

# Apex software assists expansion of patient transport service

If you run a patient transport business, a whiteboard and excellent organisation will get you started. But to expand successfully, says Apex Networks Ltd, a purpose-designed software package is key.

North West Private Ambulance Liaison Services (NWPALS) smoothly runs a fleet of 22 vehicles and honours a complex array of contracts. It provides transportation to a wide range of vulnerable patients, many requiring specialist aid.

Just four years ago, however, with a fleet of eight vehicles, Operations and Finance Manager Jamie Smith was finding it increasingly difficult to keep on top of daily operations. He was keen to expand the company, but with two or three managers keeping constant watch over a complex whiteboard system, scope for taking on additional contracts and fulfilling customer needs was limited. "There were definitely frustrations," recalls Jamie. "The data wasn't live. We were physically watching vehicles and updating the boards to track accurately. Luckily, we never had an issue, but always felt that the potential for mistakes was there."

## Expanding a patient transfer business

Expansion in this sector is not as straightforward as simply buying more vehicles. All patient transport businesses must conform to strict regulations set by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and should aim to follow the code of conduct set by the Independent Ambulance Association (IAA). It is a complex and regulated industry, with a lot to consider before even one patient can be transported from one site to another.

The CQC regulates independent ambulance services. Overall, it questions if a service is safe, effective, caring, responsive to people's needs and well-led. Its comprehensive inspection methodology examines documentation – including personnel files, patient records, accident reporting and the investigation of incident reports – and this can be a daunting experience.

In addition, they check items such as daily cleaning, equipment and status of vehicles, for which it can be hard to provide a reliable audit trail. In order to grow, Jamie knew he needed to find bespoke software to support and sustain the ethical, reliable and profitable business the board wanted NWPALS to be, as well as conform to tough regulation. It was vital NWPALS was prepared – but when he researched the software market, nothing available ticked all the necessary boxes.

## Finding the right connection

It was then that a 'happy breakdown' occurred. Jamie happened to talk to a recovery wagon driver, who explained how easily he used his phone to integrate with the recovery management system implemented by the recovery agent he received jobs from. Jamie jotted down the name of the system provider – Apex – and quickly got in touch with their MD at the time. He told them, "You build it, and we'll pilot it!" and with hard work and excellent communication between both partners, the Apex Patient Transportation Software (PTS) was developed. Jamie is now certain that he is running a system with all potential creases ironed out.

"I believe it is the best system out there for private transport providers," he says. "The Apex team made it work for us; there was never a negative."

## How it works

Once the PTS is installed, the Apex PTS Portal could be set up with NWPALS' customers: this might be a hospital or care home. They receive a pin to securely log into the part of the NWPALS system that allocates jobs. The customer can then book new jobs without even making a phone call, view jobs pending and also check their progress – finally being notified on completion. Once entered, the control team can allocate work appropriately to the NWPALS crew. It is a flexible and live system: more efficient and accurate than paper and pen methods or spreadsheets.

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The risk of incorrect information has reduced significantly for NWPALS. Previously there was the chance of a job being accidentally wiped off the whiteboard, or incorrectly updated; with Apex PTS, the information always remains in the system. "We made the whiteboards work, but we wouldn't manage now without Apex," says Jamie. He believes that from a cost perspective, if they had remained working the way they used to, it would require six to seven people in the control room; instead, they still function with one or two. Unsurprisingly, Jamie is delighted. He says, "The number of 'moves' has increased significantly. The system does it for you, so it's win-win all round. And because the hospital books directly into the system, there's less time on the phone. We also have full status screens to see exactly at what point the journey is, so it's beneficial to the customer. We've also been able to keep our costs down."

## Accountability and safeguarding

A visit from CQC could feel worrying, but during their previous audit Jamie discovered that NWPALS was streets ahead. "The CQC was very impressed with our audit side of it, and how it does all our vehicle maintenance," he says. "It was one of the best they had seen in the private sector." He also is reassured with how it enhances NWPALS' level of service and ethics. Safeguarding and a good referral system is imperative;



Apex PTS allows a crew to report any issues online instantly using their PDA app, which will be delivered into the right person's inbox to be actioned according to triage, while leaving a clear audit trail. "The CQC was really impressed that it could be reported and in my inbox within minutes," says Jamie. "Apex has only made our CQC review stronger. It's amazing – what else can I say?"

## Benefits

Overall, NWPALS has found the system flexible: when a 'tweak' was required to allow crew to select a time frame for reporting incidents, this was amended at the click of a button. Whiteboards – or even Excel – are not live, accurate or accessible, whereas Apex PTS can be accessed anywhere in the world. In addition, keeping detailed records on each patient transport vehicle is critical because a business can be shut down if correct procedures are not followed. The DVSA (Driver Vehicle Standards Agency) and VOSA (Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) carry out regular spot checks. However, NWPALS finds that the Apex Fleet management module ticks every box and is now essential for their smooth operations.

A useful side benefit of Apex PTS has been its SMS messaging system, which allows excellent communication within the company: staff absence is quickly managed and covered, and important messages can be sent out. Clear and efficient communication helps create a staff team that feels valued and listened to. Importantly, they have also found it simple to use. "I would be confident that any other organisation could take this software on and enjoy a smooth transition," Jamie assures, "and although we've only needed it twice, the support we get from Apex, in and out of hours, is second to none."

NWPALS has now achieved 30,000 moves using Apex – and is poised to expand further. Customers are delighted, vulnerable patients are benefiting and the CQC is impressed. Sometimes, it seems, a whiteboard just isn't enough.

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