Facing Up to FaceTime

BY RACHEL F. GOLDBERG
A maintenance technician wasn’t able to attend her company’s annual training meeting because she was needed onsite during that week. However, she didn’t have to miss all that was going on because another employee was keeping her in the loop via FaceTime.

The employee at the meeting could hold up her smartphone to the trainer, the computer screen, or the maintenance demonstration so the technician at the community could “participate.”

Preservation Management Inc. (PMI), managing more than 100 properties with more than 11,000 units in 19 states, has been using FaceTime for several months to improve communications among staff.

“We had a discussion of how to communicate better when we can’t be in the same location,” says Sarah Milligan, Marketing Program Manager at company headquarters in South Portland, Maine.

The solution came through an informal conversation. Someone who travels frequently mentioned that he spoke with his children the previous night on FaceTime, she says.

“[FaceTime] was a way to better communicate using resources we already had,” Milligan says. At PMI, a company of about 450 employees, half to two-thirds of employees have company-issued smartphones, from site managers and maintenance supervisors on up, Milligan says.

**Getting Started**

Several months ago, the company formally started using FaceTime, a videotelephony and VOIP application from Apple.

Milligan says many of her staff members (about 40) were already familiar and had used the technology through their personal smartphones.

Others at PMI have been slower to adjust to the new communications tool, Milligan says. FaceTime will continue to pose challenges as the company brings more people onboard with its use, Milligan notes. But once employees get used to the app they realize it is a helpful tool.

“It is a weird concept at first, being able to see someone and talk with them,” she says. “Once people see how it works and the benefits, I don’t think people will push back.”

PMI doesn’t offer formal training to employees in the use of FaceTime, although staff members are available to answer questions. When employees receive their smartphones, they are encouraged to experiment with its capabilities.

**Uses**

FaceTime has proved its usefulness around the office and in communities.

For maintenance, it can help connect members of a team. Milligan says PMI had a situation with some cracks in pavement and the maintenance technician was unsure of what to do. Using FaceTime, the tech was able to show the damage to a supervisor who was in a different location, allowing the supervisor to recommend a course of action.

For community managers, the needs may differ, but the usefulness is the same. If these managers and their regional supervisors are not able to see each other for a couple of weeks, FaceTime allows them to talk and “communicate with a more personal touch,” Milligan says.

**The Value**

Even though FaceTime is still a new tool for PMI, value can already be measured two-fold. First is time savings. Unlike Skype, which requires setting an appointment and having a computer available, FaceTime can be used impromptu, when needed, just like making a phone call.

Second, Milligan says, value is in “having a sense of a team, being able to see other people when they are in a different location and seeing body language.”

PMI will continue to expand its use of FaceTime to improve communications. Milligan says, “This is only the beginning for us.”

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