Leveraging Technology to Speed Up Locates

BY SHANE HART

Locate requests not being completed on time continues to be a challenge within the damage prevention industry, according to the CGA 2020 DIRT Report. The 2021 Next Practices Report identified it as a "critical issue that erodes excavator confidence in the system."

The locate industry is always under pressure to improve, whether that's reducing damages or doing more locates in an allocated time. Locators in the field are put under pressure to perform quickly, but they are also liable to ensure that their locates are accurate. Safety is the number one goal, and we don't want to compromise on that, but if we can help staff out in the field complete locates faster, then everyone benefits. Across North America, there are backlogs of public locates and there doesn't seem to be a way to reduce the backlog other than completing more locates. Unfortunately, there isn't enough economic incentive to hire the staff required to meet these demands, and over the last few years it's been increasingly difficult to find staff that are qualified and enthusiastic to work in the field. The CGA 2020 DIRT Report states, "Late locates are also a major contributor to near-miss/downtime events. Based on the numbers provided by the One Call centers, it is clear that the near misses reported to DIRT greatly undercount actual occurrences." The following tips and tricks will speed up locates, reduce the stress on locators and meet the demand for locates by embracing the mantra of "working smarter, not harder."

Let's focus first on your team. Whether you're a small locate team or have hundreds of employees, your locators in the field and office staff must work in conjunction to complete locate tickets quickly and efficiently. Empowering them to do their jobs faster means making them more proficient. This might involve extra equipment training, new techniques, knowledge transfer from more experienced staff and improving communications. You should be able to compile data on your staff to see how they are performing. For a locator, that might come from your ticket management system, which should show metrics like tickets completed per day and number of unlocatables. Tracking these key numbers will give you a better understanding of the workload and performance of your staff.

One of the foundational principles of locating is taking your time to locate everything. This runs contrary to the goal of speeding up locates, but the number of lines mislocated due to an operator not paying attention is already too high. Therefore, we need to find efficiencies elsewhere. To do this, you can make some informed decisions by yourself and in addition, if you have a ticket management system in place, it should be able to make some of those decisions for you based on artificial intelligence. The end product here is that you set goals and improve the speed of your locates without sacrificing quality or accuracy.

Here are eight ways you can leverage technology to speed up your utility locate ticket completions:

1. Tracking damages within your GIS database allows for informed decisions to be made down the road, whether that's increasing resources for a specific utility or moving locators around to increase efficiency.

2. Collecting mapping as you go and adding to a GIS database with software like Utility Mapper will save time in the long run and should improve the accuracy of your locates.

3. Automating dispatching should be possible through your locate ticket management system and is a super-efficient way to bypass your dispatcher and go straight to your locator. Tickets that require field stake out become available for completion to your locator instantly.

4. Trimming office staff to increase field resources is possible after you automate a lot of the dispatch processes and set up your ticket management system to handle functions like Ticket Overflow and Positive Response.

5. Triaging tickets into risk levels allows your locators to prioritize tickets and could mean reallocating the ticket to a more experienced technician.

6. Syncing with the Utility's GIS mapping systems allows locators to have real-time map access. This makes several processes easier, including clearing and locating in the field.

7. Tracking hookup for locators allows you to gather data and drive efficiency in this process. You can't be in the field, but by using technology, you can export this data and thus improve the speed of locating utilities.

8. Another important technology implementation that our customers take advantage of, is automated routing. For some locators, figuring out a route can be a major headache and another stress on their day. Routing can save time and money by figuring out the most efficient and optimized travel plan for your locators. In addition, tags can be added to prioritize jobs or avoid certain areas. Not every locator needs this as they can build up local knowledge or have good instincts, but it's worth trying and looking at the data. If it saves time and money, then that is a win-win.

The pressure on locators is immense, with ticket demand growing year-after-year and safety expectations increasing, too. Getting locate tickets in the hands of locators fast means they have more time to make better decisions. A few of the solutions we've put in place for our customers to improve response times and communication include:

• Full One Call center integration
• Emergency notifications immediately triggering right to locators
• Emergency sirens for team leaders
• Text message notifications
• Minimizing discrepancies between the utility and locator
• Mapping information as the Utility mapped it, verbatim from the Utility
• Real-time collection of the maps
• High Profile pre-assessments
• Blocking the completion of a ticket based on certain criteria

Having automations like these in place makes it easier when emergencies happen and sets out a pattern of excellence that will reverberate through your company.

When locators are in the field, they usually have their laptop and phone in their truck. Efficiencies can be found in adopting an easy-to-use locate ticket management system that has a simple user interface and easily accessible features. For example, there is technology that allows locators to text or call the excavator. This makes communication faster and enables logging of everything inside one system. Simple solutions like this may only save a few seconds on every locate ticket completed, but over the course of a year and a few thousand tickets, that can add up to a lot of time saved.

In conclusion, leveraging your ticket management system to make informed decisions, implement efficiencies and improve results will speed up your locates, reduce stress on your team, and improve accuracy. The increasing demands on locators can be met by using existing technologies or adopting new ones. Reducing damages and improving upon key metrics like completion times can only happen if we use technology to improve efficiencies. **DP**