

RESEARCH PAPER

Fast forward to improved field worker productivity

Equipping the growing legion of field workers for success

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Executive summary

Businesses are under enormous pressure to deliver services and products faster than ever before. To meet that demand, many have been ramping up their mobile workforces or looking to increase the efficiency of those they have. In industries as diverse as retail, manufacturing, utilities, financial services and caring professions, a mobile workforce is closing the gap between the organisation and the customer, patient or clients.

The mobile workforce has become essential for companies to compete. New technologies are allowing them to be more efficient in their operations, as well as presenting a friendly face to the business. Customer service is a key differentiator, and a field workforce that operates in a timely and efficient manner can help to deliver a service that's exceptional - rather than just ordinary.

Higher expectations from customers have required businesses to rethink the way they invest in and use digital tools and technologies. Field workers need tools that will help them to do their job in a way that is efficient and customer-friendly.

With more employees working offsite there is a need for better control and communication when using these digital tools. Field workers need to be empowered by tools that can help them share documents and data in real-time, or to provide hard copies of relevant documents for the customer. These processes fit in with the wider aims of businesses that are undergoing digital transformation, but it generally falls to the IT department to specify the most suitable devices and infrastructure.

The quick-win benefits of mobile technologies such as printing and scanning, for example, have not gone unnoticed by IT leaders surveyed by *Computing*: mobile scanning (37%) and mobile printing (19%) are measures that IT decision makers are taking to deliver better services to their field workers.

In this research paper, we look at the strategies and tools that organisations are implementing in order to properly equip their growing mobile workforces. We consider the opportunities and challenges presented to the IT professional around delivering services faster than ever before and the tools available to them.

Introduction

The term 'field worker' describes a wide variety of roles. *Computing's* research among 120 IT decision makers at organisations with mobile workforces found the most common roles to be engineers or salespeople. However, there were various other field workers mentioned including social care workers, auditors, consultants, inspectors, property managers, scientists, brokers, technical support, surveyors, trainers and drivers.

Enabled by better communications and reliable mobile technologies, there has been a huge growth in the mobile workforce. According to Strategy Analytics¹, the global mobile workforce is set to increase from 1.45 billion in 2016, accounting for 38.8 per cent of the global workforce, to 1.87 billion in 2022, accounting for 42.5 per cent of the global workforce. And mobile workers in North America and Western Europe adopt and use far more mobile technologies than any other regions, according to the same report.

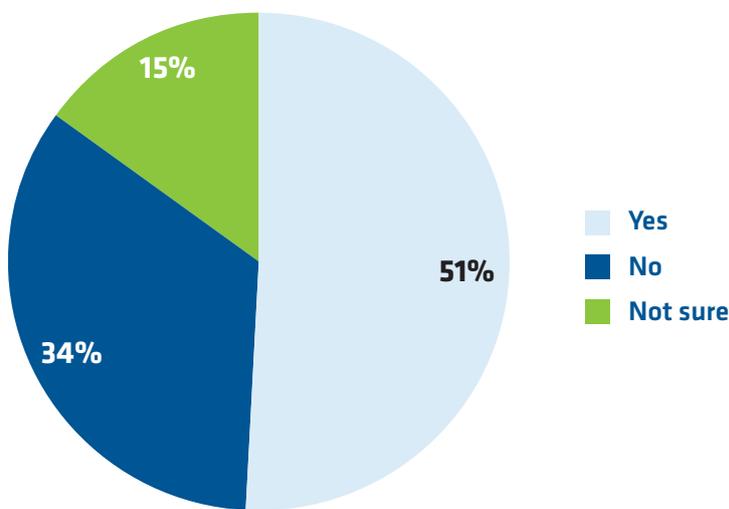
¹ <https://www.strategyanalytics.com/strategy-analytics/news/strategy-analytics-press-releases/strategy-analytics-press-release/2016/11/09/the-global-mobile-workforce-is-set-to-increase-to-1.87-billion-people-in-2022-accounting-for-42.5-of-the-global-workforce#.Wd0F7luPLIU>

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Computing's research found that more than half (51%) of UK IT decision makers who already had a significant number of field workers in their business expected the number to grow over the next five years (Fig. 1). Of those IT decision makers, more than two thirds (68%) believed that their workforce would grow between 5 per cent and 20 per cent. This supports the predictions of Strategy Analytics for a considerably enhanced role for field workers by 2022.

However, this growth is not without its challenges, the most obvious being issues around management and connectivity, logistics, equipment reliability and technical support.

