Australian trades must adapt or perish to IoT wave

Ten years ago, most people operating in Australia's trade services industry were still scribbling quotes, invoices and their daily schedule on the back of any scrap of paper they could find. It was chaotic, inefficient and costly.

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Move forward a decade and many, if not the majority, of these businesses are now utilising complex cloud-based technologies to manage their businesses, allowing them to get on with the job they are paid to do. From accounting to job management, MR and quoting, most administrative jobs can now be done easily and simply.

While many are still bedding down this first wave of change, a new wave is about to hit. The second phase of the trade services digital revolution, the Internet of Things (IoT) age, could have an even more profound impact on the way the entire industry operates. For those businesses that embrace the opportunity it will be a pathway to growth and prosperity.

Those that resist will be very quickly left behind.

In its simplest form, IoT refers to the interaction between machines that are connected to the internet. When the digital age first took off, technology was still dependent on physical input; machines still needed a human being at the helm. Today, IoT represents the next stage of digital evolution. Human-to-machine interaction has been streamlined with an online network that processes data and allows sensors or devices with an internet connection to speak with each other and perform automated functions.

One of the biggest barriers preventing some trade service companies from getting on board is a lingering confusion about what IoT means for their business.

In the trade service industry, IoT can be seen when a technician synchronises their job calendars to track appointments, prioritise projects and plan best routes. An example of this was when Swissport and Thermacell installed IoT hardware and software solutions to improve its facilities management capability at England's Luton Airport. The airport established sensors that monitored the performance of its lounge air conditioners remotely in near real time, and automatically received alerts in response to anomalies. The applications are various and can be applied to many different sectors. For example, IoT can assist fire safety technicians through sensors in a fire detection or sprinkler system, which then monitors and reports back the current state of the equipment they are tasked to keep an eye on. In the security sector, IoT allows real-time viewing of security cameras from devices connected to the internet, allowing clients to view live footage of their home or business anywhere, at any time and on different devices.

Of course, there will always be those who think IoT is nothing more than a gimmick, and an unnecessary disruption in technology development that will only make life and business more difficult. There may be business owners out there who believe that IoT is an extravagant and unjustifiable expense, and that IoT systems will likely die down to serve a niche market.

Those that accept the disruption will be those who prosper from the adoption.

A recent report commissioned by the Australian Computer Society (ACS) revealed that there is much to gain from IoT, as it currently presents a $30 billion opportunity for Australia's tech sector by 2023, with IoT hardware, software, solutions and communications systems presenting unprecedented growth rate prospects.

At this point, being left behind by not embracing IoT is not a risk; it's a certainty. But why risk it? IoT has the potential to streamline business processes, increase productivity and produce logical and data-driven solutions that consistently help to achieve goals. Trade businesses that adopt IoT are effectively future proofing their operations with strong competitive advantages such as real-time productivity and energy monitoring of machinery, as well as tracking of key maintenance indicators to predict and prevent failure provide real-time inventory of inputs. It also allows businesses to communicate with supply chain and factory operations and monitor real-time tracking of outputs, allowing for quality assurance to be performed in real time as well as status and location tracking of goods.

We have seen how IoT systems can help trade businesses across the spectrum, from ambitious niche startups to globalised industrial companies. It facilitates machine learning and automation that can help those small businesses explore new growth opportunities, and larger businesses to stay competitive in the market for for longer.

No matter their size, trade service businesses are able to use IoT systems to respond more quickly to competition and customer's demands and volatile market conditions. It can provide real-time insights into trends, creating opportunities to alter production activity, fine-tune strategies or find alternatives that can save a business cost and time. Essentially, machines that are connected and able to share data allow business owners the luxury of spending less time wondering and more time taking action.

The truth is that IoT is already making a significant impression on Australia's economy. Manufacturing, for example, is expected to achieve potential benefits of $50 to $88 billion, according to ACS's IoT report.

IoT systems are certain to change the way service scheduling is completed and therefore we must all be prepared for new styles of service agreements, scheduling and task related activity. This means the time is now for businesses to consider the following preparations for a world where IoT makes significant industry contributions.

PLAN. IoT systems are rapidly changing how we do things but a business still needs to have a clear direction. Identify where your business uses the most resources or requires the most time and effort. Pinpoint opportunities where a process can be streamlined, and consider whether these areas could be improved by automated systems and an IoT network.

SECURITY. Cyber security is one barrier keeping many businesses away from connecting to IoT. While there is certainly an ever-present risk to online data, a growing IoT presence means a greater acknowledgement of online safety. Technicians are constantly developing new ways of protecting data and the integrity of IoT system, so be sure to keep up to date with the latest security developments.

INVEST IN THE INFRASTRUCTURE. It's no use committing to a new age of industry when the office is filled with lock-and-key filing cabinets. IoT systems require an efficient flow of data and therefore require suitable hardware, including internet ports, hard drives, strong connection speeds and modern interfaces. The good news is that IoT can be retrofitted to existing systems with little effort and no extra cost. ∎

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