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The changing face of winter gritting

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Jason Petsch, CEO of Outco discusses how consumer-style technology is changing winter gritting in the UK

Today, technology and data are changing every sector – and the outdoor estate is no exception. In areas such as winter gritting where responsiveness, and above all consistency of service can protect businesses from liability, technology has completely changed the game.

To understand this, just think about the impact of smartphones over the past decade. As smartphone users, we learned that we could ask for anything, anywhere and at any time. With the smartphone app, we learned to expect this to be convenient and easy. Whether CEOs or interns, a whole generation of employees brought these same expectations to work: Mobile technology accelerated a trend known as the 'consumerisation of IT', where technologies and models born in the consumer world start changing the way the business world operates. So when users insisted on using their smartphones for work emails, IT departments have been obliged to adapt.

This trend towards greater convenience, immediacy and accessing any service on any device have been further accelerated by Covid-19. While companies like Amazon and Deliveroo saw business boom during the pandemic, the shift towards the use of personal devices in the workplace also increased. Research by Zippia found that use of personal mobiles and computers for work increased by 58%[1] during the pandemic and this change has had a profound impact. Once users started accessing services on their own devices, their expectations shifted to expect greater convenience and integration. Research by Dell revealed that 61% of Gen Y and 50% of 30+ workers believe the tech tools they use in their personal lives are more effective and productive than those used in their work life.

How these trends are impacting winter gritting

As the world shifted towards mobility, this is also driving change in how services in the FM world are being delivered. This includes winter gritting which has been transformed by the use of data – and increasingly by the ability to bring that insight to mobile devices. Our winter gritting business was built around a technology-first outlook. This included developing a bespoke technology platform that uses an algorithmic decision-making process to automate service delivery in response to weather data. Being able to trigger our activity in this way proved key to delivering critical services at the right time to thousands of sites nationwide within a very tight delivery window – even in the worst weather.

Data and automation have proved a real game changer and we have scooped multiple industry awards (including a recent shortlisting for a Property Tech Company of the Year 2023 award).

However, it's no longer enough to keep these advantages in the background. Customer expectations have shifted here too – perhaps more so, given how critical and time-sensitive decisions can be for businesses facing disruptive weather conditions. If you're deciding if your distribution centre can open the next day, you simply need to know right now. Hence, mobile devices and 24/7 data on demand are now at the heart of winter gritting and snow and ice clearance.

In our own business this need to bring insight to customers in the moment via their mobile devices has been the biggest change to how we use our platform. We developed the Pulse app, which gives customers a live-feed access to Nimbus and puts live service information in the palm of their hands.

Recently shortlisted as app of the year in the UK Business Tech Awards, Pulse shows the services that are being delivered in a real-time environment. Customers can access service photos and other detailed information including live maps that show where our operators have been on site at a precise time. The same app also allows customers to contact and communicate directly with the team at the push of a button. In addition to ensuring peace of mind in the moment, this granular data can prove invaluable in the long term: having detailed, precise records helps to provide a powerful legal defence after the event in case trips and falls occur on site. Anyone familiar with tracking a delivery or a takeaway on their phone will

find this push-button immediacy immediately recognisable. Indeed, as well as being highly functional, a focus on user experience ensures the app offers the sort of intuitive interaction that one would expect of a consumer app.

When technology is made simpler and more immediate, it's not only the customers that gain: the integration of mobile and back-end technology powered by a resilient Amazon Web Services cloud infrastructure, ensures that operators on the ground don't have to produce time-consuming paperwork and can focus on the job at hand. The same mobile technology also increases accuracy, thanks to GPS data that helps get teams to precise locations to perform location-specific or time-specific tasks. Pulse also provides alerts to operators if they're working outside of required areas. This becomes even more important at night in frozen or snowy conditions when visibility is limited.

The app also helps to protect operators working in the toughest conditions by building in pre-commencement vehicle checks, point of work risk assessments and fitness for work checks via the app workflow. Needless to say, this has proved incredibly important for our own health and safety compliance as well as creating a much more efficient workforce with productivity improvements up by 39% year on year, with millions of jobs delivered at a 98.99% SLA delivery.

Oppenheimer would no doubt agree: When technology changes, it's hard to go back. Once there's a possibility of providing real time service status, that becomes the status quo. When technology lets you provide proven legally defensible data that your sites have been cleared, it's hard to ignore.

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[1] https://www.comparitech.com/blog/information-security/byod-statistics/#:~:text=BYOD%20usage%20increased%20by%2058%25%20during%20the%20Covid%2D19%20pandemic&text=Zippia%20reports%20that%20BYOD%20usage,no%20impact%20on%20BYOD%20usage.