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Thompson Electric Amps Up Internal Efficiency

By **Samuel Greengard** | Posted 05-13-2015

Only a few years ago, electrical contractors typically relied on paper and manual processes to handle various tasks, including ticket management, dispatching, field services and route creation and optimization. In many cases, the resulting lack of efficiency led to slower service, increased labor costs and higher operating and fuel costs.

One company taking direct aim at the challenge is Thompson Electric Company, a provider of electrical contracting services in Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota. The firm, which handles everything from large scale construction projects to temporary power services for events or job sites, has turned to iPads and a specialized mobility app to accommodate more than 10,000 annual service requests.

"We had reached a volume of service requests that had made it impossible to use paper," said Pat Smith, service manager for Thompson Electric.

A couple of years ago, things hit a breaking point when the firm landed a contract to install specialized devices on about 11,500 air-conditioning units at residential sites in Northeast Nebraska. A previous software program designed for mobile field use couldn't handle the volume or the specific requirements of the job and the developer wasn't willing to make any changes to the application. Making matters worse, "We were losing data when technicians traveled outside cellular coverage areas," Smith explained.

As a result, Thompson Electric turned to a new mobile solution, TechDispatch, built on the RhoMobile app development platform from Zebra Technologies. After working with the vendor to customize the software, and then testing and piloting it, the firm went live with the application in March 2014. The field app tracks all work orders, organizes them geographically, and sends each technician optimized scheduling and routing information. The iPads incorporate a Bluetooth

barcode scanner, which records serial numbers in the app for error-proof data handling. The technicians can add comments and photos, if necessary.

The result? Thompson Electric now has the ability to track every technician and project–and examine service completion, customer signatures, billing and other tasks on a real-time basis, Smith said. There are no longer gaps in data and the company is able to use the data collected from the app to virtually eliminate missing serial numbers and human data entry errors. The result is a 30-percent reduction in the time required to complete projects. For example, Thompson Electric completed the air-conditioning upgrades in about eight months rather than the 12 months it had taken in the past, Smith said.

But the benefits haven't stopped there. Thompson Electric has witnessed a drop in "lost calls,"where data went missing about a field visit, from about 600 incidents annually to approximately 35 per year. "In the past, we had to run reports to show the status of projects. We would sometimes have to request additional data from customers to verify results. It's something we no longer need to worry about."

In fact, the time spent analyzing reports has dropped from about 18 hours per week to less than four hours. All of this has resulted in a 50-percent reduction in administrative and clerical overhead, Smith said