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## Wireless Works for the Home Building Industry — Really

By Tom Gebes, *BuilderMT*

*The latest in a series of tech talks for builders.*

No industry is better suited for wireless devices and applications than the home building industry. Workers' locations constantly change, and the building process always involves multiple sites, roving teams of unaffiliated trade contractors and a highly fluid stream of ever-changing information.

Contrary to the notion that home builders are slow to adopt new technology, home builders were among the first to go wireless. Even 20 years ago, when it was uncommon to see anyone but a medical professional carrying a pager, Motorola pagers were popular with builders. The very first cellular phones started popping up in superintendents' trucks not long after that.

Around 1990, lumberyard delivery managers started getting strange-sounding phone calls in the middle of the day from building sites. Superintendents screamed over the static that their orders were incomplete. A communications revolution was underway. Over the next decade, cellular phone service costs dropped, devices proliferated and cell towers popped up everywhere. The onslaught of wireless options now is in full swing.

Today, voice networks have matured into digital voice-data networks. Back-office project management software is being developed to integrate field data sent from mobile wireless devices. This combination can help squeeze the greatest inefficiencies out of the building process. It can help builders boost their margins — and keep enough control over their operations to maintain their sanity.

The convenience and acceptance of wireless technology has spawned a proliferation of devices. An Internet search for "wireless devices" yields tablet PCs, smart phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs), to name a few.

There are also lots of service plans to choose from. These range from "voice only" plans to combination packages for voice, short message service (SMS), e-mail, data, Web browsing and global positioning systems (GPS) tracking.

When reviewing wireless devices and what they do, consider two issues:

- What is the difference between "mobile" and "true wireless" technology?
- What wireless devices and features can improve the workflow processes that can enhance your profitability?

### Mobile vs. True Wireless

When a technology provider claims its technology is "mobile," it doesn't necessarily mean "wireless." Some mobile systems are PDAs that work in tandem with a desktop software application. For example, a crew member in the field enters data into his PDA. When that PDA is "cradle-synchronized" back at the office (by hooking it to a computer), the data in the PDA tells the desktop to automatically execute certain tasks (like printing reports or sending e-mails or faxes). Cradle-synchronized devices aren't truly wireless, but they are "mobile."

Beyond cell phone functionality, which nearly all wireless devices offer,

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true wireless devices access wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) and/or wireless digital data networks to send data. Wi-Fi offers very short range broadband signals. Data networks vary in speed from standard cell phone signals to wireless broadband.

In addition to placing and receiving phone calls, true wireless devices should be able to access the Internet to send e-mail and browse the Web. Some wireless devices now allow users to view e-mail attachments and pictures.

However, simply making a phone call, sending an e-mail message or viewing a Web page does not dramatically advance your business capability. The recipient of that call or e-mail still must transcribe your data to the back-office software system to update schedules, approve invoices or log in materials delivery quantities for comparison with purchase orders, for instance.

#### **Fully-Integrated Wireless Devices Improve Efficiency**

A true wireless device is optimally effective when an authorized user can integrate data from the field directly into back-office software in real time (that is, immediately). With this capability, a superintendent can make changes, update schedules, update information and sign off on payment from the field.

If your wireless device can't do that and you are still relying on phone calls and e-mails back to the main office to have someone else transfer your field data into back-office applications, then your wireless device hasn't achieved optimum value.

In a sense, you are still in the old-fashioned era of pay phones and faxes. You're just using fancier methods (cell phones and e-mail messages) to exchange information that has to be manually processed the old-fashioned way.

#### **Which Wireless Device and Features Makes Sense?**

With so many devices on the market, it's easy to buy a cell phone and pick a plan. But if you are interested in using a true wireless mobile digital device that can integrate — and interact — with your back office software, your selection criteria will be affected by:

- The tasks you want your field workers to complete
- What kind of wireless interaction your back-office software can accommodate

Most wireless digital devices with data screens (such as PDAs and smart phones) can handle simple yes/no binary functions (like "order received" or "order not received"). They can also handle functions that allow field workers to view simple data (for example, the paint color code for the front bedroom). But let's move to the next level, where field workers want to:

- Schedule specific activities from the field.
- Log in completion of individual activities from the field.
- Trigger invoice payment approval to accounting.
- Set up reminders and notes on scheduling activities.
- Note variance assignments from the field.
- View supplier contact information from the field.
- View owner (buyer) information from the field.
- Complete quality control checklists assigned to scheduling activities.
- Generate updated projected completion dates for the project.
- Send updated project completion dates to accounting for liability tracking and project cash flow reports.
- Send text message e-mails from the field.

To perform these kinds of sophisticated business functions, your wireless device must integrate with your back-office software with built-in links provided by your back-office software provider. The provider will

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also furnish a list of appropriate wireless devices.

Don't make the mistake of buying a device from a provider because it looked cool, got a good review on [www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com) and you can watch videos on it. It may be that your back-office software doesn't work with the device.

Before examining wireless devices, it's best to first consult with your back-office software provider. Use the above list to help determine what wireless field functionality you want, see what functionality is available and find out what devices the software provider recommends.

Use the following checklist to help narrow down wireless device options and to adopt a best practices approach for including wireless technology in your operations:

- Do you have an established management workflow in place that can be easily supported by field data exchange?
- What functionality do you need to support your management workflow?
- Are you considering mobile synchronization or a true wireless system?
- What types of wireless devices are supported by your back-office software?
- What types of devices would your crew be most comfortable working with?
- What type of training and support will your office staff require to ensure that data is exchanged and used properly in your back-office functions?

*Tom Gebes is president of [BuilderMT](#) (Management Technology), which provides implementation, business and custom end-user training and consulting services to help builders recognize the benefits of organizing internal work processes and workflow as a means of increased productivity and profitability. Gebes has more than 25 years of experience serving home builders' workflow management needs. Best Software's Timberline Office, which features integrated accounting, estimating and information management software, is designed to improve operations for all types of residential builders. For more information about Timberline Office, [click here](#). For more information about BuilderMT, [click here](#).*

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