NWL deploys 500 Panasonic Toughpad tablets for its field workers after extensive market trials.

NWL operates in the north east of England, where it trades as Northumbrian Water, and in the south east of England, where it trades as Essex & Suffolk Water. Northumbrian Water provides water and sewerage services to 2.7 million people through 16,965km of mains and 29,724km of sewers. Essex & Suffolk Water provides water services to 1.8 million people through 8,580km of mains.
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“Our field teams had a mixture of PDA devices and laptops, some many years old,” explained Richard Knaggs, Change Manager at NWL. “The communication capabilities of the devices were out of date and some teams were carrying multiple devices to do their jobs.”

Rigorous selection process
To ensure that the customer facing technicians and the maintenance teams had the best mobile device for the job, NWL organised a rigorous selection process involving many staff.

NWL shortlisted eight different mobile devices for testing and then invited 30 field staff to a series of workshops. The users were split into two different groups. Group One was made up of individual technicians, whose role was to visit customers and identify faults on the network. Group Two consisted of a two-person maintenance team that carried out repairs or made additions to the network.

Each group was asked to score all the devices against a series of criteria, such as how rugged the devices were and how suitable they were for use outside of the vehicle.

“We were quite surprised at the result, when both groups chose exactly the same device,” said Jim Howey, Distribution Maintenance Manager, at NWL. “The Panasonic Toughpad FZ-G1 tablet was the clear choice for both technicians and the maintenance teams.”

NWL then went on to further test the shortlisted devices with an additional 200 field staff as part of a roadshow exercise and once again the rugged Panasonic Toughpad tablet was the resounding choice of the majority.

“People were really impressed with just how rugged the device was and the fact that it could genuinely be used in an outside environment; and not just in the rain, the screen was clearly visible in bright sunlight as well,” said Jim. “Users were also impressed with the touchscreen capabilities. Being able to zoom in quickly and easily on documents, GIS maps and schematics was a real advantage.”

From a management and IT perspective, the other important factor about the Panasonic Toughpad tablet was that it was a Microsoft Windows 8 device compatible with NWL’s Oracle software-based systems. This meant it was possible for the Panasonic device to become the single mobile tool for NWL’s field force with real-time access to all its major systems.

Game-changing technology
Today, NWL has rolled-out 500 Panasonic Toughpad FZ-G1 tablets to its field workers. They are used to receive work schedules, locate sites through GIS applications, carryout risk assessments and report activity. Photos of sites or incidents can even be taken using the tablet’s camera and attached and sent back directly to the system. Users can also access their office email and the internet, ensuring they have access to all the important systems when out working.

“We have already received a lot of positive feedback about the Panasonic devices,” said Richard. “They are a game-changing technology that has already opened up a world of new possibilities for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of our workforce. It has also made a real difference for the users because people can stay in real-time contact with the organisation, via their device; they feel part of the team even when out in the field.”

“This whole exercise was about giving the field teams the best piece of kit to do their job and I think we have that with the Panasonic Toughpad tablets.”

Paul Davidson, Utility Sales Manager for Panasonic Toughpad, added: “With the Panasonic Toughpad FZ-G1 tablet, NWL has chosen a fully rugged device designed to be the single tool that field workers can rely on when carrying out their challenging roles.”

The latest version of the Panasonic Toughpad FZ-G1 tablet is a fully-rugged Windows 8.1 Pro device with 10.1 inch display. Powered by fourth generation Intel® Core™ technology with reduced power consumption, the device is faster for graphics performance and increases the standard battery life from eight hours to 10 hours [up to 20 hours with high capacity battery]. With the high-performing battery option and new optional hot-swap battery capabilities, the latest Toughpad FZ-G1 can also offer seamless, uninterrupted 24-hour operation to continuously service mobile workers on shifts.

In addition, the device is equipped with the latest industry leading GPS technology to allow field staff to pin point their work areas and destinations faster and more accurately than ever before. Data communication includes the latest Wireless LAN 802.11ac technology that radically improves data transfer times.

The tablet is suitable for workers that need to operate touchscreen tablets with gloves and uses the latest IPS Panel technology providing a new level of viewing quality for tablet users working outside.

The Toughpad family is designed to meet the same durability standards as Panasonic’s Toughbook laptop product line. The fully-rugged Toughpad FZ-G1 is certified according to MIL-STD-810G as well as an IP65 ingress protection rating for resistance to dust and water.

The FZ-G1 comes as standard with a high-quality HD 720p front web camera and upgraded optional 5MP or 8MP rear camera with triple flash capability for clear document, asset or site photos whatever the light conditions.

Using its Flexible Configuration Ports, the device can be configured exactly for the needs of the business, offering USB 2.0, Micro SDXC, True Serial port, LAN Connector, GPS, Barcode Reader and optional integrated smartcard reader. USB 3.0, Bluetooth® 4.0, HDMI and Wireless LAN capabilities are standard.