NetMotion Mobility® Connectivity Software Keeps the Internet On for Utility Workers

4-County Electric Power Association is a not-for-profit electrical distribution cooperative serving 50,000 members in Northeastern Mississippi that has been providing affordable and reliable electricity since 1939. The more than 70 field employees employed by 4-County Electric drive vehicles equipped with everything they need to serve customers, including Internet-connected laptops that are critical to their productivity. However, cellular dead zones throughout the cooperative's rural territory would frequently cause employees to lose connections to critical applications. The utility selected NetMotion Mobility to keep employees productive regardless of the strength of the cellular signal. Linemen and other field workers now only need to start up their laptop once to get a connection that will last all day.

Internet Access Denied

4-County Cooperative includes a main office and five district offices spread out across 9 counties in Mississippi. Field teams rely on Internet connections to access the utility's core work order system that creates efficient work scheduling around events such as storm repair. Workers are armed with Windows 7 laptops and Windows software. Relying on a cellular connection to access work applications, the laptops would often be unable to connect due to poor network coverage, bringing work order progress to a halt.

"Our rural environment had employees re-starting their connections all the time," said Harold Critcher, IT Administrator, 4-County Electric Power Association. "This caused a lot of extra cycles and delays in service."

Some linemen grew so frustrated that they abandoned their crippled laptops, resorting to pen and paper until they had time to open an IT ticket. Faced with unhappy employees and a system that often could not serve its intended purpose, Critcher and his team realized they needed a more reliable approach to keeping teams connected to the Internet while in the field. Based on feedback from staff, 4-County set out to find a solution that required minimal user interaction and didn't close out every time a lineman was out of coverage. "We wanted the tool to work much harder, so that our employees didn't have to," added Critcher.

INDUSTRY:
Cooperative Utility

OBJECTIVES:
- Increase employee uptime
- Drive adoption of efficient, electronic work order processes
- Improve employee morale

SOLUTIONS:
- NetMotion Mobility
- Window 7 Laptops with Windows Applications

RESULTS:
- Instant-on mobile connections with minimal user interaction
- Reduced IT support tickets
- Better-served customers
- Operational cost savings

> **"Mobility enables our field workers to complete more maintenance items and more jobs, helping us better serve our members."**
>
> **Harold Critcher** | IT Administrator

No Fuss Connections

4-county talked with other local agencies about how they combat connectivity challenges in the rural areas of Mississippi. From the state's highway patrol they learned that Mobility was keeping troopers connected by creating a secure and reliable mobile VPN tunnel. Applications would pause but not disconnect as the troopers roamed. "This sounded like the ultimate fix, so we ran a trial to be sure," said Critcher.

From a user standpoint, the transition to Mobility was seamless. Lineman didn't have to learn new steps to use it; in fact, they didn't even know it was there. They would just log in and their applications would work flawlessly. "All they noticed was connections were there every time they logged on," added Critcher. "This quieted our help desk phones immediately."

As 4-County proceeded with the Mobility implementation, they also gained a central control point from which they could secure, manage and optimize connectivity for the organization's critical work teams. Moreover, the client-server software was rolled out quickly and seamlessly. "Mobility was very simple to deploy," said Critcher. "I was also able to easily incorporate all of our key security and management rules, ensuring the implementation was sufficiently protected."

Modern Day Co-op

Mobility has transformed 4-County service vehicles into fully functioning offices. Staff no longer come in to the office in the morning to grab a clipboard and paper for fear of their electronic systems going down. "When they get in their vehicles in the morning, they see where the orders are, get GPS information and head out," added Critcher. "Laptops are viewed as just as reliable as the clipboard approach, and that is a huge achievement. Poorly performing technology is also no longer a source of employee dissatisfaction."

Linemen also no longer need to come in to the brick-and-mortar offices every day, but just a couple of times a week to gather materials or attend safety meetings. "Mobility enables our field workers to complete more maintenance items and more jobs, helping us better serve our members," said Critcher. That mobility has given 4-County Electric more flexibility when planning for the future. "Mobility really lets us explore possibilities we didn't have before. From reducing our offices to holding less inventory, we can look at many ways to save and provide better value and member service," added Critcher.

NetMotion Mobility has dramatically increased 4-County's ability to operate like its larger suburban utility counterparts. With cell coverage no longer a barrier to productivity, employees can focus their attention squarely on member service and satisfaction.

NetMotion®