Can Manufacturing Go Mobile? (Part II)

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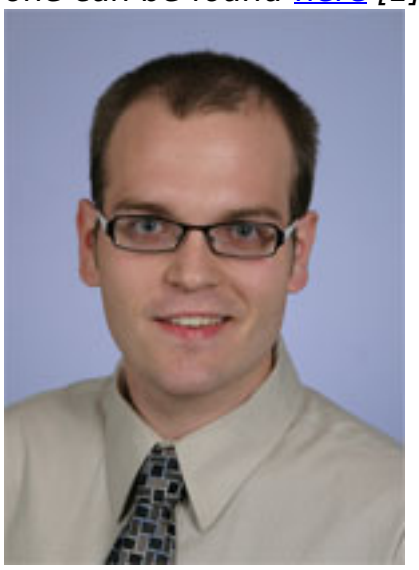
This is part two of a two-part series on mobile technology in manufacturing. Part one can be found here [1].



A World of Choice

Mobile components for many enterprise-level software systems already exist, and the reasons for integrating mobile are many. It's hard to list — or even approximate — the various types of mobile manufacturing software that exist today, mostly due to the fact that they come in just about every shape and size.

In general, mobile software is either crafted to create a better experience for the company, or its customers. Inventory control software, for example, already has widely available mobile components. Manufacturers can either purchase the whole enterprise software package — which would include the mobile capability — or they could purchase a solution that could be integrated into their existing system. Same goes for preventative maintenance programs, or software to manage employee data, such as timesheets, vacation days, and more. Somers says that the most important aspect of going mobile can dramatically increase the efficiency of a business. There's less paper, which reduces mistakes, and in general, the software allows workers to track necessary data with more agility. In almost any case, this uptick in efficiency can be found at any size of enterprise, from the small job shop to the 10,000-employee global powerhouse.

Salespeople, too, are always in search of getting their hands on better ways to close the deal, and if one asks Somers, there is a bounty of mobile software already available to help show potential customers why they should buy a company's product. He says, "Mobile can become more of a connective tissue to your customers, and provide a deeper level of satisfaction." He also says that more companies are using iPads, for example, to provide salespeople with product catalogs and technical documents in real-time. They can swipe and scroll through 3D models of each part, and if the company makes a change to any of the data, it's automatically fed to every salesperson's mobile device. Somers says that many Fortune 1000 companies have found this to be an invaluable way to get customers to more closely engage with their brand.

In a time when software standards can change from week to week, many manufacturers looking to go mobile are left wondering if they should find a provider to build them a custom solution, or go with one of the many pre-built programs that many companies currently offer. Somers and Lee might have differing views on where the market stands currently, but they certainly agree that the landscape has changed dramatically in the last 10 years, and is primed to transform again at any moment.

Lee says, "If you go back five years ago, the idea of custom-building applications was pretty prevalent, particularly on the mobility side. That has completely changed. Companies, both large and mid-sized, are looking for products." Somers says, on the other hand, that the breakdown is more relevant to industry verticals and a company's needs, rather than overall trends: "It comes down to segmentation and demographics. We, as a company, are primarily targeting medium to large enterprises. When you target larger companies, they want to use an application you've developed for field service or high-tech manufacturing and use that as a baseline to develop things that are custom to their own business processes."

Both agree that smaller organizations are likely better off looking for an already-built solution for their mobile needs. When requesting a custom application, the customer must compile all the requirements on their own, which can be a daunting task for even the most technology-savvy manufacturer. Why not utilize a provider's knowledge rather than take a risk with guesswork? In most cases, this is not only the easier option, but also the cheaper one.

Large manufacturers have a more complicated debate on their hands. Antenna Software works primarily with larger, global manufacturers, and Somers says that in that case, custom is often the best solution. With increasing complexity comes an inability to shape existing business practices to a pre-built mobile solution. Management can't expect its employees to drop everything and incorporate a new system into their workflow, so oftentimes a more integrated solution works better. Of course, this creates additional work, in that one needs to tally up a complete set of requirements for the provider. If a company thinks that's within their reach, by all means they should break the mold and get a custom solution — it will be a perfect fit every time.

Mobile: The Next Generation

If one tracks the release of new smartphones in the consumer market, they can see just how quickly the marketplace is moving. The mobile manufacturing sector will be just as rapidly accelerating. The "holy grail" for mobile manufacturing has always been the capability to completely perform one's duties — say, as a plant manager — from the road. This includes, depending on a company's particular needs, the ability to order new parts or products, manage employees, track shipments, and much more. Many think this capability is still years away, if not more, but both Lee and Somers say that world is closer than we might think. It might already be here.

All of the aforementioned data can be accessed, through one program or another, by already-existing mobile software. The rate at which other solutions arrive is always increasing, and smartphones get more powerful by the month, which means more data can be accessed simultaneously. So if you're waiting for that mobile utopia to become a reality, perhaps now is the time to jump in head-first.

In Somers' opinion, manufacturing professionals have long been on the forefront of mobile technology. "The observation we see these days, the bread-and-butter of this business is still the manufacturing space. They were the early adopters." he says. The earliest pioneers — these same manufacturers — are also the ones who are most quickly adopting some of the newest smartphone and tablet technology, which Somers attributes to their innate "techie" desires. They work in manufacturing, after all. He continues: "It's a little bit unfair [to say because] they're wearing coveralls and chukka boots they might not be as glamorous as someone in a three-piece suit using a Blackberry from Bank of America. These people are the most sophisticated mobile users out there today, and have been for close to a decade. We will still see these people leading the way into the future."

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