

Contractor Embraces Wireless World

*Atlantic Contracting and Specialties of Westwood, Mass.,
employs Nextel phones to save work, time and money*

Wireless data applications are proving to be real work, time and money savers, according to a key manager for the New England branch of a specialty contracting firm.

“It saves us a ton of time and money,” said John Lamberton of Atlantic Contracting and Specialties of Westwood, Mass. He said that since he got his first Nextel phone, he has become a true believer in letting wireless data applications do the job and looks forward to delegating even more routine tasks to his cell phone.

Atlantic Contracting and Specialties handles sheet metal, thermal insulation and refractory work on more than 30 jobs at a time in five states — Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The company works primarily for major utilities in the region, and also as a subcontractor for major mechanical contractors in the area. Lamberton is an area manager for

Atlantic, and is in charge of company offices in Westwood, Mass., and two in Lewiston, Maine. Atlantic is headquartered in Lancaster, Penn., which is also headquarters for Atlantic’s parent company, Irex Corp.

Lamberton said he started using Nextel phones for the two-way, private radio feature called Direct Connect™.

“The ability to instantly connect with the job site saved us a lot of time, and with the cost savings of the two way radio, we were able to expand our distribution of phones to a total of 40 workers,” he said. “Gone are the days when you could call a customer back the next day to provide a report. They want the information now — immediately. We can get that field information with the push of a button and quickly respond.”

Atlantic’s introduction to the world of wireless data came when it was suggested that the company could save time and money using the mobile phone as a productivity tool with an application called AirHours™.

This browser-based application allows mobile workers to enter, transmit and

receive timesheet and project information, eliminating paperwork and speeding up routine tasks.

“Every payroll was a full day’s job calling in the information and then formatting it for the computer,” Lamberton added. “Now, we have reduced field time for each foreman from as much as six hours a week to an hour or less. We save time and money in two ways — the foreman’s actual hours and the increased productivity of keeping him on the work site and out of the trailer dealing with paperwork.”

At the other end of the data line, the payroll department used to take two secretaries all day to finish. Now, it takes just a few hours to finalize and print checks since the wireless data shows up in a format that can be directly entered into the Atlantic computer system.

Another useful aspect of the mobile phone system is its ability to use technology to track project costs. Atlantic has a series of cost codes assigned to each job where they can enter hours worked, supplies used and other construction details. Lamberton used a 10-story building as an example.

“We assign a cost code to each floor of the project and enter data to track where we are on the job, level by level,” he said. “The information gained also alerts the field crew if they are ahead or behind on a project, and allows them to make adjustments as each floor is built.

“Because of this system, my job is 10 times easier,” he said.



Peter Smedburg, foreman for Atlantic Contracting and Specialties, employs a Nextel phone at a Newington, N.H., construction site.

Atlantic isn't alone in their use of wireless data in the construction industry, but they are certainly considered an early adopter, according to John Redman of Nextel Communications Inc., Bedford, Mass.

Citing a report by The National Association for Business Economics, Redman said that out of 500,000 construction companies in the country, only about 10 percent are using wireless data to manage their workload.

In related news, at a recent Construction Industry Institute conference on managing projects, wireless data was cited as "the biggest breakthrough of eBusiness" in the building industry.

Some of the newest technology available in wireless data includes the following: mobile access to corporate e-mail, calendar and datebook information, even behind the company firewall; Java-enabled mobile phones with industry-specific programs that operate independently of a network signal; wire-

less Internet that allows construction professionals to access project extranets, intranets and web-based productivity tools like fleet management and dispatch; and, built-in business networks for instant contract with clients and suppliers.

Nextel's involvement in wireless data communications expanded recently to include construction truck dispatching. The company announced it had formed a strategic alliance with Command Alkon Inc. to deliver wireless communications and status reporting to ready-mix, aggregate and asphalt fleet operations. This alliance combines Nextel nationwide wireless services with Command Alkon's mobile signaling unit, COMMANDsignal™ for managing dispatch, tracking and reporting of trucks used in fleet operations. □



Above: While employee Neil Oja installs sheet metal panels inside a utility company facility, foreman Peter Smedburg transmits project data to Atlantic's Westwood office.

Below: At a medical research building job in Worcester, Mass., Atlantic foreman Brad Moody reduces his job reporting time using a Nextel phone with AirHours™ application.

