

FIELD SERVICE NEWS
think tank sessions



**Executive Briefing:
Do we need to redefine field
service completely? US Edition**

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Introduction

The Field Service News Think Tank Sessions are a unique project where we bring together an intimate group of senior field service management professionals and pick apart some of the pressing issues facing the global field service industry across a days worth of detailed discussion and debate. The topics are varied, in-depth and full of insight and Field Service News is proud to facilitate these sessions and share with our audience the learnings from these collaborations - which we present to you verbatim to ensure the insight from each panel of industry leaders comes to you undiluted and in its essential form...

In this ThinkTank session, the topic is part of an ongoing theme that Field Service News have been exploring across the second half of 2022- do we need to redefine field service completely?

So much has changed since the pandemic and the lockdowns that came with it. For a start, we saw an explosion in digital transformation. While it is true that many digital transformation projects were well underway before 2020, the disruption of the pandemic brought an urgency with it that meant those projects that had already begun were put on turbo-boosters while those who had yet to initiate their digital transformation scrambled to catch up as swiftly as possible.

Having held conversations around this topic with over 80 senior service leaders, including dedicated ThinkTanks on two continents and a series of simultaneous discussions at the Field Service Symposium, one universal challenge we are seeing is that the shortage of engineers is forcing field service organisations to think outside of the box when it comes to recruiting new technicians.

Technology, in one way, is showing a route out of this challenge. Remote service, which took root during the pandemic, allows for new thinking in maintaining assets in the field and resolving customer problems quickly and more efficiently.

However, such approaches and the technology that underpins them are only practical if reliable and clean data are fed into the systems. Establishing good data governance protocols is becoming increasingly urgent for field service organisations. At the same time, in many sectors, the lack of consistent IoT and asset data protocols is slowing progress- particularly felt by third-party service providers.

However, even as we embrace the technology that has emerged as a potential hope for our industry, it may not be enough. Increasing customer expectations for cheap, effective and fast service are at direct odds with increasing workforce expectations of well-paid jobs that offer a strong work/life balance. Ultimately, something has got to give.

As always with our Tank Sessions, the conversation was varied, challenging and insightful. Here we present some key takeaways- which I'm sure you will find good reflection points for your organisation- as we navigate the question- do we need to redefine field service completely?



Kris Oldland, Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Field Service News



FSN Think Tank Session, Online, December '22

In attendance:

Gyner Ozgul, President &
COO, Smart Care Equipment
Services

Tom DeVroy, Senior Advisory
Solution Consultant,
ServiceNow

Jason Andrews, Service
Director, Baylo

Izzy Sanchez, Director
Service & Systems Support
Konica Minolta

Kris Oldland, Editor-in-
Chief, Field Service News

Bradley McBain, Managing
Director, MBA Engineering

The challenges field service companies face in finding new service technicians are universal and not going away...

Having hosted discussions with companies of all sizes, in multiple industries, and across two continents, there has been one universal challenge faced by all field service companies.

There is a lack of qualified engineers to fill the rapidly ageing workforce that is moving towards retirement. We've seen companies re-evaluate their recruitment approach while embracing technology to allow them to do more with less...

Kris Oldland, Editor-in-Chief, Field Service News

"I've seen some examples of companies, which, having come out of the pandemic, saw an initial spike where they were able to grow their business having worked through the challenges of lock-down, and they were then able to grow as we moved into the start of recovery.

"However, where I am seeing such companies struggle now, is not so much driving the business growth, that is of course, not easy, but for many it is the 'easier' part of the equation. The bigger challenge, the challenge I am seeing everywhere, is finding the engineers to meet the demand."

Gyner Ozgul, President & COO, Smart Care Equipment Services

"Early in the recovery, we had access to a lot of technicians from other industries that were re-entering the workforce. So I think the first half of that recovery was easier, not easy, but easier.

"The last half of the recovery has been much more difficult because a portion of the workforce left entirely during COVID, and they're not coming back. So we've had to lean heavily on less experienced technicians straight out of trade schools and build more infield training for those technicians.

"That training aspect has become much more prevalent for us now. However, the fact that the technicians are coming right out of trade school means there are five months before they have an acceptable breakeven product productivity in our business.

