

Case study



Air Products provides NHS home oxygen therapy services using Skillweb Track and Trace solution

Background

Air Products supplies oxygen, nitrogen, argon, helium and hydrogen as well as certain medical and specialty gases to a wide variety of industrial and medical customers. Established in 1940 in Detroit, Michigan, today Air Products has more than 20,000 employees around the world and operations in more than 40 countries.

In the area of healthcare the company has over 500,000 patients in 15 countries, providing a range of services from respiratory therapy, sleep apnea, home medical equipment and infusion. In many cases the service is dealing with vulnerable patients and so needs to be 100% efficient and reliable.

Success in healthcare

In the UK in July 2005, Air Products was awarded the contract to provide the new home oxygen therapy services (HOTS) for six of the ten English health regions (North West, West Midlands, East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside, North London and the South West) and Wales. Air Products was selected following a competitive tendering process run by the Department of Health.

Meeting the challenge

The contract requires Air Products to supply patients at home with a continuous supply of oxygen. The company has a Home Oxygen Order Form (HOOF) which works in the same way as a medical prescription.

The HOTS patient service relies on a very high turnaround process – orders are received by fax, or re-orders by phone, and the job request is fed into the system to be processed and fed out to the field team. Engineers carry out deliveries and are equipped to provide appropriate information and training for patients and carers in the use and maintenance of equipment provided.

- **Sophisticated tracking system**

One of the key elements for Air Products to be able to deliver this range of services was to have in place a sophisticated track and trace system, whereby if any deliveries were delayed, at any point during the supply chain, someone would be alerted, so that the problem could be rectified or dealt with. Due to the critical nature of the supplies, if there is a delay it has to be handled efficiently.

“A critical element of the solution was that we wanted to be able to support the most remote based engineers – we have field teams based in mid-Wales, Cumbria, Central and east London. We needed something that was simple to use and to read so that trips can be done quickly and efficiently,” said Ian Williams, Operational Manager at Air Products homecare division.

- **A critical service**

One of the challenges for any company operating in the service industry is that there will always be instances when patients are not available. Such information needs to be delivered back very quickly so that deliveries can be rescheduled. In particular for the patients that are vulnerable and sometimes confused it is vital that the services team can explain exactly what has happened through the day what time they have been called and when the next visit needs to be arranged.

The Skillweb solution

The company selected Skillweb to deliver its Track & Trace Manager (TTM). TTM provides a central database for managing jobs/drops into schedules for each technician. Each item is tracked, and as equipment is delivered or collected the patient provides an electronic signature captured by the PDA hand held devices. The PDAs have a built in scanner, so barcodes for each individual item may be read ensuring that every item is accounted for.

Supporting remote field workers

The Skillweb solution collates up to 2000 order requests nightly that are sent electronically to a secure web server. These are then downloaded to the engineers' PDAs.

"We have 85% of all our transactions to the field engineers via PDA, which really cuts down administration time. We selected Skillweb for their proven experience in mobile communications. We also see them as a potential partner on a pan-European basis, as we look to roll out the solution elsewhere," explained Williams.

The benefits

- **Enabling a fast, flexible response**

"We are contracted by the NHS and have Service Level Agreements that we need to adhere to and so it is vital that we have the information to hand on deliveries achieved. The technology from Skillweb allows us to do that - the information is streamed every five minutes and so that is pretty much a real time system. It allows us to maintain a high degree of flexibility and be more efficient in the field," explained Williams.

This flexibility is particularly important for the four-hour emergency jobs that Air Products is contracted to carry out. In some instances a GP may request a delivery to a patient, or a patient may not know what is wrong with the equipment and require help from an engineer. In such instances the job is raised and the details can be sent to an engineer within five minutes, if necessary re-scheduling other jobs for that day.

- **Improving productivity**

Skillweb provides reports on the website that show progress for each engineer – how many drops they have made, who may require additional help. The Air Products team try to ensure that all jobs are achieved daily, such that the teams are ready to start fresh the following day.

The reports are also used by the Air Products team for auditing purposes.

- **Meeting Service Level Agreements**

The team managers use the information to monitor individual and team performance and productivity against the NHS Service level agreements.

“The solution provides us with all the information that we need to meet our SLAS. The fewer hands involved in passing information, the more accurate it will be and getting our front office system to communicate directly with engineer’s PDAs in the field is superb,” said Williams.

The Air Products team is working with colleagues in Spain to consider developing the platform to support similar businesses in France and Portugal.

Business Benefits

- Website reports update engineer’s progress against workplan to enable extra help if required
- Workplans can be rescheduled at late notice to accommodate urgent requests
- Administration time reduced by sending and capturing delivery information direct to PDAs
- Service team can update patients of exact delivery and visit details
- More efficient working enables Air products team to improve productivity and meet NHS Service Level Agreements

For more information about Skillweb, please email sales.enquiry@skillweb.co.uk or visit www.skillweb.co.uk.