

Eandis Mobile PCs

Lessons from an in-field mobile solution reveal wish-list of services to come

While many IT solutions and services are designed for, and around, office use, mobile IT solutions for business are becoming more and more common. But mobile users have very different needs, which standard solutions and services for office-based users don't always address. Luc Van Durme, ICT Service Delivery Manager of utility services company Eandis, has been working for 2 years to ensure that the needs of Eandis' 1600 mobile users are met. And while he has found answers to some of the problems, he knows there's still room for improvement – especially from service providers.



Luc Van Durme, ICT Service Delivery Manager, Eandis, presented this case at the Datanews/BELTUG Summit on 14 October, 2010

CHALLENGES

Replacing paper with PC a delicate operation

Eandis has about 1,600 in-field technicians, responsible for new gas and electricity installations for customers, and for solving any problems these customers may have with their installations. In 2008, a project was launched to replace the old paper organisation system used by the technicians with a mobile PC system. Following a successful pilot, the mobile PCs were rolled out in stages. The PCs have everything the technicians need on the road, from a GPS, to an integrated mouse pad, to safety documentation. They provide the technician with all the information for the next customer, including driving directions, and integrate directly into the work van. The 'ruggedised' PCs keep working, even if they get dropped – just one example of thinking through the special needs of mobile workers.

"While the mobile PCs have been successful, we have continued to learn over the past 2 years, and have implemented some changes. Plus, we have determined some additional services that would really help keep our field staff rolling", says Luc.

“Be flexible to change: even the best solutions change, and needs evolve. Plus, the ‘best software/hardware’ isn’t always the best answer for you. Listen to the people using the solution: they will tell you what works.”

Luc Van Durme, ICT Service Delivery Manager, Eandis



Eandis is an operating company that serves the natural gas and electricity distribution network companies in Flanders. It brings electricity and natural gas into homes in 239 towns and communities via pipes and cables connected to the low tension infrastructure. Its more than 87,000 km of electricity net is enough to go around the world twice, while its 38,000 km of natural gas net would go around once as well. In total, Eandis operates 2.4 million electricity connection points and 1.5 million gas connection points. To meet the needs of the end-customers, its call centre handled 2 million calls in 2008: more than 5,200 each day.

SOLUTIONS

Mobile needs require special solutions

Without their mobile PCs, the field technicians cannot work: each one is ‘business critical’ to its user. “In an office, if your computer goes down, you can use another, or do some paperwork: something. If the mobile PC is down, the technician has to come back to the office, which means he isn’t getting to the client.” So the regular service desk SLAs for the office – from 4 hours for business critical up to 16 hours for an individual problem – aren’t viable for the mobile PCs. “ICT must provide immediate service”. Keeping the usage as simple as possible is important, too. “Some of our technicians worked with the paper system for 20 years, and not all of them are IT-oriented. The PCs had everything– all the best hardware and software – but this wasn’t always the best solution for the technicians. For example, we changed GPS system because of user feedback: many streets weren’t included, updates were difficult, and most were used to ‘another’ system, so we switched to that one.” Listening to the users is critical, Luc comments. “They are the ones out there; they know what works or doesn’t – no matter how great we think something is!”

LESSONS LEARNT

Support from service providers critical to move forward

As the solutions and services have evolved to better meet the technicians’ needs, Luc has uncovered more changes he would like to see, especially from the service providers. “Without a connection, the technicians are ‘blind’. We give them better internal SLAs for ICT service, but we need SLAs from the service provider as well– in writing! I want to be able to say that we have a specific time agreement for dealing with a problem.” End-to-end monitoring by the provider, and proactive response to problems, would further help keep technicians on the road, and customers happy.

Luc would also like to be able to keep a store of ‘sleeping’ SIM cards that he can put into use as soon as needed, without paying until they are in service. Finally, he needs a solution for unexpected roaming charges that can crop up when technicians are near Belgium’s border. “I’m working to get these addressed – especially the SLAs – in 2011.”