

Virginia Power: Bar Codes Deliver Powerful Tool Control

Clover, VA--With over 2 million customers in 2 states depending on them for electricity, relies on a variety of different fuel and energy sources in order to increase the overall dependability of their power system. On a more basic level, however, the company keeps operations running smoothly through a commitment to keeping on top of the maintenance at their 10 stations. To do this efficiently, VA Power's Clover Bar Station utilizes a bar code driven tool control system to help avoid unscheduled breakdowns.

Until 3 years ago, VA Power stations were all using a tool tracking system which had been developed in-house. Tools were assigned a name and a number which was etched onto the item. This data was keyed into a computerized database every time an item was issued or returned to the tool crib. While still in use at many of the power company's stations, this in-house system was replaced three years ago at the Clover Bar site by a bar code-driven system called "Tool Hound". "We wanted to be able to bar code," says Instrument Supervisor Bob Newman, noting that this method is not only faster than their old tool control system, but allows for better tracking of individual items and offers the ability to run better reports.

Tool Hound works something like a library system. Tools are labeled with bar codes, and ID numbers are assigned to employees. When an employee needs to borrow a tool, crib operators use portable laser scanners to scan in the employee number and tool bar code. The system will track everything from tool usage and locations, to repair schedules and inventory value. "Everything is labeled," Newman reports, adding that this makes tracking the actual usage of each individual tool possible.

While the system can be implemented using either batch or radio frequency scanners, VA Power has chosen to utilize an RF system. This not only gives the operator mobility, but allows him/her to communicate in "real time" with the main database from anywhere in the crib. This comes in especially handy since Newman's PC is located in his office, not in the tool crib itself. Thanks to RF, the PC's location does not matter. Any information scanned from the handheld is sent via radio waves directly to the computer's database, making the most current inventory information available at all times.

In addition, information about employees and tools are also available to the operator from the handheld in real time. For example, if an employee tries to check out a tool for which he is not certified, the operator will be flagged from the handheld. Using the same principles, if a tool due for repair or maintenance is about to be issued, the handheld will warn the operator of this as well.

But while Tool Hound has brought a new level of accountability to VA Power's tool crib, Newman admits that they are not using the system to its full potential. For one thing, they do not assign employee ID cards, but simply punch employee tool check numbers into the handheld before scanning the tool bar code. In addition, the plant does not track consumable use, but allows employees free access to the smaller, more inexpensive items.

But while consumable tracking is not a priority at VA Power, the tracking of those items which may need repair or maintenance is. This is why Newman sees the usage tracking and reporting functions as very valuable features of the bar code system.

Since the power company individually bar codes each tool or piece of equipment, it is easy for the actual usage of each item to be determined using Tool Hound. For Newman, this means that he has the ability

to see where they need to increase the quantities of certain items and decrease others. In addition, it helps them to determine which jobs are going to need specific items and subsequently keep these assets available for priority jobs.

The reporting functions, which offer reports ranging from location information to maintenance schedules, are also of great value to VA Power. "You can get a report of any information you want," Newman reports.

For VA Power, keeping track of the tools they use to maintain their Clover Bar Station is an important part of ensuring the smooth operation of their facility, and Tool Hound has proven to be a big help in this. Other stations are now looking into the advantages of having a bar coded tool tracking system in their tool cribs. "It saves us time," Newman asserts, "and that translates into saving money."