

Nothing But 'Net' For facility managers, the Internet is a necessity-not a novelty

By Catherine Quayle

When the engineers at Memorial Regional Hospital, Hollywood, Fla., set out to make sure their equipment was Y2K compliant, they faced a daunting task. There were hundreds of equipment types, which translated into thousands of individual pieces at the 680-bed hospital. "Just getting information on complaint equipment and communicating with manufacturers it was so laborious trying to call people and write letters," says Dennis Grady, Memorial's administrative director of facilities management and president-elect of the of the American Society for Healthcare engineering. Then, about six months ago, his team began using the Internet to do this work. The staff found that most manufacturers had all the necessary Y2K information posted on their Web sites. They could find out which equipment was compliant, how to upgrade, and when to discard. The team has since managed to track down all but three of the manufacturers. "The Internet really cut our man-hours down. Once you've started using it, depending on it, you wonder how you ever got along without it," says Grady.

Not just a new toy

A lot of facility managers are singing the same tune. The Internet, once a novelty item among tried-and-true management tools, has quickly become an essential mode of doing business in hospital engineering and environmental services departments. Managers are now using it for everything from troubleshooting to committee meetings to shopping for energy. And its uses continue to grow. One of the most basic, of course is e-mail. "Busy people can be very difficult to get in touch with," says Grady. "I e-mail other ASHE board members and committee members since it can be really hard to contact them by phone. Even if you have phone mail, you get these long, drawn-out messages, but e-mail people tend to be brief and to the point."

And the Internet takes person-to-person communication even further. Sometimes a manager just needs to talk with someone without knowing who that someone is. Profession-specific bulletin boards and chat rooms provide a place for managers to pose questions to their peers, seek advice on particularly thorny problems, or simply share their successes and frustrations with like-minded colleagues.

"If people are concerned about medical waste or recycling, they can say, 'What are you doing in this area? Are you recycling this or that? Are you getting paid for your recycling? How are you handling medical waste? Are you using autoclave systems? Do you find it cheaper to have a contractor haul it away or handle it yourself?'" says Patricia Hosckenberger director of environmental services at St. Clair Memorial Hospital, Pittsburgh. As president-elect of the American Society for Healthcare Environmental Services, Hockenberger is partial to the ASHES Web site (www.ashes.org), where members use bulleting boards on a variety of housekeeping related topics. "If you are debating laundry and linen issues—whether to go with an in-house laundry or use contracted services, whether to have your own linen or rent linen—there are a lot of options open to you, and you can just get on the Internet and say, 'Is anybody out there running their own laundry?' And before you know it, you'll have a whole group of people jumping right in," says Hockenberger.

A similar function exists on the ASHE site, where facility managers find bulletin boards on topics ranging from Y2K compliance to utility costs to fire safety. Of course there are other ways to obtain this kind of information: publications, conferences, and the old-fashioned phone call. But going online offers several advantages. It is centralized immediate, and can expose users to peers they might not know personally or meet at conferences. "I went online and asked, 'What kind of recognition programs do you do?' And I got a lot of responses," says Martin Shafer, operations manager of facility operations housekeeping at the University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics, Iowa City. "It's easier than sending a letter or calling somebody."

Regs resource

Codes and standards can rule a facility manager's life, and having the most up-to-date information is the first way to keep this rule in check. The Internet is now playing a big part in providing that information. At the JCAHO site (www.jcaho.org), users find resources relating to performance measurement and accreditation, as well as e-mail links for answers to standards-related questions. At the OSHA site (www.osha.gov), users can access the actual text of codes and standards, as well as a vast library of manuals, directives, and statistics. Having this information centrally available online beats searching for it in books or trying to find a human voice in the vast offices of a regulatory organization. "When I was giving a presentation to the state epidemiology nurses association, I wanted to verify some information I was going to give them from OSHA," says Shafer. "It was a lot easier than looking in some manual. I just logged onto the OSHA site and found the definitions I needed." Facility managers have also begun to shop online. "You might need a new type of filter, a floor surface covering a piece of machinery, a new recycling device, or just anything that would be unique and new," says Robert Loranger, director of facilities at the New England Medical Center Hospitals, Boston, and president of ASHE. "And you can usually find it on the Web."

At St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, Lewiston, Idaho, the facilities department frequently uses the Internet for equipment research. Just yesterday one of my engineers came to me trying to find some info on a piece of equipment—a monitoring system for an underground storage tank—that we didn't have any service manuals on, and we searched the Internet and found something right away," says Curt Hibbard, director of facilities management at St. Joseph.

The same has proven true at Memorial Regional Hospital, where Grady and his staff do a lot of their equipment research and purchasing online. "It's difficult to keep up with the advances in technology, and the Internet can help you do that. We go online to see what is the latest and greatest," says Grady. His facilities department now does a lot of its ordering through distributors on the Internet. "They're online, we're online. It has actually made the visiting salesman obsolete, and there's no question that saves time."

