Smartphone calling

Patrick Raleigh explains how the latest smartphone apps are widening the maintenance capabilities of plant engineers

VIEWED BY MANY AS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL OF business the smartphone is set to gain similar importance for process engineers and technicians involved in maintenance and monitoring roles

Smartphone apps now include products, such as Transpara's Visual KPI which gives industry users direct real-time access to metrics, including OEE asset management and equipment monitoring The California-based company's app is designed to deliver KPIs scorecards, trends and alerts to internet-enabled devices and allows users to create reports on their most important metrics (see panel below)

Other US offerings include Heat and Control's ITM app, which is designed to improve OEE in food processing plants and Carl Touch from French software company Carl Source, which delivers alarms and predictive maintenance metrics onto smartphones, PDAs and similar devices

But, perhaps, the most significant development for the process sector has been the arrival of Invensys Operations Management with an app targeted at managers, engineers and operators in industries, including refining, chemicals, upstream oil and gas, energy, utilities, metals, mining, pulp and paper, and food and beverage

The control and automation company's SmartGlance product/service enables users to access and scroll through reports on process status, KPIs, downtime and troubleshoot using the touchscreen features on Apple iPads, Apple iPhones or Blackberrys

Since its recent launch there has been significant uptake of SmartGlance in the food and beverage sector, according to Bilal Mehta of Invensys It has also, he reported made some inroads in the power and utility sectors as well as metals and mining

There are, however some challenges for vendors in the fledgling industrial area of smartphones, not least cyber security and the technological pace of change �‚

"Data security concerns are still the number-one barrier [to] adoption," said the Invensys expert But, he added, these concerns "are being addressed through user- and device-authentication and data encryption, similar to what the banking sector is using"

Overall, Mehta said "People are getting comfortable with smartphone usage and so on but are not there yet in terms of mass usage The whole mobile world is moving so fast in terms of Apple phones and with Android taking market [share] some people are sitting on the fence in terms of what they want to adopt "

Given the nature of the market, he advised "I think it would be quite critical for all companies to have a mobile strategy The key is also making the right choices because [the technology] is moving on a quarterly basis

It is important for vendors, meanwhile, to remain mobile-phone independent, said the Invensys expert Likewise, he said, the gateway for sending information is not just limited to the company's own set of products, but can also work with equipment from other suppliers such as Rockwell, ABB or Siemens

The initial uptake of SmartGlance is being led by "supervisors, shift supervisors, plant managers and up, who most need information to make the right decisions at the right time", Mehta also pointed out

As a native phone app, rather than a web client, SmartGlance allows the use of the touchscreen features on mobile devices to access and scroll through reports, and to view the most current process and equipment performance data

Another feature is that data is pushed onto the device in contrast to the standard offerings, for which users have to launch a browser and go on to a particular website to access information

Users can, therefore, define what kind of information they want and when they want it, said Mehta, who claims that this capability "can transform decision-making for managers who often lack visibility into real time plant operations"

He added "If a plant manager, for example, is informed of his top five-to-10 issues before getting into the office, he can react more proactively and with greater effectiveness," said Mehta "He can get key reports on how a process line is working, equipment utilisation, and so on first thing and then decide where to focus his day ·

Smartglance is currently being enhanced to provide a broad range of "actionable data" that triggers an integrated workflow of things that need to happen in response to particular alerts

"For example, an alert generated by equipment needing repair in an oil and gas facility might signal the need to put the scaffolding up before a technician arrives to replace a pump," Mehta explained "This [mobile feature] could also bring in third-party mobile workers without the worry of them logging onto the enterprise system of the customer "
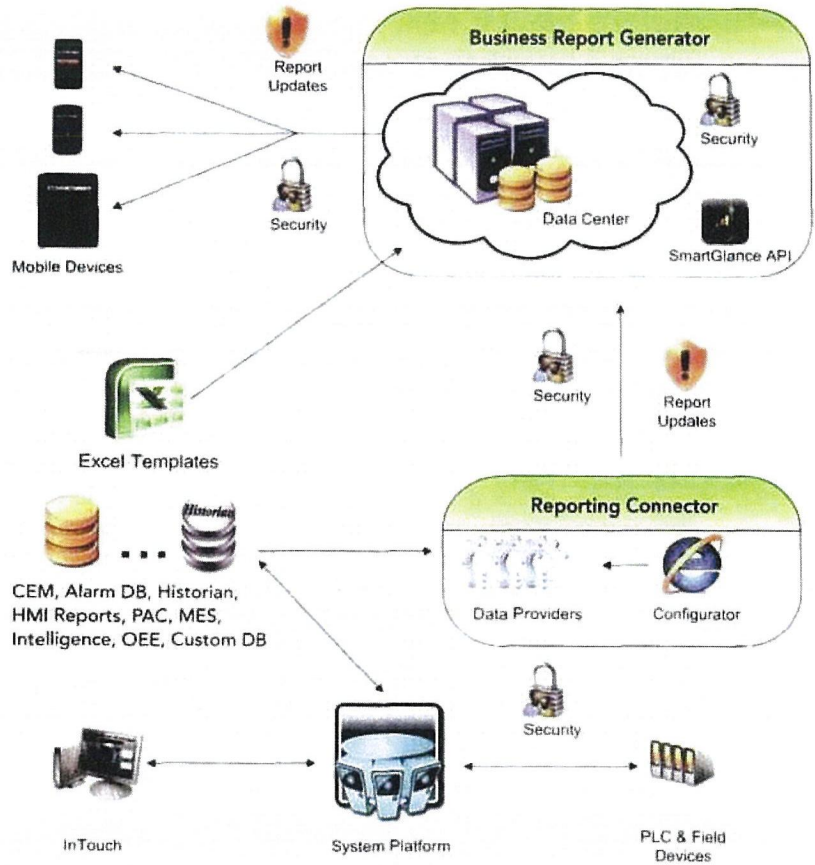
Surface approx. (cm²) : 812

▸ Smartphone usage

Up for adoption

Over the past two years, the number of smartphones has doubled, notes Laurent Truscello, products and services manager at Carl Source, who said: "With the PC, it was the companies that democratised its use to the general public and it took several years. For the smartphones it's the opposite, and certainly adopting [it] will happen much faster."

Forecasting a major spread in the usage of smartphones among more 'technically oriented' managers, Truscello said the driver is the need "to shorten the time of transmission of the information emitted between the factory equipment and the maintainers, [so that they can] follow their daily activities in real time, regardless of distance from the plant.

The Carl Source manager added that: "It is essential for software editors to develop specific software for smartphones and not simply transpose their web applications. Otherwise they will take the risk of losing future users."

Mobile Devices

Report Updates

Security

Business Report Generator

Security

Data Center

SmartGlance API

Excel Templates

Security

Report Updates

CEM, Alarm DB, Historian, HMI Reports, PAC, MES, Intelligence, OEE, Custom DB

Reporting Connector

Data Providers

Configurator

Security

InTouch

System Platform

PLC & Field Devices

⬓ SmartGlance allows the use of the touchscreen features on mobile devices to access and scroll through reports, and to view the most current process and equipment performance data

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