

The 24/7 personnel office

The old-fashioned kiosk is taking off as an interactive tool dispensing information and services

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Nurse Lyndsay Downes uses kiosk at Rockyview General Hospital – Jeff McIntosh for the Globe & Mail

Calgary Health Region was facing a perplexing problem: How to provide Internet access and e-mail to thousands of employees who did not have ready access to a computer?

The agency, which provides hospital and health-centre services in Calgary and a number of small surrounding communities including Banff and Lake Louise, found its innovative answer from IBM Canada Ltd., in the latest incarnation of a nearly century-old concept: the vending machine. Originally built to dispense simple goods such as candy, cigarettes and soft drinks, today they are interactive kiosks, popping up everywhere from airport check-in counters to store check-out lanes, and now helping employers respond better to staff needs.

“The growth in innovative new ways to use interactive kiosks is phenomenal,” says Rob Ranieri, service line leader at IBM’s application innovation services unit in Markham, Ont. “They have reached into almost every facet of our lives.” Driving that growth is serendipity - the happy coincidence of technologies and demand for increased access and speed of service.

Lower cost is also a factor. Ten years ago, kiosks cost about \$20,000 each; today, the simplest form goes for about \$2,000. Today’s self-standing kiosks are essentially a touch-screen computer connected wirelessly to the Internet, says Mr. Ranieri. New versions offer 3-D imaging, and voice prompts and responses may not be far away.

“With so many places offering WiFi networks, all you really need is an electrical outlet for power,” Mr. Ranieri says. In the case of Calgary Health Region, the situation was a tad more complicated. The agency has 24,000 employees in 115 facilities covering an area the size of Switzerland, notes Lee Ann Sullivan, director of relationship management.

Calgary Health wanted to get rid of its paper- and phone-based system of providing human-resources information and support to staff, and replace it with a Web-based portal for online access, along with two-way e-mail communication for everyone.

The problem was that about 75 per cent of the agency’s staff did not have regular access to a computer during work hours, and many worked shifts that extended long past the 9-to-5, closed-on-weekends hours kept by HR employees. “We went to IBM and they came up with that kiosk idea,” says Ms. Sullivan.

“We put about 100 of them in high-traffic areas like cafeterias, clinics and common areas. Since we rolled them out in the summer of 2006, the paper-based requests for information on things like vacations, pay and benefits have fallen to a trickle, and calls to the call centre are down by 30 per cent.”

The kiosks are essentially a touch-screen computer with an attached keyboard, track-ball, built-in printer and a telephone that automatically dials a help desk when the receiver is lifted. The health agency’s employees can download or send e-mails, connect with work-related Internet sites, submit benefit claims and vacation requests, print out pay stubs, and handle all the tasks once relegated to telephone calls and snail mail.

“The response has been phenomenal,” says Terry Cleveland, director of Calgary Health’s transformation project. “No more posting bulletins on elevator walls to keep staff informed. No more lost mail. The staff now control their own benefits and vacation times.”

IBM’s Mr. Ranieri says the Calgary installation is just the tip of the iceberg for the rapid penetration of self-standing kiosks into everyday lives. His 300-person unit now has 70 people dedicated to finding new ways to use the technology mainly in the hotel, transportation and border security sectors. His group created the check-in kiosks at Toronto and Vancouver international airports and just completed a similar project at Schiphol Airport. “We have also done check-in kiosks for Air Canada, British Airways, JAL and hotels like Hilton and Marriott,” he says. IBM says its interactive kiosk business has quadrupled in as many years.

What’s next? Look for increasing numbers of 3-D kiosks, says Mr. Ranieri. They will pop up in hotel lobbies, allowing you to take virtual tours of rooms and choose the one with the view you like. You will also find them in clothing and furniture stores. Need to see how that sofa will fit in your living room? Just upload a digital photo of your room and then download an image that will show the couch in various positions in the room. “The technology is available,” Mr. Ranieri says. “We are just starting to apply it and extend it.”