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EDF ENERGY FINDS A SMALL SOLUTION TO A BIG PROBLEM.

When EDF Energy needed a simple solution to replace an outdated paper system used by the field sales force to improve information flow and support ambitious ecological targets it turned out that finding the best solution wasn't straightforward, until Panasonic Toughbook became involved.



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EDF Energy is one of the largest energy companies in the UK, generating around one-fifth of the UK's electricity and delivering it to around a quarter of the UK's population via their electricity distribution networks. In EDF Energy's 'Our Climate Commitments', a document outlining the biggest package of environmental initiatives announced by any UK energy company, CEO Vincent de Rivaz explains the vision to reduce negative impacts on the environment through increased recycling of waste at offices and depots, large scale reduction of CO2 emissions and a 30% reduction of paper usage¹.

With these challenges in mind in October 2006 Lisa Lewis, RE35 Field Sales Project Manager, embarked on a task to equip all of EDF Energy's field service agents with a device to capture customer details electronically and completely replace the old paper system. This included not just paper contact information but all sales materials; direct debit forms, cancellation forms and walking sheets. "It was basically anything paper based; we recognised the opportunity to reduce the impact on our environment, save money and increase efficiency" said Lisa.

Prior to any introduction of electronic systems, Area Managers car boots were filled with paperwork and once a fortnight an agent would liaise with their area manager and collect paper walking sheets for the following month. All paper documents needed for a days work had to be carried in a presenter weighing up to 5Kg and any customer information passed onto the Customer Services team, called 'Quest', would have to be manually entered into the system. "Obviously because of different handwriting styles there were errors in the data and even though the Quest team would conduct a follow up call to double check information, regional accents or bad connections still meant occasionally mistakes were inevitable" explained Lisa.

Something had to improve and so the initial wave of trials began in July 2007. At first, a basic level laptop and two tablet PCs were shortlisted. The trials highlighted the need for a more robust machine, as well as electronic signature capture capability, easily visible screen for presentations, low weight and long battery life because agents can be on the road from 10am to 8pm every day.

The second stage trial launched an A4 size tablet to 100 field operatives but only two weeks into the trial the project team had received concerned calls regarding the weight of the device; "nearly half of our field operatives complained about the weight causing shoulder and back problems" said Lisa. By January 2008, a review of the device needed to be conducted before a full roll out, and the team only had until September to ensure everything was in place for a smooth transition to the new system.

"It was in May 2008 that Panasonic Toughbook approached us promoting the benefits of the new CF-U1 and by this stage we had a limited amount of time left to trial the device" commented Lisa.

Panasonic quickly provided two devices to the Lisa and the team at EDF Energy so that a trial could be conducted and feedback reported. A combination of the rugged design, versatility and 1.06Kg weight made the CF-U1 instantly popular; "The response was immediately positive. The weight was perfect, the battery life was exceptional and the guys particularly liked the fact it wasn't a pure tablet and included a keyboard. As the user had the option of touch screen, stylus or QWERTY keyboard it has a solution for everyone." said Lisa.

It was evident that the Toughbook solution offered the best all round solution to address Lewis's project objectives and by December 2008, the company had rolled out 620 Toughbook CF-U1's to the rest of the field service agents, "Just looking at the CF-U1 you can see it is built for purpose, where as with a lot of our other trials it was difficult trying to make the device fit, so it lent itself better to our needs." commented Lauren Swietlik, Test Analyst at EDF Energy.

Since the launch of the CF-U1 at EDF Energy efficiency and service delivery has reached new heights; errors have decreased, information availability and accuracy has been enhanced, paper wastage, unnecessary travel and CO2 emissions reduced and data security improved. The unique way EDF Energy takes advantage of the built in Intel[®] Wireless WiFi Link enables real time uploading of information, meaning once a customer has signed up for a service, the information is sent instantly to Quest and within two minutes the customer receives a welcome call.

"In terms of our customer experience it's fantastic. The customer has more confidence that their data isn't being held by someone that isn't part of EDF Energy and with reduced paperwork, the agents can now travel in comfort!" explained Swietlik.

The CF-U1 continues to impress with the ability to survive drops from heights of 120cm and its IP54 dust and water compliance has proven invaluable given the rigours of the Area Managers daily use of the device. This durability has resulted in equipment downtime being significantly reduced. Even when dropped in puddles in the street, Peter Seagle, a Team Coach at EDF Energy, noted how the device "bounced" and "continued to work without pause or problems".

Just as important as EDF Energy's service, Toughbooks come with Panasonic's excellent after-sales support and because Toughbook are concerned about the future as well as the present, representatives from EDF Energy visited the Cardiff factory and met with Panasonic's highly skilled engineers to discuss the device and how it can be improved; "They listen to ideas and get you involved with the design process for upcoming models" said Lewis.

Most of all, the Toughbook CF-U1 has proved a supremely versatile tool, helping to reduce the total cost of ownership, improve efficiency and encourage a positive move into the 21st Century to help meet environmental targets.

"From my perspective the support, service and after sales service that we've had has been brilliant. I've worked with a lot of parties directly or indirectly and with Panasonic there is just a willingness to try and assist and get to the root of the problem. They are definitely a company I would hold up as an example of how to do business." commented Swietlik. With the Panasonic Toughbooks making such an impact at EDF Energy and the successful union of two commercially driven companies both dedicated to coexistence with the global environment shows that efficiency and environment are two concepts that can work in tandem.

¹Estimated paper used for billing 30% reduction from 2006 to 2020. Source: <http://ourvision.edfenergy.com/statistics-02.html>

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