



Rail operator brings real-time train information to 270,000 passengers with BlackBerry solution

Northern Rail is one of the biggest train operators in Britain, providing 2,500 local and regional train services every day across the north of England, and carrying 85.5 million passengers a year. It has 4,800 employees and its trains call at over 500 stations, approximately 20% of all UK railway stations.

The Challenge

Northern Rail wanted to improve the quality of information its 1,300 train conductors provide to passengers. Over 270,000 people use Northern Rail's trains daily. When incidents occur passengers turn to the conductor for information about delays, train schedules and onward connections. For lack of a better alternative, incident alerts were sent out via text messages to the conductors' mobile phones.

"We were sending in the region of 7 million text messages annually," says Albert Gribben, Procurement Manager at Northern Rail. SMS messaging was ill suited to Northern Rail's needs. First, it was expensive. Second, message length was limited to 160 characters, which restricted how much information could be sent out. Third, there was no way of knowing if a message had been read. Moreover, since they were only equipped with mobile phones, conductors could not look up other information that might be of use to the passengers.

In 2008, Northern Rail decided to give conductors access to more detailed service information from the control team and allow them to communicate with each other more effectively.

Benefits

Significant overhead savings

25% lower operating costs

92% user satisfaction score

Significant increase in National Passenger Survey score

The Solution

Northern Rail was already using a BlackBerry® solution with BlackBerry® Enterprise Server, to provide mobile email to senior managers. "We had proven the capability of BlackBerry for email on the move and the infrastructure was in place," says Gribben. Northern Rail had originally opted for a BlackBerry solution because of its built-in security.

Northern Rail built a business case for replacing text messages with a BlackBerry mobile email solution that showed a significant reduction in operational costs and overheads. Next, it organised a three-month pilot programme among 100 conductors. The group consisted of conductors operating across the region in a wide range of settings, from urban areas to remote lines. "We wanted to make sure that network coverage and email service was good in all the areas we serve," says Gribben. The group also had varying levels of familiarity with mobile technology. "Some people were tech savvy and others were not. We had to make sure BlackBerry would be appropriate for all users across the spectrum."

The BlackBerry solution came through with flying colours. "We proved the business case; proved BlackBerry smartphones were fit for purpose; and proved the usability." Email delivery is highly reliable and fast, and the users gave the BlackBerry solution a 92% satisfaction rating during a post-pilot user survey. Now, all 1,300 conductors use BlackBerry® smartphones.

The Benefits

The BlackBerry solution has been a resounding success in terms of return on investment, communications, user satisfaction and customer service. As the business case predicted, "the BlackBerry solution was cost neutral in year one and we've seen a significant return on investment in years two and three," says Gribben.

Moreover, mobile email has proven to be more reliable, more secure and faster than texting. "It is the surest way of getting information to conductors. With the BlackBerry solution we can trace delivery, which is especially important for safety-critical messaging," says Gribben, "and the control team can simply click and send a targeted message containing the right amount of information to a group of people in an area," he adds.

In addition to replacing texting with mobile email, the BlackBerry solution gives the conductors access to live departure boards using the BlackBerry® Browser. "They can tell the passengers where their connections are, if it's on time, even what platform they're going to go into," explains Gribben. This has contributed to Northern Rail's National Passenger Survey score for the provision of information in times of disruption rising significantly. "Bringing the BlackBerry solution on board has set the benchmark for us to develop further this year," says Gribben. Northern Rail has initiated a new business plan project that is looking at what other business processes it can mobilise. "We have many paper-based systems that we'd like to bring to BlackBerry smartphones. This is definitely the year for maximising the use our BlackBerry investment. I would like to see a fully mobile Northern Rail," concludes Gribben.

www.blackberry.co.uk/casestudies

"The BlackBerry solution was cost neutral in year one and we've seen a significant return on investment in years two and three."

Albert Gribben
Procurement Manager Systems
at Northern Rail