

# Operations Executive

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## **John Fallona keeps his utility service company efficient while business is booming by streamlining work processes and investing in technology.**

For the past few years, utility companies in New England have downsized in reaction to a slow economy and skyrocketing costs. Maine-based On Target Utility Services did the opposite, and now that the economy is getting stronger, it is positioned to pick up the pieces.

On Target works with major utility companies in New England, providing services such as underground locating, fiber optic and telephone work, utility pole setting, and electrical construction, distribution, and transmission. As utility companies downsized, the need to outsource those services increased. Additionally, upper management dismissed in the downsizing needed a place to go. John Fallona, president of On Target Utility Services, welcomed them with open arms.

"We have a great deal of expertise because we employ former utility managers who understand what our customers are looking for," said Fallona. "We fill voids our customers can't fill."

In the past year, On Target Utility Services has experienced a 10% growth and discovered a need to increase their efficiencies in dealing with employees and customers. Fallona and his team decided to start by adding GPS to each of the 180 vehicles in the company's underground locating and construction divisions.

Fallona said the move enhanced the company's productivity in a number of ways. In addition to increasing the number of locates a locator can do in a day, the system gave the company more control in employee scheduling. "It allows us more freedom to know where our remote underground locating employees are," he said. "The GPS system also enables us to monitor the location of employees in order to manage our work load, giving our supervisors the ability to transfer work on a minute-by-minute basis."

Teldig, the ticket management system at On Target, helps with the management of the field locators' workloads. By law, anyone digging must notify a call center. The call centers are responsible for notifying the utilities that have facilities in the area of the dig location. Those utility companies stock On Target's contracts, and the notifications come to the ticket management system.

On Target also provides utilities an option to screen their tickets by using digital customer provided maps. On Target can automatically screen for the presence of underground facilities, and the ticket management system allows operators to manipulate and edit the customer facility map data to identify and validate dig site locations. The process is paperless and automates ticket processing, dispatch and billing.

"Our ticket management system helps us manage that work," said Rita Bilodeau, business manager. "It segregates the work by area so the locators in the field know what they are responsible for."

In addition, On Target installed air cards into each locator computer, allowing for remote connectivity wherever there is a cell phone signal. Employees in the underground locating division can download their work, receive new work throughout the day, and send completion reports back to the company.

"In the past, our technology only allowed them to download their work twice a day, either first thing in the morning or at the end of the day," said Fallona. "Now we know on a minute-by-minute basis what work they have, what's pending, and what's been completed."

Since introducing the air cards, GPS trackers, and the ticket screening system, Fallona found the company's fuel consumption dropped by almost 30%. Although employees in the field were uncomfortable with the tracking systems at first, Fallona said they understood the cost savings and why it was important to the company. "The consequences of the

rising cost of gas were the biggest selling point," he said. "Our employees understand we can't change our customers' rates, so it would affect the money they make."

In 1998, On Target aligned with Kennebec Valley Community College, a local community college, and helped set up a technical training program for line service workers.

Fallona said the relationship has developed into a partnership as each side benefits from working together.

Members of the company's management team are involved in the training program. Bilodeau teaches a class on reporting and driver logs, and the transportation manager starts each semester showing students how the equipment operates. In addition, the company sends its employees to the college to show students how fiber is spliced.

Because safety is the most important aspect of On Target's business, students are invited to attend the company's annual safety meeting. "On the construction side, we haven't had a lost-time accident since 2002," said Fallona. "We bring these students in at the apprentice level, and when they get out of the school's program, they receive credit towards the line worker progression schedule."

In the past 10 years, underground locating has blossomed, and Fallona said he anticipates an influx in New England in the transmission arena rebuilding lines. "More money will be spent in the next year to build up the utility infrastructure than has been spent in the last five," he said. "We will continue to focus in the locating, line construction, telecommunications, and pole setting areas, making our processes better and more efficient, while continuing to adapt to the needs of our customers."