In many hospitals, particularly those in a large health network, the purchasing function is handled by a purchasing department or is under shared-services contracts, so facilities managers are not likely to spend a lot of time shopping themselves. The Internet plays a role in these situations, too. At the James H. Quillen VA Medical Center, Mountain Home, Tenn., for example, environmental managers were preparing their equipment lists for next year and wanted to include the most recent equipment offered by each vendor they used. "We were able to go to several sites and look at more up-to-date equipment

than what our old catalogs had. It was real easy to just for to the Web for that," says Larry Collins, the hospital's chief of environmental services and president of ASHES.

At St. Clair Memorial Hospital, shared services contracts specify companies from which the environmental services department must buy its products. "They may indicate that you get rebates or bonuses through purchasing 3M products, for example, and if you've never used 3M, you might get on the Internet and check with people to see if they've used them and how they are working in their hospital," Hockenberger points out.

Watch your waste

Online communication has an added dimension at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, where Shafer and his team have been using e-mail to document and notify staff of red bag waste violations in the 850-bed facility. Armed with a digital computer and camera system from Walsh Waste Tracking, Montreal, the environmental services staff roams the facility's 2.5 million square feet examining red bags for trash that doesn't belong, such as cups or papers.

When they find a violation, they go to the computer, which brings up a form allowing the user to enter the type of waste, its percentage of contamination, the location of the violation, and any other relevant information. It then allows the user to take a digital photograph of the waste. All the information is stored on the computer. At the end of the survey, Shafer downloads this information to his PC, which is already programmed with the names of supervisors in each area. An e-mail documenting the violation, along with a picture of the waste, is sent to every department where a problem has occurred. "Our hope is that they will use this as an educational tool, and say, "Hey, here's what housekeeping found." Then they can correct these problems in the future, Shafer says.

The system has been in place since January, and Shafer is certain that it has helped to heighten awareness among the staff-no small feat considering that the staff already had a heightened awareness about waste; before the introduction of the waste tracking system, the facility had reduced its red bag waste by 50 percent since 1993. "And we're still finding things. We actually generate two to three e-mails a week," Shafer says. "If I had people constantly doing this, I'd probably have a lot more. If you can imagine a hospital that hasn't done anything in the waste area, it would be invaluable. You could pay for the system pretty quickly. At least I hope to.

A day at the (energy) mall

Facility managers struggling with how to take advantage of the rapidly changing deregulating electricity industry now have an Internet solution. A joint project between ASHE and Healthcare Circuit News, called the Energy Initiative Network (www.energyinitiative.com), enables them to track their energy use, then post that data online, where it is available to utilities that wish to bid for that energy supply. Each morning at 6 a.m. the network's server dials up hospitals and downloads information on all energy used during every 15-minute period of the previous day, including electricity, gas, water, and steam.

Each hospital's load profile is then posted on the network anonymously (revealing only the region in which the hospital is located) and utility managers interested in taking on that load submit a proposal into a blind inbox, from which facility managers retrieve the proposals and select the best one. "This is a win-win situation for both facilities and

utilities because the facilities can do their shopping online and the utilities don't have to have their salespeople in the field collecting data every day," says Dan Chisolm, executive editor of Healthcare Circuit News, which is published by the Motor and Generator Institute (www.mgi-hcn.com), Winter Park, Fla.

Facilities sign up for this service through ASHE for \$150 a year while utilities pay according to their level of participation. ASHE membership is required to participate, but nonmembers receive a discount on ASHE membership when they sign up for the network. Some hospitals buy their energy daily, some yearly, depending on their contracts. But the system benefits all types. "Even if you have long-term contracts, you still need to keep a check on what's going on in the marketplace," says Chisolm.

And size is relative. "We have all sizes signing up, from 50-bed hospitals to 50-hospital systems. A 7 percent saving for somebody spending \$30 million a year is \$2 million, and for somebody spending half a million, it's \$35,000. It seems like a lot either way," Chisolm says. Utilities, too, find value in smaller facilities. "If a utility has most of its revenue tied up with one customer and that customer leaves, there's a downside to the bigger-better deal. I've had utilities tell me they'd rather have 20 \$1 million customer than five \$4 million dollar customers," says Chisolm.

What's up next?

Buying energy online? It's just one of the amazing business practices the Internet has made possible in a very short time. There's no telling what the Internet will bring next, but if the past few whirlwind years are any indication, it is sure to be transformational. "It wasn't that long ago that many of us didn't even have Internet access from work," says Memorial Regional Hospital's Grady. "And now I can't imagine not having it. What was life like before?"