

IT INVESTMENT PAYS OFF

For many years, mainstream industry has regarded IT as a discipline fundamental to growth and competitiveness. But lift contractors generally have been slow to see the benefits of technical innovation and systems development beyond the actual lift itself. So Apollo Lifts is far from typical in having made IT and communications a key area of investment over the past decade. We saw technology as the best way to enhance efficiency and productivity while also supporting operational and business decision-making. We needed to be responsive, to be fully informed and to be able to analyse our work for both internal and external reporting purposes.

That's why we became the first lift contractor to develop our own bespoke, web-based Service Management System, called Mercury, together with a client portal known as the Digital Dashboard. But that was only the beginning. We also regarded connectivity across the enterprise as essential for optimum performance and proper audit trails, the principle being that field engineers should have instant real-time access to everything they need to know - and need to record - without having to rely on service desk operators as intermediaries. Hence the development of the Pocket Pluto, a handheld PDA that gives every engineer 24/7 access to the Service Management System. Over a fast, secure connection they can:

- Receive full call details on screen
- Update call progress
- Clear down calls
- Access special instructions
- Prioritise and plan call outs and service visits more easily
- Check lift histories
- Cross reference call fault reports
- Access service schedules Input service visit details
- Receive automatic service reminders
- Receive SMS text alerts/messages from helpdesk

This means that the call out desk can focus on incoming client calls and client liaison while the engineers have everything they need information-wise delivered straight to the screen in front of them.

Such an arrangement allows the helpdesk to take more customer calls more quickly and respond in a timely manner to customer queries. They can also be more proactive when it comes to call allocation and management, ensuring that engineers attend and complete jobs as time efficiently as possible. Overall, clients enjoy better access to operators, a more efficient call handling service and a more dynamic performance in the field.

More recently, we have developed Supervisor Saturns, a similar PDA-based interface to the SMS which has been designed specifically to enable supervisors to monitor call outs and engineer activity around the clock, not just in office hours. With so much information at their fingertips, supervisors are now able to be more dynamic in their management of the field team and to adopt a more responsive approach to issues related to call outs and service visits.

With such systems and infrastructure in place, we can take on more work with confidence. The pressure of more calls, more allocations, more progress monitoring, more clear downs is all taken up by the Mercury Service Management System which simultaneously links with the engineers' Plutos and supervisors' Saturns. Moreover, we can remain cost-effective - head count on the service desk does not have to increase in line with units taken under contract, as automation allows the handling of more calls in less time.

But perhaps the boldest step was the development in 2004 of the client portal, the Digital Dashboard. Allowing clients free and ready access to a whole wealth of call out and service data plus a range of management reports, analyses and statistics was a brave decision but one that has been vindicated by client opinion, improved relationships and a competitive edge that has helped the Apollo portfolio double in the last three years.

It just goes to show that it really does pay to invest.

Martin Bettridge
Managing director
Apollo Lifts
E: martin.bettridge@apollo-lifts.co.uk