ZEBRA

Boosting Automation and Service Amid Bold Expansion

HOUSING LEADER TAPS MOBILE COMPUTING TO BOOST AUTOMATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

Challenge

Affordable housing developer Dominium is in the process of doubling in size, with plans for 40,000 units by 2025. Yet a manual, time-intensive work order-management and apartment inspection process hampered field staff. The company set out to ratchet up operational efficiency and worker productivity in a bid to deliver enhanced service to its residents at a faster clip.

Solution

Dominium turned to Emkat Solutions and Zebra's TC55 touch computers to upgrade from a paper analog system to a mobile computing platform. The new system operates in real time, streamlining communications between field service technicians and office staff; service calls to residents; work order processing; and apartment inspections.

Result

The TC55 devices cut work order administrative time in half, generating $525,000 in annual efficiency gains — a savings that's poised to grow as the technology rollout continues across Dominium's properties. The devices also slashed apartment inspection times from 1,560 seconds to 210 seconds per unit, while capturing valuable data to measure staff performance.

MODERNIZING OPERATIONS WHILE DOUBLING IN SIZE

Dominium is one of the nation's largest apartment development and management companies, boasting 25,000 units in 23 states. Founded in 1972, the company saw its portfolio swell amid the nation's economic downturn. In a time when other companies were cutting back, Dominium acquired new properties and the demand for affordable housing grew exponentially.

Since then, the developer has opened 5,000 new units over the past two years and is accelerating expansion with plans to double in size to 40,000 units by 2025.

"This aggressive growth plan is fueling the drive for automation and efficiency," said Jim Mitchell, director of maintenance & purchasing for Dominium. But the central "frustration" motivating its upgrade from a manual system to a mobile computing solution was improving the quality of apartment dwellers' experience at the complex — particularly when it came to solving maintenance issues, he explained.

"The communication system between field service staff — maintenance technicians, housekeeping, and groundskeepers — and residents, as well as on-site facilities managers, was both unduly time intensive and an administrative burden," highlighted Mitchell. The result was slow, subpar service to residents, and worker productivity that wasn't being optimized.

The analog paper system was prone to human error and "wholly unable to accurately measure how long it took to solve problems for customers," Mitchell added.

Recognizing that these shortfalls would only become more pronounced as Dominium doubled in size over next few years, the company enlisted Emkat to help them empower their mobile workers to increase operational efficiency as well as service to their residents.

Redefining the Resident Experience

Dominium operates in an industry that's too often substandard, explains Mitchell, when it comes to servicing residents. Each apartment complex views its own attention to service as a key competitive edge. And as the company expands, "customer service is going to differentiate us more than anything else," he added.

Improving service calls to residents is integral to countering apartment dweller defections. Indeed, If a resident opts to leave the complex and "makes a lateral move to an apartment complex across the street, it's primarily due to the service."

The developer's manual work-order management system, for one, made getting apartment services addressed arduous for residents.

"Communication system between field service staff – maintenance technicians, housekeeping, and grounds-keepers – and residents, as well as on-site facilities managers, was both unduly time intensive and an administrative burden."

Jim Mitchell, Director of Maintenance and Purchasing, Dominium

An all too often common scenario: On the grounds of the apartment complex, maintenance staff might run into a resident who reports a service issue. Typically, the response would be, "'Sorry to hear that Mr. Smith, please go to the office to report it,'" noted Mitchell. "That inconveniences the customer."

The TC55 helped Dominium streamline the entire process for both residents and staff. With the device in hand, maintenance staff can enter the resident's service request on the spot, placing a ticket into the system in real time.

Data Dive on the (Critical) First 30 Days

Transactions via the TC55 generate valuable business intelligence for Dominium. They enable the company to begin building "a much more robust set of data than what we've had in the past, data that will inform business decisions," Mitchell remarked. For one, "We're keenly interested in the overall experience of the customer."

