

BlackBerry Supports Customer and Sales Efforts for Forward-thinking Transport Company



Robert Transport differentiates itself in the competitive transportation industry by integrating with their customers' supply chain to provide a value-added service. They are also focused on offering service improvement without dramatically escalating costs. In 2002, they launched a wireless strategy to help support these business goals.

Dispatch is a key aspect of their business, but their current satellite and push-to-talk phone systems were not geared to city operations. The company's IT team had already built an ERP system to manage dispatch, warehousing and accounting. What they wanted to do was connect BlackBerry® devices to the ERP system by building a custom wireless application. They also saw the potential of linking BlackBerry to another third-party application that would put mobile sales people in touch with their CRM solution.

The BlackBerry Enterprise Server™, with the Mobile Data Service (MDS), was installed, and the IT team developed two custom applications. 475 BlackBerry devices were deployed to drivers, sales and administrative people with some significant advantages:

- *Improved communication with drivers*
- *Dispatch team gains two hours productivity/day*
- *Online web tracking system allows customers to see status of deliveries*
- *Reduced wireless communications fees by 7%*
- *Improved data integrity to better manage billing*
- *Increased driver satisfaction by reducing paperwork and duplication of reporting*
- *Ability to monitor driver performance*
- *Reduced need for sales people to carry laptops*
- *Increased data security*

Robert Transport is in the highly competitive transportation industry. While their immediate wireless goal was improving communications with their truck drivers, they also saw the bigger picture. In an industry where margins are low, success isn't only about moving products from place to place; it's often a result of who communicates best with customers and provides superior service. That made integrating with their customers' supply chain an integral component of their wireless efforts.

Industry

Transportation

Environment

Microsoft® Exchange 2000

Applications Deployed

Custom ERP and CRM applications

Situation

Robert Transport needed to increase performance in their local city operations by improving the dispatch system, which relied on satellite technology and push-to-talk phones. They also wanted to wirelessly connect sales people to the existing CRM solution.

Organization Profile

Robert Transport is the 2nd largest transportation company in Quebec, Canada. In 2004, they had more than 1,000 tractors, 3,000 trailers, 17 service points across Canada and the U.S., and 1 million sq. ft of warehouse space. They are winners of the 2004 Shipper's Choice Award and one of the Top 50 Best Managed Companies in Canada.

Solution

Soluteo (<http://www.soluteo.com>), a ISV Alliance member, helped the in-house IT Team build a custom wireless solution connecting the BlackBerry Enterprise Server, with the MDS feature, to their back end ERP and CRM systems. 475 BlackBerry devices were given to drivers and sales people to improve access and communications.

Results

Robert Transport met its primary business goals. Customer service has improved with better tracking, communication and reporting – with more time for customer management. The company has reduced costs for communication, equipment and personnel while gaining significant business improvements.

They also wanted to find a way to grow without increasing the operational expenses associated with improved communications, such as hiring more dispatching staff. Other factors that affected their thinking included: meeting their industry's regulatory standards; increased tracking and reporting requirements to meet new security standards arising from 9/11; and attracting and retaining drivers in a period of driver shortages.

Why BlackBerry?

Their BlackBerry wireless strategy was designed to meet a multitude of business needs, but their immediate goal was building a better communications system for their drivers in city areas. The existing system relied on 600 satellites and almost 400 push-to-talk phones. The satellites were expensive, difficult to learn, worked slowly, and offered poor coverage in the city. Push-to-talk was also a limited solution, and required human resources at the dispatch center to support it.

After considering text messaging, Pocket PC and PalmPilot, Robert Transport determined the BlackBerry Enterprise Solution™ was right for them. Since they already had an internally developed ERP system for managing dispatch and warehousing, they decided to build their own dispatch application for the devices.

"As a communications' tool, BlackBerry is a breeze to manage," says Mathieu Abbott, IT Development Manager. "You don't need a huge staff to monitor it in a dispatch center. You eliminate the need for verbal communications, which takes away the requirement of having to manage peoples' usage on cell phones and finding the right rate plan. And you don't have to be computer literate to use the functionality. You don't risk breaking the screen, like some solutions, that need a pen or stylus."

The stability of the BlackBerry platform also appealed to Abbott. MDS meant that an in-house ERP application could connect to the devices. BlackBerry PUSH technology meant that information could be sent to drivers in a timely way.

The Value of a Custom Dispatch Application

Robert Transport has an in-house team of 10 programmers – all of them proficient in the development of a custom ERP solution. That knowledge base helped them build a customized BlackBerry application in one month. They contracted Soluteo, a BlackBerry based solutions specialist with expertise in Java programming, who extended the solution to BlackBerry and assisted Robert Transport with integration to the devices. Soluteo offers its customers over six years of management, research and knowledge experience in launching enterprise level and highly customized mobile solutions.

