Data Collection

U.S. Postal Service streamlines incident reporting with quality results

The United States Postal Service (USPS) delivers hundreds of millions of letters and packages a year in the United States and around the world. To manage this capacity, the USPS contracts commercial airlines to transport mail, most of which is bundled into mail receptacles, such as bags, crates, or trays. The USPS and the airlines strive to provide the best possible service, but receptacles are sometimes mishandled or damaged.

When this occurs, USPS ramp clerks, located out on the tarmac to monitor mail flow and airline performance, create "incident reports" to document problems. These critical reports provide a way to detect and reduce mishandling, offering USPS the data and leverage to alter routes, change airlines, and assess fines, as needed.

Until recently, a paper-based process logged incidents days or weeks after the fact. It was prone to error and often contained incomplete or illegible information. At times, the months-long process from data collection to airline resolution compromised the quality of service and potential collection of large sums of money. The USPS looked for a better way to monitor vendor performance.

Together with CIBER, www.ciber.com, a Colorado-based systems integrator, the USPS chose the rugged, portable, and inexpensive Symbol SPT 1730 barcode scanning devices based on the Palm Computing® platform, coupled with ScoutMTS 3.0 software from Riverbed Technologies. Today, when a ramp clerk discovers a problem, he or she simply scans the receptacle's barcode to capture information such as date, airline, and flight number. Pull-down menus and pick-lists, which capture only relevant information, have streamlined the data collection process even further.

At the end of the day, ramp clerks place their Symbol devices in an Ethernet cradle and upload the data to the USPS central database via the USPS intranet. "We wanted to be able to record the incident at the place discovered, by the person who discovered it – all at one time without having to transcribe any information," says Clayton Bonnell, USPS Manager of International Operations. "The ability to easily synchronize our data, from a wide number of locations, is a huge advantage. Now, accurate tracking information can be accessed at any time by managers around the country."

Initially developed to track U.S. mail sent to foreign destinations, USPS has expanded the solution to 80 airports around the country to track domestic deliveries. According to Bonnell, "Using the Symbol devices, we will probably save a month's worth of data-entry time. Additionally, incident reports are getting to the airlines within days instead of months." Bonnell expects the USPS to see a return-on-investment for the 1,000 Symbol devices within just six months.

Enterprise: United States Postal Service

Industry: Worldwide Mail Delivery

Application: Mail tracking system delivers timely and complete information for monitoring vendor performance

Profile: The U.S. Postal Service transports mail around the world. It invests over $1 billion a year contracting with commercial airlines to ensure quality delivery of hundreds of millions of pieces of mail.

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