

SNOW+ICE

GUIDE

PHIL HARWOOD WASN'T buying into technology when he was a principal of a major Green Industry company 10 years ago, but he wouldn't go without it if he were in the business today. Harwood, president of Pro-Motion Consulting, has seen how far job-tracking system functionality has come.

Business technology has come so far, the way companies manage equipment and personnel looks completely different than it did a decade ago. And that's a good thing, contractors say.

From billing tools to route trackers, technology is helping snow management companies save and recover revenue, making them wonder how they managed without them.

Controlled chaos

There is enough chaos in day-to-day business. Add a snowstorm to the equation, and there are plenty of opportunities for reporting and billing errors on top of everything else.

"During a snow event, there's a lot of equipment, people and moving parts going 24 hours a day, especially with spreaders," says Andrew Jenkins, branch manager of ValleyCrest in Chantilly, Va. "We could be going a few days straight. We've got to keep the equipment going to keep clients happy."

ValleyCrest trucks are equipped with SnowEx's tracking devices, which document salt use and job times. In the past, employees wrote down the times they started and finished a job and how much salt they used. The method of manual recording can lead to human error if the truck operator forgets to



Job-tracking technology includes salt-use tracking devices, mobile time clocks and GPS systems.

USER *(and profit)* FRIENDLY

The latest snow market job-tracking technology helps companies run tighter ships by picking up where human capabilities end. **BY HEATHER TAYLOR**

record everything. But technology takes the error factor away, Jenkins says.

"When you get to the job site, you press 'start job,' then 'stop job' when you're done," he says. "Between starting and stopping, it counts your material usage quantity, and it's very accurate."

Accuracy is invaluable when a customer contests a bill, alleging the contractor never hit the property that day. "You can go back to them with all this data and say, 'Look, we're not guesstimating,' which was the old-school practice," Jenkins says.

The technology has to be used properly to get such accurate results, which

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is why South Bend, Ind.-based Foegley Landscape has a three-method system to track jobs. In addition to time sheets, the company uses Exaktime's mobile time clock and FleetMatics' GPS system.

"Sometimes the crews get so wrapped up in it they forget to record their hours in Exaktime," company president John Foegley says. "If something is missed, we fall back to the GPS records. Someone in the office makes sure everything is balanced to the minute."

Tim Schrage, vice president of Signature Land Services in Anchorage, Alaska, says the Exaktime time clock system installed on employees' smartphones works instantly.

"If the crews are out working at night, by the time the administrative staff gets in the next morning, they can pull in the field notes from the previous night and answer any questions without having to track down the employee who



Foegley Landscape uses a three-pronged system for snow job tracking, including time sheets, mobile time clocks and GPS.

reported it," he says.

Some technologies uncover lost revenue.

"The amount of money that has been found on the GPS [that had previously been overlooked] is mind-blowing," says Foegley Vice President Brian Hominiuk. "We would have missed out on a lot without it."

Schrage adds that job-tracking

software's money-saving and analytical features make it indispensable.

"It's a huge time saver in the office," Schrage says. "You can report much more accurately and on time. It allows you to look at each shift and person and determine whether you made money or you didn't. To me, that's worth a million bucks."

Achieving efficiency

Snow contractors say job-tracking programs also help the bottom line by keeping employees and the trucks they drive more productive. One way it works is by cutting down on travel time between jobs.

Software helps Foegley's company cut down on "windshield time" by mapping more efficient routes. In addition, the software is set up so when a truck pulls into a gas station, Burger King or similar business, the office staff is alerted.

"We don't want to be Big Brother, but we need to account for the crews," Foegley says.

Like most companies, Foegley Landscape looks for every possible way to cut down on fuel consumption. Its GPS system gives the crews several ways to do that. It keeps track of mileage and sends alerts when service is needed, and it also monitors gas-wasting truck idle time.