"We're shifting more to building the resource now, rather than recruiting it, and we'll see more of that again next year. We're strategically investing more in training across the next two years, both digital and in person to accommodate the fact that we know we're going to have to go to a less experienced pool of candidates."

Jason Andrews, Service Director, Baylo

"Our guys have to be their skill sets have to be very varied, down from the blue collar mechanic, into the mid-level technician, through to more advanced engineering roles, and you need to have all those skill sets, which is exceedingly hard to recruit.

"We are taking the approach of trying to train our customer technicians to be that first level. So we're also investing in online training, and, and then are some in person for when they get to that second level. However, we're now also incentivizing our customers to take our remote service solutions as well.

We're doing this by telling our customers 'if you're have the ability to be more hands on with the product, then it's going to cost you less, your cost of ownership is going to be less and you just have to invest in training. We're then going to sell subscriptions to keep that service revenue coming in.

"COVID actually played a big role in driving that change, because the in-person workforce at our customers went to nothing and then those people didn't come back. So that opens up an opportunity for us to sell service into the market. However, it also creates a challenge, because we have to somehow figure out how to turn their displaced workforce into a first level technician, because we can't do it for them, the contract price would be prohibitive and we wouldn't be able to actually have a return on investment on the technology."

Izzy Sanchez, Director Service & Systems Support Konica Minolta

"It's been an extreme challenge, finding new technicians, regardless of brand recognition.

"We currently have 400 open positions, so we're aggressively recruiting. We had to become our own recruiters, even though we do have a recruitment team here.

"We started going back to the old way of approaching things, going back to the trade schools. So we started going to our local tech schools and asking them, 'Who are your strongest people? Let us interview them.

"We've just hired three people fresh out of Lincoln Tech here, which is local to us. Honestly, it's been about six months, and they've proven to be some of my better folks because they didn't come in with any of the baggage. They came in fresh out of school and so were very malleable, and we were able to train them.

"There are still holes in the workforce that we need to fill. We're a national company so while it is easy with somewhere like New York where there is a lot of population density, but it gets harder in more rural areas where there is population scarcity. So now we're competing with other brands in our space and we are all trying to recruit that same talent."

Tom DeVroy, Senior Advisory Solution Consultant, ServiceNow

"I think it depends on the complexity of the product that the technician is responsible for, but I will say, at a macro level, we get a chance to talk to a fair amount of service executives, and this is a very common refrain- recruiting, training, fully utilizing and then retaining critical components of your workforce.

"Then when service companies can't recruit their own people, it's developing better practices for how they can supplement their internal workforce with qualified contractors. Where a lot of companies are turning to us to help them is bringing those third-party workers into the fold as somebody who's direct employee as opposed to sub-contracted employee. As an organization, that is a big focus for us at the moment as it resolves a lot of problems our customers are facing."

Remote service, has not only taken root, but it is increasingly becoming the inevitable future of field service...

Another ever-present in discussions has been the rise of remote service delivery amongst field service organisations. While there may still be questions about how much can be achieved across different industry verticals via remote service tools, the reality is that remote service is now forming at least some part of the service portfolio for most organisations...

Tom DeVroy, Senior Advisory Solution Consultant,
ServiceNow

"When it comes to remote support, we need to think of this in the context of the customer journey. Customers don't mind talking to somebody in a contact centre or technical support as long as they feel there's a progression towards resolving their issue

"If it's a break fix issue or a self-maintainer that's trying to get through some a complicated maintenance procedure, as long as the customer can see that progress is being made towards the resolution then they tend to remain happy to engage.

"If it's a break-fix issue or a self-maintainer that's trying to get through some a complicated maintenance procedure, as long as the customer can see that progress is being made towards the resolution, then they tend to remain happy to engage.

"So, for me, the applicability of remote support is directly associated with the issue or asset that's being worked on.

"In some instances and industries, remote can work fantastically, but in others, where the resolution is more complex, there's only so far that remote support can take you before you have to have somebody who knows more than the person on the other end of the phone.

