Imagine a comprehensive automated logging system that makes solving technical queries simple, takes away the need for external meter reading, and allows companies to view their printing statistics online. This is in fact real, and at the core of Ricoh SA’s customer service endeavours. By Marisa Lourenço

There are two systems at the heart of this logging system: @Remote, which is focused on fleet management and operates within a company’s network; and E-service, an automatic process that uses a comprehensive online system. Both replace the need for phone calls to be made to report issues, and make pinpointing a problem – to find the most efficient solution – easier.

Successful problem solving
@Remote became available in South Africa five years ago, and today boasts over 8 500 clients. ‘We have won many tenders with this system,’ says @Remote and E-service system administrator, Danjay Seosanker.

All Ricoh machines have a built-in @Remote function, which works through the client’s own network to transfer messages to Ricoh’s server. The client must give permission to the Ricoh engineer to bypass port and firewall security to enable server access, which is open only to Ricoh administrators to ensure security.

If there are more than five machines in a company, or not all are Ricoh products, a small box with the @Remote functionality is set up in the office to connect the machines to the service through the network.

Though @Remote is free – with no plans to charge for it in future – clients pay a once-off fee for the box installation.

With this functionality installed, any time there is an issue with a machine, a request is registered immediately by the @Remote system. The command – with the unique request number of the machine – goes through to the Ricoh server, called Siebel, to see how the problem should be repaired.

Responding to an issue
One example of the automation without human intervention is the case of toner replenishment. When @Remote detects a certain low level on a machine, an email notification is sent to the Ricoh consumables division to order toner for the device. Siebel checks automatically what toner the machine uses, and if stock is available, it allocates it to the relevant company, draws up a warehouse order, and sends a notification to the in-house courier company. ‘Companies only know they’re out of toner when the new one comes,’ says Seosanker. The new toner serves as a replacement for the backup that will soon replace the one in the machine, ensuring a company does not run out of this essential need.

In the case of a service call that cannot be solved by the system – like continuous paper jams – the Ricoh helpdesk is alerted by @Remote to call the client experiencing the difficulty. A Ricoh engineer tries to assist the client over the phone, and if successful, the call is closed. If the problem persists, it is escalated to a ‘field repair’, where the message is sent to a service
controller and relayed to a handheld receiver. Ricoh has both hardware and IT engineers to deal with field operations, which must be answered within four hours. According to Seosanker, the response time is usually 1.5 hours.

The @Remote system also offers customers an online web portal, called the Customer Portal Site. This provides a platform for viewing monthly meter readings and volumes. It is useful for customers with various branches that want a detailed report of what happens on-site, and to see when machines were added to the system – even non-Ricoh products. Another convenience is automatic billing, where meter readings are done electronically, eliminating the need for customers to be called on to complete this.

**Manual intervention**

Unlike @Remote, E-Service is not network dependent. It is an automatic process with manual intervention from the customer. Its core is an online portal where customers can log in to order toner for a device, and then track its delivery progress; place a service call if a device experiences technical issues; and enter the meter readings of a device. This takes away the process of manually completing those time-consuming tasks, ‘increasing a company’s efficiency and reducing the downtown of the devices’, says Seosanker. E-Service is now in its second year in South Africa.

To report an issue, customers find their machine on the system, and send a message to Ricoh via e-mail. E-Service also uses Siebel to resolve issues, and when receiving a message, Ricoh staff will first check to see what the problem is and if it can be fixed remotely, keeping in contact with customers at all times. Sometimes a WebEx meeting – where a Ricoh engineer can control desktops remotely – is set up to fix the problem.

To get customers that still call in for various issues started on the system, Ricoh sends out an e-mail notification after the call is logged. The notification explains the benefits of the system and how to get started. To register, customers type in the asset/serial number and the machine’s postal code in the online portal. Once this is complete, they can view their machine(s) online, and log complaints from there. To date, E-Service has over 700 registered users.

One feature of @Remote available only for Ricoh devices is green reporting. Here, customers can view exactly how many trees were saved in terms of pages printed via duplex, which translates into tangible cost savings for business. They can also keep an eye on paper wastage. It shows customers the amount of energy used in terms of electricity and indicates Rand savings. The bonus of using @Remote for these kinds of analyses is that it is free.

According to Seosanker, South Africa is moving towards billing per department. ‘It’s already starting to happen,’ he says. ‘You need to do double-sided printing for energy conserving. Legislation will be that between even one and three devices in a small company must show their dedication to the environment.’ He adds that all Ricoh machines are Energy-star compliant, meaning they use the lowest possible amount of energy to print.

‘In the current times of information overload, one wonders if there is need to add to it?’ asks Seosanker. ‘On our part, the answer is yes. We can show our customers everything.’