The application was designed to push out the drivers' trip sheets, which includes routing information, scheduling and special customer needs. Drivers are able to see their whole itinerary for city deliveries. "What the drivers see on their device is a direct and live link to their trip sheet," says Abbott. "So what the dispatcher sees is what the driver gets, meaning the people on-the-road can have a lot more information about a customer's requirements."

The system meant there was no longer a need for labor-intensive discussions between drivers and dispatchers, freeing up dispatchers to spend more time on route planning and addressing customer needs. Abbott estimates a productivity gain of two hours per day. He also estimates that BlackBerry offered a 7% reduction in the communication costs associated with push-to-talk services.

Data quality has improved since all relevant times are entered by drivers and validated at the time of entry. There are logs of all messages sent or received. An automated driver detention notification feature helps ensure that delays are properly tracked to the source, whether that is the driver or the customer. All of which contributes to a more accurate system for managing customer accounts and billing, and resolving any disputes.

An added benefit was contributing to driver satisfaction, which helped in retaining qualified personnel in a demand marketplace. BlackBerry eliminated the need to record details on-the-road and then transfer the notes to a system at the head office. "Drivers need to be productive," says Abbott. "We don't want them duplicating their efforts, especially when they may not have accurate memories about when they arrived at locations."

Customers were also an important part of the loop, since a primary business goal was integration with their supply chains. With an online web tracking system, customers can login and see the movement of their shipments. This access not only offers peace-of-mind, but is also the most accurate way of investigating any invoicing issues for services, since every detail is now logged.

"I would say that the knowledge of our customers and drivers has increased," says Abbott. "When it comes to driver performance, we now know the transit times between two locations, and what is an average time. We've been able to identify underperforming drivers and set benchmarks for them to reach."

Connecting the Sales Force

With an ERP application successfully built for BlackBerry, Abbott's team turned to adapting something equally valuable for their sales team. A third-party application was used to provide wireless connectivity to the ACT! solution for customer relationship management.

The freedom of access to customer histories and records meant that sales people could now travel without laptops. "We've actually been able to virtually eliminate all laptop purchases and maintenance," says Abbott. "Almost everyone has a home-based computer and high-speed Internet, and we're running everything through Citrix, so access to more detailed information is still possible."

The company has also been impressed by the ability to secure data in the event that devices are lost or stolen, or employees depart from the company. BlackBerry allows administrators to lock or wipe devices. "You lose your cell phone, your laptop, or anything happens with an employee, you know you have not let your customer information get into the wrong hands," he says.

The Importance of Partnerships

Robert Transport built their own impressive, in-house dispatch solution that integrated with their IT systems, including RS6000, Microsoft Windows, UNIX, Jbase and MsSQL. They approached Soluteo to help them bridge the last challenge: enable the flow of data from various systems to and from BlackBerry devices.

Soluteo provided the services of a mobile application developer who knew BlackBerry and the Java framework. The developer worked closely with Robert Transport's own IT team to help them develop know-how that would benefit them in the future. It's not uncommon for BlackBerry partners to offer this kind of knowledge transfer since many companies want to build-up skills in their own teams.

Soluteo provided the role of all-important overseer, envisioning the BlackBerry solution, developing server and client application and ensuring it integrated with the existing IT infrastructure. Robert Transport's IT team was responsible for executing the development of the code that helped the custom BlackBerry application work with the back end systems.

RIM also played a role in this process, being available to troubleshoot any challenges with MDS, and making the solution seamless.

Next Steps

Robert Transport is a sophisticated BlackBerry user with the in-house IT resources to support extended application development. They have installed the BlackBerry Enterprise Server v4.0, and its wireless management features.

"We are also looking at the Bluetooth® handsets that are now available," says Abbott. "There is potential to integrate them with GPS positioning and printing and bar code scanning capabilities."

The Benefits

BlackBerry has been a success story for Robert Transport for numerous reasons, such as:

- Improved communication with drivers about trips, schedules and customer needs
- Freed up dispatch team to work more closely with customers for a gain of two hours productivity per day
- Online web tracking system allows customers to see status of deliveries
- Reduced wireless communications fees by 7%
- Improved data integrity to better manage billing and customer service
- Increased driver satisfaction by reducing paperwork and duplicated reporting
- Better ability to manage and offer feedback on driver performance
- Reduced need for sales people to carry laptops
- Increased data security should device be lost or stolen



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IT Development Manager*