"However, if that remote service element is part of the customer journey, where you are trying to triage that problem with the customer, and the customer thinks you're making progress towards that end goal, whether or not you can actually resolve the customer's issue, or whether you eventually have to dispatch a field service engineer, then I think there's a lot of value to add there in terms of the total customer journey but also in terms of your service efficiency."

Kris Oldland, Editor-in-Chief, Field Service News

“Some time back, I saw an organization do a complete remote install with a team in Portugal guiding a local tech crew in Brazil. I’ve also seen something similar with a Swedish company doing a zero-touch green site install during the height of lockdown. The first was in heavy manufacturing, and the second was in industrial waste management.

“In both instances everything was done with the expertise based in a remote location and local hands on site, with technical skills to follow the instructions, but not the subject matter expertise required to do the installation, so that was ‘dialled in.’”

Gyner Ozgul, President & COO, Smart Care Equipment Services

“One challenge we see with the upfront build of virtual or augmented reality tools, customer self-help etc., is that all of these new technologies assume a level of data integrity.

“The biggest challenge we’re having is the data governance of getting a technician to do everything perfectly in a work order to feed the level of data insights that is required – that is the first problem to solve.

“Often, with technicians typically, even though they’re technicians, they’re not necessarily in favor of technology, and so you have an adoption challenge, and then you have a data governance challenge.”

Bradley McBain, Managing Director, MBA Engineering

“It can take two years to train someone to do pretty much everything and, in our sector, we don’t have specialists as such where we know if the issue is a mechanical fault, then we send in the mechanical expert, so our technicians are generalists in that sense, which again means a lot of dedicated training.

“In addition to this, the feedback we get from the users of the lasers was pretty poor, and that’s not changing; if anything, those using the equipment as becoming less and less skilled, so we can’t rely on what they’re telling us as part of an accurate diagnosis.

“At the same time, as everything becomes leaner, while at the same time people want more pay, there is a real stretch on the team that is maintaining the assets. So as service providers, we have to do way more before we send out an engineer. What we have to work towards now is either being able to fix it remotely so we don’t send that engineer in the first place or if we cannot resolve the issue remotely, we need to make sure we are sending someone with all the information possible so they can work efficiently and solve the problem the first time.

“To achieve that I think across the board, there is a need more intelligence from the machine to eliminate all the basic issues, which are seeing more of in the advancement in various technology, machines are getting smarter, so perhaps the level of operator knowledge can be reduced.”

For us to be able to turn to technology to drive field service operations, we must first establish asset data integrity

While there are plentiful options in terms of the technology available to field service organisations that can help us as a sector drive towards more efficient service, the tools leveraging IoT and Artificial Intelligence are fundamentally reliant on good data being fed into the system first. Therefore, a significant area of focus for many field service organisations needs to establish good data integrity when collected from the field...

Gyner Ozgul, President & COO, Smart Care Equipment Services

"For us, we have two projects on par for next year. One is, how do we get the data integrity to improve the work order upstream? How do we make it simpler for the technician to input that data? That potentially solves the governance problem because you're putting in cleaner data.

"The second part is doing surveys to understand why we have adoption problems with technology. We use merged reality tools and varying digital training tools, and there are just adoption challenges with techs- so we have to understand why.

"There's a lot of 'I think' and not a lot of 'I know' so we must understand why there's an adoption challenge and then go after resolving them."

Kris Oldland, Editor-in-Chief, Field Service News

"That came up on multiple occasions when we had very similar discussions across this project, including at FSN Live, where we had a group of 60 senior service leaders in the room live at Edgbaston Stadium here in the UK.

"It came up so many times that it feels like the technology is almost like the easy part of the puzzle. The adoption is the challenge. It goes back to almost pure play change management for me."

Tom DeVroy, Senior Advisory Solution Consultant, ServiceNow

"Technology tends to get over engineered to the point where it becomes difficult, I mean, not only difficult to use, but technicians don't view that as actually forwarding their mission- so they push back.

"I have seen this change management issue occur many times throughout my career."

Jason Andrews, Service Director, Baylo

"From my perspective, and things that I've done in the past, it becomes cultural. It is establishing that understanding that the technicians' job is not only to fix things and fix the customer, and it's to document their work because we can't manage our business without the data.