Fig. 1 : Do you envisage the number of field workers in your organisation growing in the next five years?

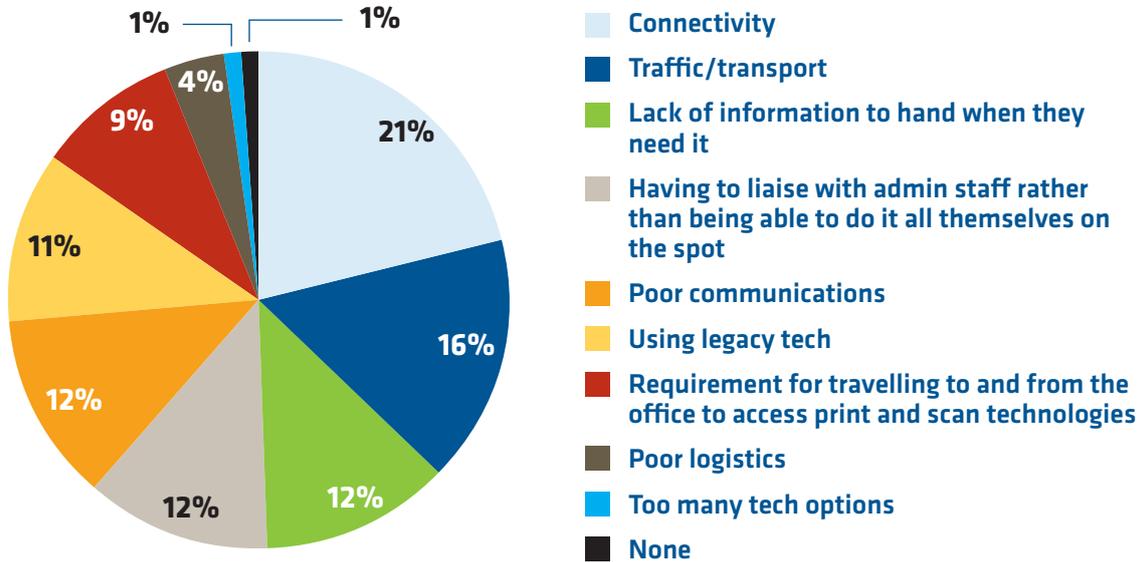


Changes with challenges

While the impetus behind increasing the number of field workers is clear, organisations remain hampered by a number of existing challenges when it comes to maximising their effectiveness. Aside from road traffic congestion, which is out of their control, many of the challenges come down to technology.

Ensuring continuous connectivity remains the biggest of these problems. The next three, after road traffic, are poor communications, a lack of information available to hand, and (related) the need to constantly liaise with supporting services. Considering the importance of data to companies' digital transformation efforts and customer satisfaction, tackling these technical and procedural issues should be made a priority. This doesn't necessarily mean buying completely new technology, but it may require updates to software, new mobile devices, and tools that help data flow between the customer, field worker and their employer.

Fig. 2 : What is the biggest bugbear for existing field workers?



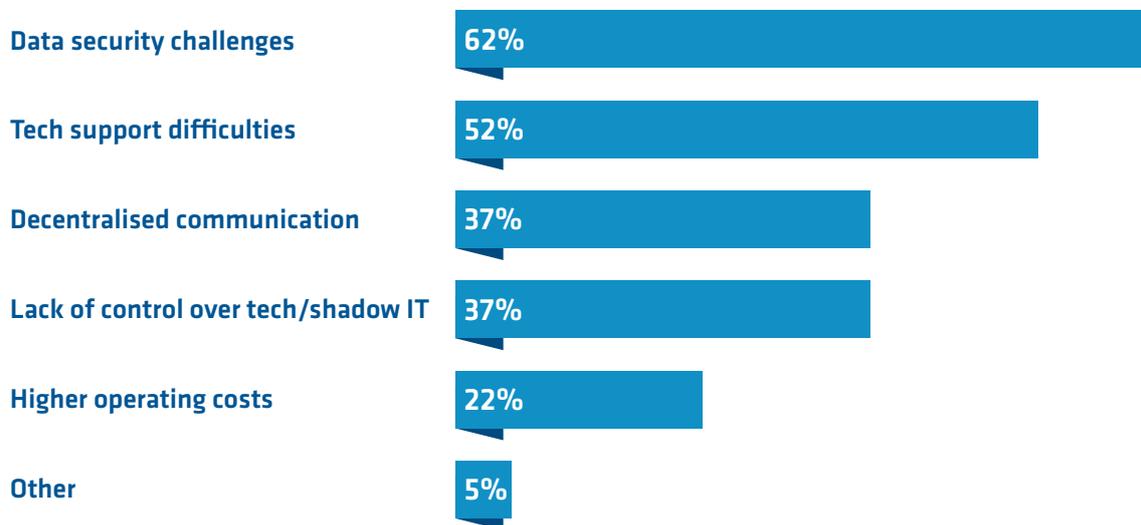
Some of the technical challenges related to running a growing mobile workforce are illustrated in Fig. 3 (overleaf).