The cost of saving money

Naturally, a system that can help a company with efficiency and saving money is going to require an initial investment. It can cost anywhere from \$200 to \$400 to buy each vehicle's

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unit, depending on the product and the size of the company. Installation requirements vary as well. While some companies have the vendors install the equipment in the vehicles for a fee, others use their own in-house mechanics to install it.

Ongoing costs vary by product. Some, like FleetMatics, have a rental fee but offer a seasonal option where companies make payments only during the busy season. Schrage pays a \$500 annual fee to use the tracking system.

For app-driven technology such as Exaktime's product, expenses include a smartphone and the data package from the cell phone provider.

Schrage's employees have the option of checking out an employee phone for use on the job. Or, they can access the job-tracking app the company uses on their own smartphones.

Powering up the crews

Contractors also like job-tracking technology because it's easy to use.

"The bulk of employees these days are under age 30. It's technology they've grown up with," Schrage says. "For the longer-term employees who aren't as familiar with technology, there's a big green button that says 'start.' The GPS



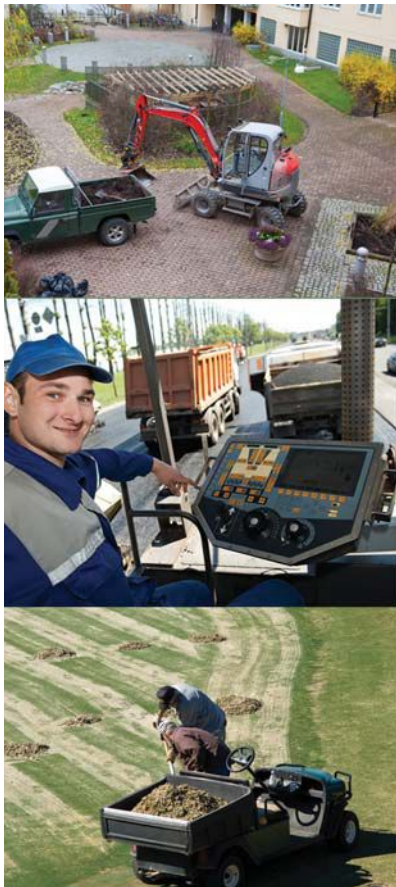
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shows you directions to the nearest account and you verify if that's your next job. It's pretty darn simple."

While the technical aspect might not be a problem, it can be challenging to get the crews to remember to use the systems or use them properly. The leadership at Foegley encourages

buy-in by recognizing crew members and foremen when they consistently use the technology correctly. Rewards include a \$3-per-hour bonus and gas cards or gift cards to their favorite restaurants or stores.

On the other hand, there are no repercussions for those who might be

slow to catch on. Sometimes language, culture or unfamiliarity are barriers to getting employees on board.

"We keep working with them and they eventually get it," Hominiuk says. "We don't punish them if they're not good with technology."

Choose wisely

As for price, Harwood advises potential adopters to do their due diligence.

"Technology changes so quickly, so there's a lot of work in knowing what's available," Harwood says. "A lot of contractors go to trade shows and pass by the booths with technology to go stare at a box blade for an hour. They assume technology is too complicated and expensive, so they don't do their homework."

Due diligence should go beyond listening to a salesperson, Harwood adds. He suggests finding peers who use the different systems and asking their opinions.

Harwood adds that the search doesn't have to be limited to suppliers in the landscape or snow management industries.

"I have clients who use GPS and data-tracking technology from the trucking industry because they have a background in trucking," Harwood says. "Every industry that has vehicles on the road has a tracking system, and that expands the possible solutions."

Smaller contractors may not think a tracking system is for them, but Harwood points out now might be the best time to get into it. The fewer the trucks in the fleet, he says, the fewer units you have to purchase initially. Then, he asserts, you can purchase additional units as the company grows and staff already will know how to use them.

"Small companies can still save on efficiency and productivity gains," he adds.

That type of savings is appealing to any size company.

"Without the technology, I don't know where we would be," Hominiuk says. "Losing money, I guarantee." **LMI**

Taylor is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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