Product: ToolHound OnSite

Client: Operating in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Argentina and the United States, TransAlta Utilities is Canada's largest investor-owned electric utility. With interests in gas and electricity distribution, independent generation, energy services and energy marketing, the company boasts over $5 billion in assets and $1.6 billion in revenues. In addition, TransAlta owns and operates 7 of the top 10 thermal generating units in Canada, and is ranked 6th in terms of volume of energy marketed in 14 western States (13th in the entire US).

Challenge: TransAlta was experiencing problems in their Edmonton plant tool cribs. Tools flowing out to work sites did not always return, and the company had no way to accurately track where they were or who last had them. The method TransAlta used to track their tools in 1993 was what Tool Crib Manager, Dave Stainthorp, refers to as, "archaic." It was called "pen and paper," he reports. "You couldn't keep track."

Quite simply, crib operators were armed with nothing more than a sign out sheet, which Stainthorp recalls just wasn't up to the job. Tools went out, but when they didn't come back, there wasn't any way to assign responsibility for the loss. What TransAlta needed was to introduce some accountability into their tool tracking system.

Solution: ToolHound works by applying bar code labels to tools in the crib. Employees or work orders are also assigned bar codes, and tool crib operators simply scan in the employee and tool bar code labels to sign out a tool to a particular person or job site using radio frequency scanners. This information can be transferred instantly into the computer via radio frequency communication, or saved on the scanner and downloaded later via a batch file system.

This computerized issue/return system is not only easier to use than a sign out sheet and faster than manual keyboard entry, but it also keeps much more accurate track of the tools. No matter who physically returns the tool, the computer has a record of who originally signed it out, and returns it accordingly. And if a tool doesn't come back, TransAlta now has a reliable record of where it went, and who is responsible for replacing it.

Functions such as quick and easy transfer of tools between cribs, automated reordering and receiving of tools, and the tracking of tool costs in the cribs can also be completed right from the scanner — no keyboarding required!

Besides quick issue/returns, and reliable tool tracking, ToolHound offers a number of other features, such as repair and maintenance tracking, report generation, and verification of employee certification. Stainthorp's personal favorite is the automatic reordering.

When tools are initially entered into inventory on the computer, the operator has the option of selecting a minimum number of tools/consumable products required to remain on hand. A report can then be generated which notifies the operator if any inventory is getting low.

This feature can be a real time-saver for two reasons. It ensures that there is never a shortage of anything when a product is needed, and it frees the tool crib operator from the constant struggle of manually keeping track of inventory levels. Stainthorp finds the reports to be especially helpful when dealing with consumables. "It's nice," he says. "I don't even worry about it. I fax in an order and it's done."

Results: Stainthorp reports that the ToolHound system has cut tool crib expenses by 30% at TransAlta's Edmonton plant. This is a significant savings for any sized company. "It's a godsend," he says.

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