

Bruce Stanley looks at the best methods of keeping in touch with one another when you're spread across the length and breadth of the golf course



Can you hear me mother?

ON THE RIGHT COURSE



Most Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers have a need to keep in close contact with the members of their team.

Knowing where staff are working on the golf course, how they are progressing and when they have completed a specific task are important elements in safe and efficient greenkeeping operations.

The ability to communicate instantly across the whole of a golf course not only eliminates wasted time but also enables problems to be dealt with quickly and new jobs to be allocated without one or both parties needing to return to the machinery sheds.

However, for many greenkeepers and Course Managers, keeping in touch with staff still involves driving around the golf course until you find the person with whom you want to speak. This is fine if you know where everyone is and you can be sure of finding them, but is not always a simple task on an area of 100 acres or more.

Today, with the continuing advances in mobile communication systems, there is no major reason why one should not be able to contact immediately another person working anywhere on a golf course.

Mention mobile communications and most people's thoughts turn to the mobile telephone. The companies who provide mobile phone services

boast about their excellent nationwide networks, quoting coverage figures in excess of 98% of the UK population. But there are still problems.

Mobile phones rely on repeater aerials to transmit signals across the countryside. Yet, each aerial has a limited range and it is not uncommon to lose contact suddenly and completely, particularly in lightly populated, more rural parts of the country. Mobile phones are fine if you happen to live or work near a major road, city or town, but step onto a golf course in the middle of the countryside and you may find the signal becomes very weak or disappears completely.

Then there are the running costs. Although mobile phone ownership is relatively inexpensive compared with five years ago, the basic annual charge made by a mobile service provider will rarely be less than £180. Exceed any "free" or "inclusive" talk time provided as part of the basic monthly contract, and the cost of communication quickly starts to escalate.

Although excellent in a one-to-one situation or when travelling extensively around the country, the mobile phone is not the most cost-effective solution when needing to keep in touch with several people at the same time within a clearly defined area.

Nor, for that matter, is a pager. Although inexpensive to own, they provide no voice to voice contact so

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are of little use where instantaneous reaction or response is wanted. The pager is best employed as a simple means of alerting or "calling in" another person, for example, in a hospital or within a factory or warehouse complex.

By far the best and most economical solution for anyone working in a golf course environment is the two-way, or professional, radio. Apart from the initial purchase cost, the only regular outgoing is the annual licence issued by the Department of Trade and Industry, a legal requirement for anyone using a two-way radio.

The cost of the licence varies according to the range of the equipment, the total number of handsets in use and how many operating frequencies have been allocated by the DTI.

For a golf course with eight handsets operating on a single frequency within a three km (1.8 mile) radius, the total annual licence cost would be £100 - with no additional costs such as call charges or connection fees.

According to Sue Preater, branch manager of Swindon-based telecommunications specialist, Lincom Communications, golf courses should avoid the simplest and cheapest forms of two-way radio, commonly known as "walkie-talkies".

"Such equipment normally costs up to £180 for each handset and is fine for domestic situations, weekend scout camps and residential homes," she explained. "However, they are not sufficiently robust or powerful for everyday professional use. Because they have pre-programmed frequencies, they will need to be

returned manually in the event of interference from another user trying to communicate on the same frequency."

The recommended entry-level two-way radio for everyday professional use is the single channel unit which has been allocated its own dedicated operating frequency by the DTI. Easy to use with a basic push button and talk operation, the radio provides instant two-way communication between handset and handset or handset and base unit, and vice versa. The purchase price of such radios is in the region of £250.

As many users have found, one of the major benefits of two-way radio can also lead to problems due to the exceptional portability of the handsets. It is not uncommon for radios to go "missing" just when they are needed.

To ensure that staff can always contact the office, and vice versa, it is well worthwhile investing in a mains-powered local base station as part of the system, at a cost of around £450. On hilly or undulating terrain, it may be necessary also to install an external mast antenna to enable the base station to communicate across the complete course.

For those who are regularly on the move, there are also units available for fitting permanently into vehicles, supplied complete with an integral speaker, palm microphone and antenna. Prices range from £260 to £300-plus, depending on the range of features.

With a basic single channel two-way radio, all communications take place across one dedicated frequency allocated by the DTI. As a result, everyone on the course equipped with a radio pre-set to the operating frequency can listen in to conversations between other users.

To overcome this, manufacturers offer two-way radios which operate on a single frequency split into 16 or more channels. By allocating different channels to different users, individual handsets can be called up separately. Cost of these radios range from around £370 for a simple unit with manual channel tuning to £450-plus for models with keypad dialing and an LCD display.

The additional circuitry within these more sophisticated radios means that users have available to them an added range of facilities including a voice-activated hands-free capability when used in conjunction with optional headsets.

There are also power level adjusters to give longer battery life and, with keypad models, the ability to store commonly-used contact numbers and



display the name of incoming callers. A useful safety feature is the lone worker alert which automatically puts the radio into emergency mode if the worker does not respond to a preset warning signal. Other users on the same frequency will then be alerted.

Although the DTI requires an operating licence for each frequency it allocates, it is possible to set up multi-channel radios to allow private conversations between individual handsets or a handset and base unit, as if talking on a different frequency.

This is achieved by the supplier pre-tuning the two items of equipment to a dedicated channel which cannot be accessed by any other user, giving similar security to using a completely separate frequency.

Such a feature can be useful where, for example, the course manager needs regular communication with another manager within a hotel and golf complex or during a tournament when totally separate communications may be required with the organisers' office and the greenstaff.

Two-way radios with keypads can also be programmed to allow three or more users to communicate simultaneously.

All of the above systems are designed to work over a radius of up to 3km where there are no major obsta-



cles in the way. For difficult terrain or where greater range is required, the supplier will normally recommend a more complex base unit, known as a base repeater station. Costing in the region of £2,000, such equipment needs to be positioned in a building at a high point on the course.

If all suitable buildings are low-lying, it will be necessary to install an external antenna mast higher than the rest of the course. The important point is the availability of an electricity supply to power the repeater station.

When the equipment is to be used over distances greater than 3km, a wide area licence will be required from the DTI. This costs £140 to cover a base unit and nine handsets operating on one frequency. Cost of a single frequency wide area licence for up to 25 handsets is £250.

If aerial positioning is difficult or one does not wish to go to the expense of a wide area licence, a lower cost alternative can be to rent space on the repeater mast of a supplier of communications equipment.

Positioned at high points around the UK, such masts give local coverage over distances averaging 25 miles, enabling individual handsets within the area to communicate with each other and a base station via the repeater mast.

Lincom charges a £10 rental fee per month per handset for use of its masts but there is no other charge because users are covered by Lincom's own telecommunications licence.

Moisture is one of the biggest enemies of mobile communications equipment. For optimum protection, Lincom's Sue Preater recommends the use of a leather rather than a nylon case.

Most cases come with a belt loop, but for totally security, especially during hands-free operation, a shoulder strap or body harness are advised.

"As an authorised Motorola dealer, we have access to probably the widest range of accessories on the market," commented Mrs Preater. "These include a range of headsets with boom mikes, the most sophisticated of which conform to statutory ear-defending standards.

"Other accessories available include batteries with a life of up to 14 hours before they need recharging, single and multiple recharging units and vehicle adaptors which enable a two-way radio to be used and recharged in a vehicle, in similar manner to a mobile phone."



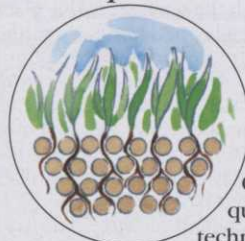
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