"When you put that information in front of the technician and say, 'this is how we're using this data, and this is how it helps you on a day-to-day basis'. Then you do it on a cyclical basis so they can see the product of what they're doing and quite honestly hold those people accountable who can't adopt it because, at the end of the day, we can't manage our business without that data at all.

"We can't decide how many people we need; we can't decide what the performance criteria are other than some manager out there guessing what needs to be the productivity versus the number of customers. We can't see the problems we might have with a particular piece of equipment or a specific customer, causing everybody pain. We can't marshal resources where it needs to go without the data, and I drive that home with my technicians very hard and make it very, very clear.

"Put the data in front of them and show them that this is what we're doing with it, and this how it helps your life."

Izzy Sanchez, Director Service & Systems Support Konica Minolta

"It's essential that whatever processes you put in place come from the top down. If you don't get that, if they don't come from the top down, you're never going to penetrate; you're never going to have that adoption.

"Currently, we have approximately 70% of our assets connected to our DRM platforms, which solves many issues with the documentation. We know the machine problem, and with the integration, we put all that information into a ticket, giving the techs a lot of information in the job ticket. What we're doing now is beyond that; we are looking at how we can mine that data.

"The goal, ultimately, is to look at everything, look at inventory, what parts were used, what happened, and then, in turn, feed that back to that first contact so they can speak with the customer and outline that we have a part that we have a 98% assurance that will fix your issue- that's where we're headed.

"However, in the beginning, reassuring the technicians that we're not trying to replace you; we're trying to make you more efficient. Be honest with them and say yes, we want two more extra calls a day from you, but to achieve that, we are trying to help you lower the temperature to make your life easier in the field.

"In taking this approach, our techs started to trust the technology we were rolling out and when they saw that over the last 15 years, the company has been growing, we've embraced technology and in that time our technicians workforce has grown, rather than being replaced."

The need for better data protocols is becoming more and more pressing...

Establishing data integrity for practical application in modern field service systems is an important area of focus for field service organisations moving forward. Still, progress in this area will undoubtedly be limited in scope when multiple data protocols exist within industry verticals. For third-party service providers, in particular, this challenge threatens their ability to meet increasing customer expectations...

Gyner Ozgul, President & COO, Smart Care Equipment Services

"We use customer IoT devices, and everyone has different standards.

"Unfortunately, our industry hasn't had a standard unification yet. There is some in HVAC, but in our industry, every manufacturer, sometimes the customers themselves and then third-party intermediaries, all have different asset management standards. Because of that, there's a lot of complexity. Do you use the serial number of the piece of equipment? Do you use an asset tech number for the customer view?

"All of these variables, all add a lot of complexity to the both the asset management itself and then into the insights that asset data can carry forward throughout the organisation."

Tom DeVroy, Senior Advisory Solution Consultant,
ServiceNow

"This is a major challenge anybody who is not the original OEM faces – they struggle with coming together with a standard IoT adoption policy.

"Everybody wants their own sensors, their own methods for monitoring their equipment and it makes it virtually impossible for an organisation like that to effectively utilise a lot of those readings they can get from those sensors and disseminate it so they can make sense of it without spending tons of money."

Izzy Sanchez, Director Service & Systems Support Konica
Minolta

"We have something called the RMS platform, which is a device relationship management platform. The level of effort it took us to develop that platform was insane because our competitors would not give us that information.

"So we had to find a way to normalise the data. When a job comes in, what component is it related to, how much can we use the insight we have in our team, and also take an educated guess where needed. However, now the technology on the back end, the AI, is catching up, and it can start joining many of the dots, looking at curves and doing other clever things.

"It's important that if you don't get the buy from OEM's or industry at large, then at some point, you have to start considering a strategy to normalise that IoT signal for your particular industry. I think that would that will go a long way, to over oming the challenges but it is very painful."

Are the skill-sets we need for field service technicians changing?

With challenges in recruitment being prevalent and the shift on machine intelligence becoming more critical to the ongoing success of field service operations, what does this mean for the skill-sets of the engineers and technicians of the future, do we need to see a mass de-skilling of the field workforce?