Capturing data on the experience of new residents during their first 30 days is a crucial window of opportunity. The saying, "you never get a second chance to make a good first impression," assumes heightened meaning in the apartment rental market.

"It's when most residents determine if they'll stay or not," explains Mitchell. So, it's "critical for Dominium to be able to drive additional strategies to improve that initial customer experience and improve our quality."

For example, "We might know at 10 am or 11 am that we can't fix a resident's air conditioner that day, so we'll put in a few portable ACs, but the customer doesn't know that until they get home at the end of the day," he said. "Had they known what we knew earlier, they would be in a better position to plan their day."

Via the mobile solution, service staff can now troubleshoot the AC, identify, perhaps, that it needs a part, order the part with the TC55 and communicate directly with the resident via email, voice or SMS. By doing so, Dominium "engages the resident in the solution," Mitchell remarked.

Optimizing Worker Efficiency and Productivity

Dominium was also saddled with a customer-call system that chipped away at worker productivity. A customer would call in a service request to the management office. Maintenance staff would then retrieve the request from the office, and then take off to the apartment unit to perform the work. The system had technicians going back and forth to the office to retrieve work-order requests — an inefficient use of time.

Since implementing the TC55, workers now get pinged by the digital device and assigned residents' service requests in real time, driving efficiency, time savings, and a streamlined workflow, as technicians can now triage service calls according to their urgency.

The Work Order Makeover

The TC55 mobile computing devices also helped Dominium reinvent their work-order management process. Technicians used to write down service call notes on a paper ticket. Then a staff member back at the office would enter notes into a computer, a system that could easily introduce errors into the process. What's more, paperwork on service calls often piled up, causing delays and resulting in inaccurate records on technicians' response times.

"We have a standard that says that any service request needs to be addressed within 24 hours,"

Since implementing the TC55, workers now get pinged by the digital device and assigned residents' service requests in real time, driving efficiency, time savings, and a streamlined workflow.

declared Mitchell, but Dominium had no way to track that crucial metric.

The TC55 equipped with a work-order management application replaced paper tickets. The application features standardized drop-down options for technicians to enter on a customized solutions menu, generating precise records on the nature of the work completed.

Now, technicians hit a clock button when they start work and stop work, "providing a high degree of accuracy that the work was complete," he remarked, "which allows us to more accurately measure the performance of our maintenance staff."

Because of the new devices, work-order processing times have dropped from 810 seconds per order in the paper analog environment to 210 seconds per order.

The Apartment Inspection Payoff

Accuracy is paramount when it comes to inspections at subsidized residential properties. "They're critical in the world of affordable housing; if you have a cracked switch plate you can fail an inspection," Mitchell said.

Apartment inspections prior to the implementation of the TC55 handheld devices were a painful, manual paper process akin to processing about 10 work orders.

The TC55 devices are enabled with a Repair Clinic application which serves as a sort of virtual, information rich supervisor during the

inspection process. The application enables maintenance staff to log into the repair clinic to get information and guidance while at the site of the repair.

The devices also support a WebEx feature which lets home office staff assist in the apartment inspection live, making assessments in real time, rather than ones based on poor quality photos later.

Dominium reaped one if its biggest gains from the feature: Analog apartment inspections used to average 1,560 seconds; they fell to an estimated 210 seconds with the TC55 devices.

And as Dominium doubles in size over the next few years, "We are going to drive an automated communication process as a result of being able to do our work electronically," Mitchell concluded.

emkat

About Emkat
Emkat is a national leader in the automated identification data capture industry. The company's focus is to equip clients with mobile computing technology that meets the end-user's process and procedural requirements. Using a simple customer first approach, Emkat helps streamline operations by providing complete technology solutions that seamlessly integrate with the client's data collection and ERP system.

To learn more about how Emkat and Zebra can help you improve operational efficiency and worker productivity, visit www.emkat.com and www.zebra.com

---

ZEBRA