Question of the Month: Can technology improve communication and efficiency for field personnel?

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A property manager walks onto a property to do an inspection. They take out a pad of paper and a pen and start to focus on the details. He or she visits tenants and makes notes of maintenance deficiencies and creating talking points for vendor calls or in-house staff. It could be a leasing sign that has fallen from a window, a tenant looking to talk about a renewal or the lack of weeding on the part of the landscaper. If the property manager is responsible for a portfolio of properties, visiting a group of properties in a day is typical. At the end of a long day of field visits, it is time to type the list up, see what calls need to be made, and plan how the deficiencies will be resolved.

In the above scenario, one might say nothing was done incorrectly. The property manager is doing his or her job and managing the properties. At RK Centers, a company founded by Raanan Katz over thirty years ago, we thought hard about the challenges field personnel have on a daily basis and asked the question - how could it be more efficient? How could our personnel communicate better? What technology would allow us to communicate in real time and be maintained by multiple departments and/or employees?

Our first task was to determine how the RK Centers property management/development team could share task lists and have the ability to modify the lists in the field? For many years, our company used a "Property Book," which was managed by one of our office-based team. It was about 200 pages of information that was reprinted as edits were completed at the weekly management meetings. The book included current task lists for property management, property site plans, and important phone numbers for each property. Given its size, the book was not convenient to carry around, not to mention that amount of paper that was being used on a weekly basis.

The solution came after many trials. We had field personnel call into office personnel for manual updates to the lists, which was labor intensive and not effective. We tried laptops and using the remote desktop connection allowing employees to access the server. This method allowed the user to access the network and see the digital lists and/or access property data when needed. While this method was an improvement over the manual method, the time needed to fire up a laptop and access information was just not effective. The company's founder Raanan Katz encouraged the team to continue to seek a technological solution, which came after many months of trial and error. After significant brainstorming, the team found the ideal application to use on the Apple iPad - Notespark. With Notespark, we found the perfect way to access our task lists and manage the important phone numbers needed in the field. Notespark allows for a team to create, edit, and share task lists on the iPad for field staff in real-time, meanwhile, office staff can access this information on the Notespark.com website. Notespark's website www.notespark.com states that, "Notespark gives you a single set of notes that you can access from the web, iPhone and iPad. Your iPhone keeps its own copy of the notes so you can use them even when you are offline and synchronize when you

are ready. By default, your notes are private, but you can also share your notes with other people."
RK Centers has been using this solution since February of this year. We no longer need to maintain a cumbersome property book, which saves money and time. Beyond these savings, our staff now has up to date information in the field.

Another topic that fell under the question of field staff communications was software for the leasing staff to manage leasing activities, which we solved by using a product from Avidian Software. Avidian Prophet CRM software is embedded inside Microsoft Outlook and was accessible on the iPad and web. The software, Prophet was the perfect solution. Users did not have to leave Outlook to manage prospects and it has full reporting capabilities. Previously, the leasing reports had to be manually maintained and needed constant updating. As a result, we did not have real time information about leasing. Now, with Prophet, RK Centers document all leasing prospects and the reporting is completed with a click of a button.

Our final task was to give real time access to files needed in the field. Dropbox was the solution. It allows for remote access and sharing of files. Dropbox has become a vital tool we never knew we needed. We have real time access to leasing brochures for leasing meetings, construction plans for field emergencies, and all other documents that may be needed in the field.

These technological solutions have changed the way RK Centers communicates in the field. They have been extremely effective for our business. RK Centers is a privately held, family-owned real estate development company founded by Raanan Katz which currently owns over 6 million s/f of commercial space. RK Centers' core business is acquiring, developing and operating prime "open air" regional and community shopping centers in New England and South Florida. All of RK Centers' leasing and management is performed in-house by company staff.

More information can be found at www.rkcenters.com.

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