Ensuring data is held securely on mobile devices and in motion is essential for any business. Just below that, cited by 52 per cent, came technical support difficulties. Given that they are generally away from physical support networks, it's vital that equipment issued to field workers is rugged, reliable and easy to use.

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Fig. 3 : What are the biggest challenges to the business as a result of a growing mobile workforce?



In terms of organisational strategy, communication is a key issue. Organisations turn to mobile working as a way of completing tasks more swiftly, but this requires an efficient data management network set up for rapid response, or any potential efficiency gains will be eaten away by delays. The tools and technologies selected for field workers obviously have a part to play here too.

Mobile printing and scanning devices can play a key part in driving organisational efficiencies. Businesses need no longer require their employees to travel to and from the office to complete tasks such as printing and scanning, or even to post documents such as quotes, reports, invoices or certificates, and wait for them to come back out to customers. Instead field workers should be able to scan documents and immediately relay the information back to the business, while also being able to provide customers or clients with a physical asset.

For example: field workers can instantly print certification of work or invoices; retailers can print receipts offsite; healthcare organisations can print wristbands or prescriptions; sales teams can provide a hard-copy of their presentations; and pest control companies can provide hard-copy certification following the use of a restricted chemical.

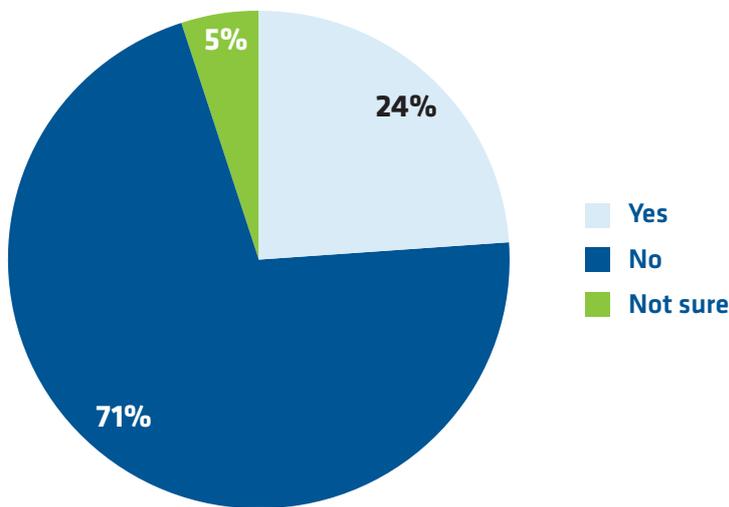
Modern devices answer the data security question too. The best mobile printers and scanners come with secure messaging and encryption technology such as WEP, WPA-PSK, LEAP (CKIP) and WPA2-PSK (AES) built-in as standard.

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Considering the effect that mobile printing and scanning could have on an organisation – and the fact that one in ten IT decision makers believe that travelling to and from the office to print and scan is the biggest bugbear for field workers (Fig. 2), it's perhaps surprising that only about a quarter of businesses (24%) that *Computing* surveyed were using such devices.

Nearly all the businesses surveyed that are using mobile printing or scanning believe that it saves field workers a significant amount of time. The highest proportion (20%) said it saved two hours per field worker per week, followed by one hour (stated by 13%). Some respondents even estimated that mobile printing and scanning saves their company between three and four hours per worker – or about 10 per cent of a normal working week.

Fig. 4 : Does your company/workforce currently use mobile printers/ scanners (ie. portable devices for printing & scanning documentation while working remotely)?



