

Compaq Success Story

BurkeAir - technology in the field





Ranked in the Australian top ten air conditioning service providers, Perth-based and family-owned BurkeAir has continued to maintain leadership in an industry competed for by multinational organisations. Supporting the company's position is best-of-breed service and, in the form of Compaq *iPAQ™* Pocket PCs, best-of-breed technology.

When Ken Webb resigned his Australian Regular Army commission in 1999 to take up the position of BurkeAir's managing director, he brought with him a strong background in technology and an understanding of how its innovative application can dramatically improve business operations.

"One of the very first pledges I made to the entire staff was that I'd get rid of the masses of paperwork they were lumbered with," states Webb.

Before he could live up to this pledge, Webb first set about installing a Windows NT Server-based network, a new accounting software package and re-engineered many of the standard business procedures. His next step was to streamline information flow to and from service engineers in the field. This was achieved by introducing the Optus Retriever Service operating on Compaq *iPAQ™* Pocket PCs for all field service engineers.



The Optus Retriever Service, which is sold and delivered in Australia exclusively by Cable & Wireless Optus, provides a customised solution for data transfer. Using a handheld computer or laptop, combined with a digital mobile phone or integrated phone card data can be transferred to and from the field. Its suitability to the Compaq *iPAQ* lies in the fact that the Optus Retriever Service has been purpose-built for staff in the field - a market segment that has been quick to adopt mobile solutions such as the *iPAQ* Pocket PC.

Explaining why the *iPAQ* is so successful 'in the field', Chee Mei Gan, manager, mobile solutions group, Compaq Computer Australia, commented: "The *iPAQ* provides mobile workers with the means of connecting to the Internet or business networks, ensuring they

have immediate access to critical information when and where they need it most - in the field."

"Where other portable computing devices provide this, the *iPAQ*, which has the fastest processor, has expansion features simply not available elsewhere unless you're using a notebook computer. This, more than anything else, is where the *iPAQ* stands alone, delivering notebook computer features, speed and functionality in a Pocket PC format."

Streamlined information flow

For BurkeAir field service engineers, gone are the days of keeping track of job sheets, filling them out in long-hand at the completion of each job, then waiting to get job approval before being paid.

Under the previous system, service engineers arrived at the office each morning to pick up their job sheets for the day. Once a job had been completed, the job sheet was filled out and brought back to the office for processing the next day.

Before the job sheet was passed on for invoicing, a supervisor checked it for accuracy then forwarded it to administration staff who would then generate the invoice.

While the process had served the company for more than 20 years, it was not without its problems. Job sheets were sometimes misplaced. Some would be missing important information. Customers would, on occasion, dispute the work carried out. Together, these represented the catalyst for typical business problems, such as

cash-flow slowdown, worker disruption and customer relationship issues.

With the Compaq *iPAQ* Pocket PC using the Optus Retriever Service, all of these problems have been solved. For the service engineers, jobs are sent directly to their *iPAQ*'s, without the need to go into the office.

All that's needed is to log on to the Optus Retriever Service using the *iPAQ* and a GSM modem card, and they can retrieve their jobs.

The handwriting recognition capability found on the *iPAQ* means the process is streamlined even further. In the field once a job is completed, a digital paper job sheet is filled out using drop-down menus and the *iPAQ*'s handwriting recognition feature.

Most importantly, before the job can be classified as complete and the engineer paid, the customer's signature is recorded on the *iPAQ's* screen.

With the *iPAQ* enabling access to the Optus Retriever Service, the job sheet can be completed and signed allowing the technician to transfer information with a single keystroke via the Optus GSM network. Now, rather than waiting days or even weeks to get information on each job, it's only a matter of minutes before data can be received and invoices generated by BurkeAir office staff.

For Webb, this rapid flow of information is crucial to BurkeAir's continued success. "At one level," he says, "the system enables us to capture more information than we used to under the old paper-based job sheet

system. You couldn't expect engineers to spend large amounts of time in the field writing down masses of information."

"Thanks to Retriever's intuitive design including drop down lists and option buttons and the Compaq *iPAQ's* ease-of-use, more information can be captured in less time. As a result, I have more accurate and up-to-date information upon which I can base important business decisions."

Also, because the *iPAQ* and the Optus Retriever Service solution simplifies the information capture process, additional information can be obtained from the customer. An example of this is Retriever's optional inclusion of customer relationship questions with each job sheet. Again, through use of the *iPAQ*,

customers can advise if they would like to have their contract revised, or can provide general feedback on quality of service.

The job sheet model has been further expanded by BurkeAir to deal with situations where engineers obtain parts directly from suppliers. Whenever an engineer picks up a spare part from a supplier, and regardless of location, a Retriever form is completed and signed on the *iPAQ* Pocket PC, and transmitted back to BurkeAir.

"All of these efficiencies contribute to one of the most critical aspects of any business - improved cash flow," states Webb. "Because customers physically sign-off on a job and the information is received by our staff within minutes, invoices are generated and sent out the same day."

"Similarly, when an engineer picks up a part from a supplier, we know about it within minutes, meaning we're able to keep much better track of our outgoings."

Exploiting the potential

An unforeseen, yet eagerly embraced, benefit of Compaq's *iPAQ* Pocket PC's use by BurkeAir has emerged in the form of passive marketing. According to Webb, as customers are exposed to the *iPAQ*, they realise they're dealing with a company that's at the leading edge.

"Most companies in this industry are still stuck in business operations that are more than 20 years old," says Webb. "So when customers see our engineers using Compaq's innovative technology, they immediately draw the correct conclusion that BurkeAir is a company that's



moving forward and even ahead of the times.”

The Compaq *iPAQ* Pocket PC’s many features are exploited for the business benefit by BurkeAir staff. One such example is the Pocket PC’s one-touch instant-record feature.

Generally used for recording voice memos, BurkeAir field engineers sometimes use it to record equipment noises.

“Quite a number of our senior engineers can identify what’s wrong with a piece of equipment just by the noises it makes,” explains Webb. “For some of our staff, the ability to use the *iPAQ* to record equipment noise and then

play it back to a senior engineer - often over a mobile phone - means they can identify and remedy a customer’s problem more quickly than having to bring out another engineer.”

Supporting expansion

Through efficiencies gained remodelling the business and supported in large by the *iPAQ*/Optus Retriever Service solution, Webb has been able to address one of the most sought after goals of any business - expansion. Interestingly though, where the new system assists in support of expansion through increased cash flow and customer relationship management,

it is also providing the infrastructure.

Webb explains: “I knew for some time that an office in Busselton - about 200 kilometres south of Perth - would give us a major competitive edge. Actually achieving this goal was going to prove extremely difficult under our old business model. We’d need to rent office space, buy furniture and equipment, connect it back to our Perth-based network and employ at least one person to look after the office.”

“By using the *iPAQ*/Optus Retriever Service, we’ve opened what could be best described as a virtual office.

We now have an engineer working the Busselton area and using the *iPAQ* as his office.”

“Customers call a 1300 number, which diverts back to our main office. There, the job details are taken down and sent to the engineer’s *iPAQ* using the Optus Retriever Service.”

“What we’ve achieved with this new system is a business edge that our competitors are only starting to come to grips with. By the time they have, we’ll have found new ways to exploit Compaq’s *iPAQ* and the Optus Retriever Service to stay well in front.”

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