Kris Oldland, Editor-in-Chief, Field Service News

“As we get to the point where the machines become smarter, we need less hardcore tribal knowledge across our techs, perhaps in the field – if we can supplement that knowledge via remote unless it is critical to get the best engineer on-site.

“Therefore, I wonder whether that tech role on site becomes more about the brand ambassador about the people skills, about being able to speak to the customer, to defuse the situation if it is a break-fix scenario or present to the customer what optimizations have been made if it is more a predictive maintenance call?”

Jason Andrews, Service Director, Baylo

“I think the trend will continue to go that way. In medical devices, it was imperative that we could speak the clinician’s language in the lab- so we hired that way. In the last company I was with, it was decidedly an inability to talk to the customer, hurting us on repeat sales. We were a commoditized business, so we needed to differentiate through service to keep those customers with us, and that was very, very difficult.

“Now where I’m at in robotics is we deliver a solution to the customer, but we’re not speaking the same language. We’ve got engineers in front of warehousemen, or they’re talking to managers in charge of manufacturing and warehouse operations- and we don’t speak the same language.

“We’ve recognized that gap, and are going to attempt to fill it to but that’s all based on the relationship to the customer for repeat sales and retention, so I think it stays that way and because that’s a cost of sales, we’re trying to align the service and sales discussions as well.”

Gyner Ozigul, President & COO, Smart Care Equipment Services

“For me, the biggest challenge is the constraint on finding technicians. As I mentioned earlier, we are hiring a less competent tech, and I also think the idea that we may have to even reach further down at some point, literally looking towards recruiting from high school is real because we are going to run out very, very quickly, of talent, even if we do everything with AI, IoT, everything with the technology supplement and all of that works, we are still not going to have enough talent – probably within the next five years, which seems like a long time, but it’s not.

“So for us, we are already starting to think, how do we go way downstream to build visibility into the mechanical industries in terms of compensation and what it does for their lifestyle and what it’s like to work for a field service company so that we can attract the younger talent into the industry to begin with? It’s really early in our journey, but we’re thinking that if we are having to attract more inexperienced talent- we’re going to have to really drive past that and make the role more attractive.”

Bradley McBain, Managing Director, MBA Engineering

"We're a small business, but we're very agile, and that gives us we deliver probably the best service in our industry – and that's not just me saying that that is what we do, but it is not easy to do. It's not easy to keep people because it's just really unpredictable.

"To give you an example, I had a member of the team out today, and he had his day mapped out and was probably thinking, 'I've just got to service that machine, nice, easy day, then I'm probably going to be home early,' he might have some plans for his evening, but then I message him around about 10 o'clock this morning and tell him that once he is done with the planned maintenance, I need him to drive about two hours north, and go and take a look at the machine.

"It's six o'clock now in the UK, so it's probably not going to be out until seven half seven, and that is disruptive, it's unpredictable, and nobody wants to do it because you can't have a life around it.

"So is the lack of engineers, because people don't want to do it? Is it because we don't have a pool of talent to look towards? Why is there a problem – for so many companies finding engineers?"

Gyner Ozgul, President & COO, Smart Care Equipment Services

"I think the commercialization of what all of our end customers expect is in direct conflict with what's happening in the world regarding work-life balance, engineer availability etc.

"Those two things are set to come together in something of a reckoning. Our customers want a 24/7 service, and really fast response times, because technology has driven our behaviour towards that, our people want a better work-life balance, to be home with their families more and to work fewer hours- and neither of those things is set to change.

"However, there has to be a reconciliation of that, either customers have to come down a little bit in their expectation, or employees are going to have to understand that their work life balance isn't what we talk about broadly."

Tom DeVroy, Senior Advisory Solution Consultant, ServiceNow

"I don't think the days of the trusted advisor are obsolete. I think a skilled technician that's viewed as being a skilled technician, when they're at the customer site creates a value proposition that cannot be diminished."

About ServiceNow:

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With ServiceNow as the integrated system of action, field service organizations are proactively resolving issues and facilitating collaboration between operations, field resources, and customers. Companies can increase operational efficiency, improve resource effectiveness, maximize asset uptime, and expand service revenue all on a single platform with ServiceNow.

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