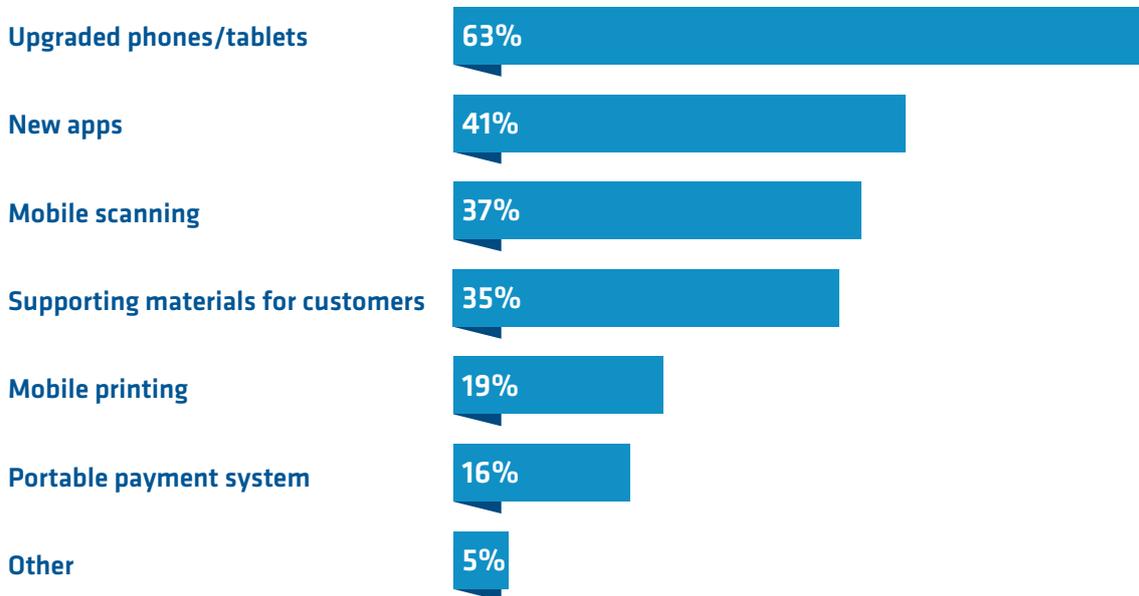
Some feedback showed that mobile scanning was crucial to business, with a respondent noting:

"If they couldn't scan, they would have to get the client to print for them and then re-scan when back in the office," that person said.

The quick-win benefits of the technology have not gone unnoticed by IT leaders; mobile scanning (37%) and mobile printing (19%) are measures that IT decision makers are taking to deliver better services to their field workers (Fig. 5).

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Fig. 5 : What measures are you taking to deliver better services to your field workers?



Indeed, mobile printing and scanning devices are becoming a vital part of the field worker's toolkit along with new phones, tablets, apps and portable payment systems. They represent a simple way to fast-forward the efficiency of mobile field workers. Provided the right models are chosen, with rugged design and enhanced connectivity and security features, businesses can expect an immediate boost in field worker productivity.

Certainly there is a growing understanding of the benefits of mobile printing and scanning. In 2015, analyst IDC predicted that mobile-printed pages would grow approximately 24 per cent by 2018, and found that more than 90 per cent of business mobile users valued the ability to print from anywhere.

Conclusion

Computing surveyed 120 decision makers at businesses with an appreciable field workforce. The majority of respondents were expecting to see an increase in their mobile workforce numbers, and were looking ahead as to how to best equip them.

Organisations can benefit hugely from ensuring their field workers are properly equipped with the latest technology. Whether this means better sales conversions, quicker turnaround in troubleshooting problems on a manufacturing site, or improved customer service, it is clear that mobile workers can extend the reach of the business in a way that no other intervention can. However, the benefits can only be realised with the right tools and processes in place.

Legacy technologies and unnecessary travelling between an office and the field in order to complete work are two major hindrances. After all, a field worker should be able to carry out their job without having to come back to a specific workspace. Organisations should work at minimising these issues as much as possible, reducing friction and allowing field workers to get on with their job.

There are a number of quick wins available to fast forward such efficiencies, but perhaps the simplest, and therefore often overlooked, is to provide access to mobile printing and scanning. Almost every field worker needs to input data and output hard copy documents and labels as part of their day to day routine, so making this as straightforward as possible should be a key priority.

Industry analysts all agree that the relative size of the field workforce is rising to meet the expectations of customers and to give firms a competitive edge. That workforce needs to be the focus of efficiency and productivity enhancements already seen elsewhere as businesses become 'digitised', with the right management, logistical and technical support put in place.

About the sponsor, Brother

Over 100 years of innovation have gone into making Brother the global supplier of technology solutions for business that it is today.

Founded in Japan in 1908, and now operating in 44 countries around the world, Brother has continually adapted to thrive in an ever-changing marketplace.

From managed print services and web conferencing, through to printers and scanners, Brother's products and services are designed to increase efficiency, boost productivity and encourage collaboration in the workplace.

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