

Simplified CMMS Interface Can Enhance Plant Communications

Written by MT Staff

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Local area networks are becoming common in all types and sizes of plants. Computers are strategically located throughout the plant for easy access to information. For companies with a computerized maintenance management system (CMMS), employees with an appropriate security password can access information on equipment, parts, and maintenance activity and enter data from many locations within the plant.

Access to the CMMS has typically been restricted to employees who have been fully trained in the use of the software. However, there are a number of advantages to making the information in the CMMS more widely accessible to others on the plant floor.

Many CMMS packages and recent version upgrades contain features that can provide a simplified icon menu on computers located throughout the shop for casual users of the CMMS. This concept gives anyone the capability of asking for maintenance and repair work (open a work order), inquiring about the status of an earlier request (work order query), or viewing equipment information, yet does not allow access to the full menu of maintenance selections.

This capability enables the maintenance shop to allow anyone to make a request but not alter critical information such as equipment history, parts inventory, purchase orders status, and preventive maintenance routines. The solution is simple and is initiated by the log-on password. When a user logs on, the system shows only the functions that user has access to, such as those in the illustrated drop down menu from a network-based CMMS for midsize plants.

The reduced menu set provides the security needed to protect other information. A typical main menu has all the functions of the maintenance department displayed for ready access and fast execution. Good security still limits usage of parts of the program to those who have need of the functions, but why show a full menu to the casual user who needs only a part of it or can gain access only to parts of it.

A complaint often heard from casual users of most systems is that there are too many functions or choices available on the computer screen and it is not readily apparent how to enter a request or obtain information. This does not apply to maintenance supervisors, planners, or data entry personnel, but it is a valid criticism of the system from the casual user, especially someone such as a machine operator or office worker.

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There is one fundamental principle of interface design for computer systems: keep the screen simple and easy to understand. Nothing will kill a successful program faster than clumsy usage, conflicting instructions, or screens that are not straightforward and simple. The limited menu approach for casual users enhances ease of use and application credibility.

A related function for the limited menu approach is remote access and data entry over the network at sites with multiple buildings or campus settings. A limited functional menu could easily direct a person to a work request form or general inquiry screen to send or receive information that formerly required pagers, radio, telephone, or even the Internet to communicate with the maintenance department.

One other advantage of remote entry is the functionality of the remote terminal to maintenance personnel in the field. After completion of a job it is a simple matter to go to a nearby terminal, enter the pertinent information, close the work order, and see what is next on the schedule.

Another advantage to the maintenance department is a reduction in telephone calls because the requester can go to a terminal to see if a work request has been assigned to a maintenance technician or crew, thereby making it an open work order. This function is a time saver for operations and maintenance.

Simplified menus for casual users and remote access are options to explore with your current CMMS supplier or with other suppliers when a major upgrade is planned. It is a relatively straightforward enhancement that can pay good dividends. **MT**

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