Q&A: How The Internet Of Things Has Transformed Our Service Operation

TankScan

By Sarah Nicastro, publisher/editor in chief, Field Technologies

Publisher/Editor-In-Chief Sarah Nicastro talks one-on-one with
Sherri McDaniel of ATEK Access Technologies about the impact IoT can have.

Unless you've been living under a rock, you've been hearing a lot of IoT (Internet of Things) buzz lately. Why? IoT is changing the way many companies operate — and is on pace to impact many more in the near future. One company that's already reaping the benefits of IoT is ATEK Access Technologies. ATEK Access Technologies is a technology solutions company that has revolutionized its operations with the capabilities of M2M (machine-to-machine) and IoT. Here, Sherri McDaniel, president of ATEK Access Technologies, shares firsthand insight on the company's vision for and use of IoT.

Field Technologies: When/how did you first learn about M2M/IoT technology? What was your initial impression on how the technology may impact your organization?

McDaniel: The Internet of Things is a fascinating topic and one that will surely change all of our lives in the coming years. I view what we at ATEK Access Technologies are doing as taking data from our devices and turning it into information that our employees and customers can act on immediately via IoT technologies. The vision of how IoT will provide value in the media today is exactly what we at ATEK Access Technologies are providing for our customers.

ATEK Access Technologies has three product brands. One of them, TankScan, sits squarely in the IoT space. TankScan is a family of tank-level measurement solutions for the light industrial above-ground tank space. It allows anyone who has remotely deployed tanks to monitor their tank inventory from anywhere an Internet connection is available. The information is then used to improve customer service by knowing exactly when tanks need to be filled or emptied, improve the efficiency of truck fleets by knowing how to optimize routes, and improve safety by eliminating the need for anyone to climb tanks to get tank fill information.

TankScan has been around for years, but what's new for ATEK is the idea of using more of the device information to vastly improve our service offering to TankScan customers. Our customer base was asking for additional help around servicing their capital investment, and we wanted to be able to assist them with that. We started brainstorming around those needs and realized that IoT could help us provide that service in addition to the tank-level information.

The ATEK Service Platform monitors all of the device and connectivity health information from the devices and makes it visible to us in a single dashboard. When we log in every morning, we can see any outliers in the field — we know if any batteries are starting to deplete, we know what the uptime has been, and we know about the cellular connectivity health. The entire ATEK Service Platform is built on a technology called The Social Machine by Etherios, which in turn is built on the Salesforce1 platform.

This allows us to automatically create cases in our Salesforce environment for customers who may be experiencing problems. This drives immediate action by our Customer Care Team as they automatically start placing orders for service and parts. It's a more proactive way of servicing customers.

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Field Technologies: Once you learned about what the technology could do, how did you go about evaluating the solution and building a business case for the use of IoT within ATEK?

McDaniel: As every good business does, we had to look at the cost and the return for the ATEK Service Platform that we were proposing. We valued things like customer satisfaction and customer safety improvements that could provide us differentiation in the marketplace. We also valued the more traditional measures of productivity gains we could experience at ATEK by having a tool like the ATEK Service Platform and the recurring revenue that we could gain by having a service offering.

Field Technologies: What are the biggest ways that IoT has impacted your organization?

McDaniel: The IoT via our new ATEK Service Platform has provided a number of benefits both to our customers and to our internal organization. Our customers experience an entirely new level of service from us. They also experience their own employee safety improvements by eliminating unnecessary trips to check on network challenges.

Internally ATEK has seen benefits as well. We have a differentiated service offering that we gain revenue from, while also delighting customers. Additionally, we have been able to double our installed base without adding support personnel because we have access to so much information in one easy-to-use portal.

Field Technologies: A lot of companies say they're overwhelmed by the volume and types of data they receive from an IoT solution that they weren't getting previously. How did you handle the Big Data aspect of your solution?

McDaniel: Big Data can be overwhelming. My experience is that it is critical to create a limited scope for the types and amounts of data being collected, along with exactly how it is going to be used. And then stick with it! Do not allow scope creep in the initial release. As the tools and the data start being used, there will be many ideas for enhancements and improvements. Save all of that for phase two after there has been time to properly digest what is already being collected. I've seen some organizations get paralyzed and do nothing because they can't get to a scope that is manageable.

Field Technologies: In your experience with IoT, what surprised you most about the technology itself or the impact it has had on your organization?

McDaniel: What I've been most amazed by is the amount of interest that other organizations have shown in the service solution that we have created by effectively leveraging IoT. There are clearly pent up needs that aren't being addressed today. In addition, the one thing that remains true is that the technology alone is not what is impactful, but rather using the technology to drive business process improvements in your organization is where you obtain the value.

Field Technologies: What's the biggest challenge you faced during your evaluation, deployment, or use of M2M/IoT, and what advice do you have for other companies on how to conquer that same challenge knowing what you do now?

McDaniel: My advice is to choose partners wisely. With IoT being the buzzword in the industry now, there are many companies looking to get engaged. Choosing those that can truly consult with your business, understand your needs, and help create reasonable project plans is critical. That requires partners that have experience in specific industries and businesses as well as in the creation of the hardware and software.

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Field Technologies: What advice do you have overall for a company like yours that's just beginning to look at what IoT can do for them?

McDaniel: We have found that change management processes are most critical in determining long-term success. Often it is easy to overlook the role that people play in a technology deployment, but the reality is that any time we need people to change their roles and their day-to-day behaviors, it can get dicey. Having a plan for how people will be trained, how expectations will be set, and what metrics are being put into place will drive a great deal of success as companies look to get value out of their IoT deployments.

Another trap is automating the exact processes that have been in place for years, without truly looking at what the new IoT solutions can do to actually transform business processes for efficiency and value. It takes a creative team of stakeholders to research and evaluate how the business can truly get the most benefit from all of the new tools at their disposal.