

Mobile GIS?

I get this all the time. People want Mobile GIS. “We have this big GIS in the office and we use it all the time to make maps and export data into our outage systems or gas leak management system. It’s great. Can we put into the field for the mobile workers?” I’m like the psychiatrist. Instead of giving them an answer, I ask them a question, “To do what?” The answers range from, “it’s a lot easier to get the maps on a mobile device, then carrying around paper maps,” to “the GIS is more current, so I’m getting better data in the field” to “well I can access the entire electric or gas system with me.” Again I ask the simple question, “to do what?” In frustration, the common answer is, “field work.” Ugh? The right answer is, “all kinds of stuff: transformer inspections, pole inspections, damage assessment, customer surveys, staking, manhole cleaning, battery maintenance, meter testing, painting” A lot more stuff – probably hundreds of workflows.

The issue is that each one of these workflows requires a very limited set of information. So why load up your mobile device with everything you every wanted, but really don’t need on your ruggedized laptop. It’s a classic case of one size doesn’t fit all. Instead, there should be no such a thing as Mobile GIS at all. Instead, we should be thinking of a damage collection app, a street light replacement app, or a pole inspection app. If my job is to do lamp replacements today for the city of Somerville, Massachusetts, then my app should show me only streetlights that need lamp replacements in Somerville. I don’t need or want data on line switches or gas leaks (unless the work flow requires it) or dirty manholes. Period.

Since the GIS is an information system, it has the ability to serve (or publish) just and only just the information the workers need to do their job. The next time someone asks what your mobile GIS strategy is, answer it this way, “give the field worker just the right information, for the right place at the right time on the right device to do the work at hand.” Mobile GIS? Never heard of it.