The Impact of Digitalization on Field Service Organizations

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Earlier this year, the Technology and Services Industry Association (TSIA) wrote a blog post that defined the digital transformation happening in our world as simply "the integration of technology into our everyday lives." There's no question that life and work today look considerably different than they did a generation ago – or even a year ago. There's also no question that we have to conduct business in new ways, and adapt our products and services to fit into the world we live in today, in order to survive and thrive.

These rules most certainly apply to the field service industry as well. According to that same post from TSIA, achieving growth in our digitalized economy means increasing service revenues along with product revenues, and evolving beyond just offering products to enabling successful outcomes. Yet most service organizations haven't made much progress in this direction, and whatever growth organizations have seen in service revenues may likely be a result of shrinking product revenues.

Delivering quality field service in a digitalized world, and competing well in our new marketplace, requires thinking and operating differently on several levels. From my perspective, here are some of the most significant.

1. **Adapting to New Digital Technology**

Field service organizations should be integrating mobile devices, organizational project management systems and other technologies that enable field engineers to work efficiently at any time wherever they are. They also need to explore and evaluate how to integrate promising tech into their operations. For example, predictive analytics and Internet-of-Things-related telemetry could help service organizations better anticipate when system issues could occur or when upgrades are available. Better connectivity systems, network resiliency and bandwidth could lead to ordering and replacing parts faster, navigating logistics more efficiently and more. Also, greater adoption of the latest phone-home telemetry will help service employees and end-users to better manage and monitor system operations.

There are still more emerging technologies worth a hard look. Artificial intelligence, machine learning and augmented reality are among the concepts that represent relatively untapped opportunities to reshape field service and add value for all parties involved. Smart service organizations should be pushing the envelope, experimenting with them and forming new best practices whenever possible. Benefits could include better triage of issues, shorter time to productivity for recently hired FEs, greater efficiency, higher resource utilization and more.

2. **Hiring, Onboarding and Training**

Generally speaking, field service organizations haven't fully adapted yet to digitalization on a human level. Traditional skills alone don't cut it anymore; new ones are needed to succeed today, and they're more technological in nature than mechanical. Yet employees are generally dissatisfied with the learning opportunities, training and guidance available to help them develop and refine these skills. It also doesn't help that some employers still have legacy mindsets around office and workplace attendance, work schedules and work styles.

There are several approaches that can help organizations better equip their people for success:
- Learning programs need to be comprehensive and engaging without being overloaded with unnecessary or untimely information.
- Using tools that automate and streamline as much field service work as possible to make FEs more productive and efficient.
- Expanding talent pools to recruit diverse skills and perspectives into the organization. FEs today are coming from more walks of life than ever before, including the military and the sciences. These people bring skills, best practices and energy that simply aren't there without them. Tapping into that ensures you're sending the right resources for the job and supplementing and cross-training the rest of your workforce.
- Meet employees where they are. Flexible, variable organizational structures will enable field engineers to establish their preferred work-life balance and lead happier lives and careers.

3. Exploring New Operating Models

Some service organizations are finding that traditional W2 field engineer models just aren't enabling the level of quality or efficiency their end-users require. Instead, organizations increasingly are pivoting to outsourced third-party service models.

There are a few key attributes to look for when considering an outsourced team, including:

- Quality. Of course, you want a team that can do the job as well as your own staff. The best third-party service providers do this well, and they also bring innovative services that advance the overall customer experience.
- Certifications. The best third-party service providers also ensure their field engineers are fully trained and certified for whatever they might encounter. This way, you can be confident that quality and customer experiences will be at the standard you expect.
- Oversight. Great third-party providers enable both you and their own FE supervisors to follow progress in the field. This helps ensure troubleshooting, diagnostics, service delivery and resolution happen as skillfully and efficiently as possible.

This approach has helped service organizations reduce their operating expenses and augment their digitalization needs while their own workforce adapts to trends in digitalization. As such, it's a strategy worth broader consideration in the industry.

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