has successfully integrated 23 smaller water boards to become Victoria's largest manager of urban water supply and wastewater treatment in the state's food bowl heartland. GVW provides world standard urban water and wastewater services to a population of more than 118,000 people. It covers 55,454 properties in 55 towns and cities from the outskirts of Melbourne in the south of Victoria to the Murray River in the north. GVW meter readers visit each property three times a year and collect 150,000 meter readings per annum.



The Challenge: An inefficient outdated system

GVW's previous meter reading system ran on an aging PDA system. This meant that the meter readers had to physically come into head office to download readings and upload new work to the device.

Gail Hines, Manager of Revenue and Billing at GVW explains, "Our previous system wasn't designed for meter reading – it was just a data storage unit. Therefore, the meter readers would spend much of their day travelling to and from head office to update the PDAs with more reading rounds.

"Additionally, specific problems encountered by readers would be noted on scraps of paper and handed in at head office. Due to the age and lack of flexibility of the previous system it was difficult to record information, which led to inaccuracies in reporting incidents. This in turn affected our ability to service our customers.

"GVW needed a system that would be compatible with our existing meter reading program but upload completed work and download new work remotely. We also needed a mobile phone facility so the meter readers could have ready access to head office," added Gail.

Customer Profile



Company

Goulburn Valley Water (GVW)

Location

Victoria, Australia

Industry

Utilities

Products

MC70 mobile computer

Partner

Thinking Windows

Solution

Field service automation for meter reading

Benefits

Ability to receive and complete reading rounds in the field has led to increased efficiency, accuracy, cost savings and improved OH&S

Another challenge that Gail wanted to solve was Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) issues. "Meter readers work out in the field by themselves and often encounter hazards such as snakes or wild animals. We needed to find a solution that would provide the meter readers with a communication tool that they could use in an emergency. This meant finding a solution that was capable of providing, voice, data, and email, while ensuring that customer data remained secure."

The Solution: Rugged handheld MC70 mobile devices with customised software

GVW went to the market to look at available solutions. After evaluating a number of handheld devices, it chose Motorola's MC70 mobile computers.

"We chose the MC70's because it best met our requirements. On a technical side it provided the voice and data capabilities we needed, such as a mobile phone and email, and on a logistical side it was rugged and durable, but not awkward or heavy," said Gail.

Thinking Windows, a software integration provider, worked in partnership with GVW to write AquaRead, a meter reading application specifically for the MC70's that could function independently in the field. The system uses Web Services for communications, an Embedded SQL Server database for storage and Microsoft Mobile 5 for the operating system.

"The device connects to Microsoft Outlook, which enables the meter reading schedules to be sent directly from head office to the meter readers via email. The meter readers can then key in readings and send them back straight from the field," said Gail.

Thinking Windows' AquaRead software gives the MC70 the capacity to address customer data privacy concerns by ensuring all operations on the device require the operator to be authenticated. All downloads and uploads to the corporate web service require a digital certificate together with user ID and password credentials. Should a unit be lost in the field, it is pre-programmed to automatically wipe all information.

When it comes to storage, the MC70 has a large central storage capability and an additional 2GB card to ensure back-up space is available if necessary.

"The new solution took a little while to implement as we had to train all of the meter readers to use the new equipment. However, the support that we received from Motorola and Thinking Windows was excellent, and the MC70's have now become communications centres for the meter readers.

"The solution itself is revolutionary. We are one of the first water authorities to roll out this type of system," adds Gail.

Results: MC70 mobility provides efficiency, accuracy and a more professional working environment

Following the roll out of the MC70's at GVW, several key issues have been resolved.

"The MC70's allow us to provide a more professional environment for our meter reader as they are connected to head office via email and phone at all times. Also they have less to carry in the field," said Gail.

"Our meter readers are now far more efficient and they can do more work as they don't have to make lengthy journeys to and from head office. The cost savings achieved as a result of less vehicles and travel time has ensured a quick return on investment. Additionally, meter readers are paid for what they read, so the solution means they can receive more work whilst out in the field.

"The solution has also improved Occupational Health and Safety as we can provide better information to the meter readers, such as sending hazard warnings in advance. Also due to the MC70's mobile phone function, readers can seek help quickly in an emergency. This is important because meter readers are out in the field alone.

"The streamlined system has provided cost savings in terms of time saved in office administration. Invoices are being generated up to two days in advance of the previous system and the information is more accurate. This is good for customers as it means we can provide a more accurate, secure, and speedy service."

"The solution is all that we wanted and more. In the future we are planning to incorporate GPS locations and introducing RF (radio frequency) meters. This is useful for meters that are difficult or dangerous to access, such as those in large pits, cellars, underneath flooring or in locked properties," concludes Gail.



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