Handhelds: Do they Help or Hurt the Data Process?

Handhelds, to have or not to have that is the big question. As many of you know I have had some very strong opinions on handhelds for years. Many organizations have taken the stance that handhelds would solve all of their problems as it relates to asset and work order data collection. The ultimate outcome for most of them was that all they did was to speed up the collection of poor asset data and work order information, and that was only for the organizations that were successful in having the technicians use the handhelds in the first place…which is probably a topic for another month.

In the early days of handhelds most were small and difficult to use with the big greasy fingers of the average maintenance technician (I am sure you remember Bubba and Skeeter). They did not have many time saving features like pull down menus and were typically all docking type of units which meant they had to be plugged into a computer to upload and download data. This meant having real time information was impossible and could not be used for emergent and reactive work except to document completed work after the fact. One of my classic examples of handheld use run amuck was with an organization that had 40 or 50 handhelds. They were really proud they had 86% usage of the units. As I toured the operation one afternoon I went through the HVAC shop and found at least 20 handheld units sitting on conference room tables plugged in and docked during the work shift. The crew used them to get work tickets in the morning; and in the afternoon at the end of the shift used them as terminals to close out completed work. You ever tried to use a five inch screen as a desk computer?? Not exactly the best use of handhelds but at least they were gathering some data; well I hope they were.

Technology has changed greatly in the last several years and there are a lot more options available for gathering data with handhelds. In the early days you had to purchase data collection units designed for all types of data collection industries and then customize them to work with your Computerized Maintenance Management System (CMMS). You can still purchase same types of units in the wired or docking units, or wireless connections used with Wi-Fi or cell broadband connections. These units work well and the newer ones have much more flexibility in setting up menus, fields, codes, and comments. You can purchase these units in all kind of configurations like wet environments, shock proof, explosion proof and ballistic covers and coatings. In the last couple of years there has been a major change in the handheld data collection business, bring into the spotlight Smartphones, Tablets, and iPads. Now the sky is the limit for what you want to use and how you want to use it. A year ago I was attending a user's conference for one of the major CMMS suppliers and in ten minutes they had me performing PM procedures, writing work orders, and looking at drawings and schematics with my Droid. Really incredible! Don't forget with the Smartphones you still have the small screen problem and the big greasy fingers to deal with when you are using touch screens. But what about the iPads and Tablets? Big screen, plenty of room for looking at lists and drawings, and a large touch screen keyboard for making notes and comments. You even have the ability to take pictures and send to others if you need advice, assistance, or just for the assets history file.

So let's answer the question, is the data quality better with handhelds or paper? Until recently I believed paper was a more accurate and detailed method of recording work order details and asset history because handhelds were difficult to use and contained limited special fields with pull down menus. But as some of my friends and collogues drag me in to the 21st century, I am beginning to change my mind. The reason I am changing my mind is if you assume the handheld is set up right;

with good fields; with limited pull down menu options which are required to be populated before you can move or progress to the next entry point, you should finish out the day with greatly improved work order and asset data.

So the bottom line is whether you use paper, old fashioned handhelds, or your Smartphone the quality of your data will depend on only two things…
Discipline and Accountability!