Protecting assets, reducing losses and ensuring smooth operations with intelligent asset tracking

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Openreach installs and maintains the local loop for the UK's telecommunications infrastructure. Every year it buys complex tools, optical fibre, copper cable, and street cabinets – as well as high-volume, lower cost customer premises equipment (CPE), such as modems and home hubs. All of this adds up to hundreds of millions of pounds worth of assets and equipment to look after. But outdated and manual tracking systems were letting them down.

"Intelligent Assets provides us with a forensic ability to identify and remove faulty kit before it impacts our customers."

Tony Mitchell,
Director for Customer Network Services, Openreach

The challenge
Openreach's challenge started when it needed to find 222,000 modems from across the country. During the search, it found that 18,000 units, valued at nearly £500,000, were unaccounted for.

It could identify exactly when new modems were delivered into stores, but it lost visibility after stock was assigned to engineers. Moreover, if modems valued at almost half-a-million pounds were missing what else had escaped attention and at what cost?

Openreach needed a better way to track and trace equipment and assets, end-to-end, across its entire network.

The solution
BT asked Acumentive, who specialise in real-time asset location and management, to customise and embed their SenseAnyWare® application into the Intelligent Assets platform. Martin Kruse, managing director of Acumentive, explains, "We use and develop smart technology to help our customers look after their assets and equipment – types, values, locations, histories and workflow processes – for full visibility and control."

With Intelligent Assets, Openreach can track the exact location and status of tens of thousands of CPE items. It can reassign them from one engineer to another to save unnecessary journeys back to the stores and re-allocate assets between regions, rather than order unnecessary units to meet local shortages. Better still, the system can determine if a broken unit is under warranty for refund or repair.

Darren Delsol, project lead for asset tracking at Openreach, says: "With the Intelligent Assets solution, we have a 95% success rate in tracking modems. In its first year it saved almost £950,000 – not including successful warranty claims or manufacturers' refunds."

The result
With the Intelligent Assets platform working so well, we looked into applying it to other areas of the Openreach business.

Every year Openreach spends £11 million on high value tools. Units like calibration systems and high-end scanners are assigned to engineers for many years. Much like the less expensive items, it needed to know if a tool was still in use, undergoing repair, or had been lost. It also had to ensure tools were returned or reassigned if an engineer left the company.

With the Intelligent Assets platform, Openreach can now track 35 tool categories, with a total value of £7 million, held by 1,100 engineering teams. Unique identifiers are assigned to make employees responsible for their tools, reassignment is easily tracked, and leavers are reminded to return equipment. Over a four-month trial period, Intelligent Assets saved £200,000 in lost or missing tools. After expansion, it will track tools held by all engineers; with a value of around £45 million.

Challenge
Develop an advanced track and trace system for a complex supply chain that covers everything from low-cost, high volume customer premises equipment, right through to high cost tools and equipment.

Solution
BT's Intelligent Assets solution has been customised to accommodate Openreach's needs across a range of different areas, allowing the business to reduce costs, avoid loss and theft and improve environmental impact.

Products and services
Intelligent Assets

Openreach is also responsible for the installation, maintenance and repair of expensive electronics like the line cards that help drive telecommunication services for large organisations and government departments. These electronic items can cost thousands, but without full support information to accompany them, they might be thrown away rather than returned for repair. Failure to track such assets was potentially costing the company a lot.

With Intelligent Assets, Openreach scans electronic cards on delivery from the manufacturer and the system captures exact location, value and date of deployment. If a fault occurs and the component is under warranty, the manufacturer and engineer are notified and items get returned. It's estimated that this could save at least £6 million every year.

Similarly, it can now track millions of pounds-worth of fibre and copper cable, used to extend or repair networks. For a long time, drums of cables were tracked manually, but this wasn't ideal. The quantity of cable used on specific jobs couldn't be tracked and exact national stock locations and quantities weren't known, so leftovers weren't always used. With intelligent assets, everything's tracked and nothing goes to waste.

Finally, with responsibility for the thousands of broadband and telephone cabinets across the UK, Openreach needed a better way to track new ones as they were delivered. The latest generation of superfast broadband cabinets are manufactured in China and shipped in bulk in containers, before being transported all over the country. For a long time, they were tracked through a manual system. But data capture was patchy and it wasn't possible to track these high-value assets in real time. Tracking uses barcodes and location-aware mobile devices that transmit information to a central portal. Openreach are be able to track cabinets' lifecycles in real time, from their arrival in the country to delivery and deployment and all the way to retirement.

The range of Intelligent Assets solutions in use by Openreach will not only reduce capital expenditure by millions of pounds, but also improve customer service. Furthermore, efficient use of assets will speed up projects aimed at improving local and regional infrastructure and the risk of loss or theft will also be reduced.

There are sustainability benefits, too. Less raw material consumption takes place and unnecessary engineering journeys are eliminated. Ian Hill, Chief Sustainability Officer at Openreach, says: "Our use of the Intelligent Assets solution will reduce unnecessary consumption of scarce resources, eliminate disposal of branded items in landfill, and reduce carbon footprints for both BT and its customers".

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