

THE MOBILE OFFICE



Aquality goes on the road with Windows Mobile and iPaq

NAAS-BASED Aquality is one company that has embraced the concept of mobile working. The Co Kildare firm has been distributing high-end German bathroom products to independent retailers around Ireland for three years. It has a staff of eight, with three working mostly on the road.

Managing director Andrew Murphy believes effective use of mobile technology is essential for his firm and is key to its growth. Much of the company's work involves pitching its wares to the architects and contractors who specify the bathroom fittings installed in new domestic and commercial developments such as hotels and corporate headquarters, though most of its orders come from bathroom supply stores.

The company began in 2005 as a one-man operation run by Murphy from Dublin using a partition on a partner's hard drive. When he realised business had grown enough to warrant setting up branch offices and employing three full-time sales people, Murphy went to IT partner CDSOFT for advice on building the company's systems.

Aquality worked with CDSOFT to

develop a mobile office environment which gives the sales team real-time access to CRM information as well as accounting and stock control data hosted on a centralised Small Business Server – all while on the road. This allows sales people to place orders from their iPaq 514s and to tell customers when they will be delivered after checking stock levels.

"When we started off, we knew we wanted HP servers, as we had used them before, and Sage software, which we were also familiar with. We also wanted a system that was secure," said Murphy.

CDSOFT ran a software audit to help us decide what we needed. The result was a centralised SBS based-system that the four sales people access via VPN from laptops and iPaqs. It includes applications such as Remote Fax, which is important to Aquality, as many bathroom retailers use faxes to send orders. Remote Fax allows sales people to see orders faxed in on their laptops. "As a small company, we live or die based on the service we are able to give our customers," says Murphy. "We wanted to make sure we were using a strongly branded product, as we sell on the

strength of our brands."

Murphy says he has found his HP servers extremely reliable in supporting staff on the road. Sales staff use Windows Mobile-based phones to access diaries and e-mail, while Murphy can also access the server at any time to ensure he has visibility of where his staff are and which customers they are meeting.

One of the challenges for small companies using Microsoft, says Murphy, is maximising what you can get out of the box. "I think the Blackberry has done very well, but Windows Mobile gives you a lot of additional benefits – something as simple as having your Outlook contacts automatically synch with your phone for no additional cost – it's part of what you get when you use Microsoft. It's pretty much a no-brainer." The ability to synch updated contact details to central systems was one of the big benefits of moving from a standard phone to the 514, said Murphy. "It's simple and obvious, but it's one of the best things in the whole world. Now whenever I add a new contact, it just synchs," he said.

"Remote access is vital so our sales people can check stock levels in real time without having to make a phone call," he explains. Sales people also use their laptops to access a CRM package called Super Office for contact management and customer information. Sales staff can update the central server with this information via a virtual private network link from home every night so that Murphy can keep track of their activities. "They can schedule meetings for me. Everybody can see what everybody else is doing," he explains. "We've spent quite a lot on our IT systems over the last year, but it's not something I begrudge because our systems work really well," says Murphy. He estimates that Aquality's two HP servers, laptops, iPaqs, support and software cost around €80,000.

"Mobile access is definitely working for us. Remote access to Sage and our CRM system means I don't have to drive two hours down and back to Naas every day to check reports filed on the servers there. I have worked for bigger companies that have less remote access than we do now. I think the software market accepts that mobility is becoming pervasive, and that mobile applications are key. The tipping point is coming. It's up to software companies to ensure their products are accessible by mobile devices. If they don't, they won't last very long."