



Permit-to-work systems... electronic or paper?

First of all let's be clear about what we mean by an electronic permit-to-work system. There is widespread misunderstanding and confusion about this term. Some folk understand this to mean that it simply refers to the use of a computer as a means of generating and printing a paper permit, rather than having to rely on doing this work entirely by hand, in effect, merely an "electronic form" of a paper permit. Whereas, in reality, an electronic permit to work system, like aSap's PCMS (www.safetyapplication.com) is something entirely more relevant to modern business needs.

By harnessing the power and ease of use of modern technology and advanced application software development, aligned with best safety practice and risk assessment techniques, the advantages offered by this particular electronic permit-to-work system transcends the simple process of raising and issuing of permits. Just as importantly, it provides the necessary interface and means of access to a whole spectrum of safety-related management information, as well as providing the impetus and behaviour to underpin an effective and efficient safety culture and operational regime. A far cry, indeed, from the obviously inherent limitations of a paper-based system.

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So why change from a paper based system? A sentiment often expressed runs along the lines of: "We've managed with our paper-based system for years, why should we change?" or, "If it's not broken, why fix it?" These are perfectly reasonable opinions if the business is small and relatively simple to run. The reasons why some companies may resist adopting an electronic permit-to-work system vary. This attitude could stem from one or more of the following:

Apathy (We can't be bothered to see if we can improve things and we don't really care)

Complacency (We've never had a problem, we've a good system already, so it does not apply to us)

Cynicism (It's not for us, it offers no advantages over what we do now)

Techno phobia (This new-fangled stuff...it's too technical, complex, difficult for our people)

Averse to change (We are unwilling and reticent to embrace new ideas)

Expense (We can't afford or justify the cost of the investment, we prefer to ignore any costs associated with wasted operational delays or safety incidents)

Safety at Work



But for any business that involves potential physical and commercial risks that are associated with the nature of their operation (for example, the use of electricity, gas, water, working at height or confined spaces, machinery, high temperatures, pollutants, hazardous materials and substances, fire and explosion hazards, etc) the issues surrounding safety and risk management requires more insight and stronger leadership.

So what has changed over the years to make this subject particularly relevant? Here are some of the key conditions that have influenced the pattern of the way that organisations now do business:

- The advances in computer and communications technology that allow businesses to operate more efficiently
- Global market dynamics have spawned more stringent business practices. As we know, the fallout from the Enron and WorldCom experiences gave rise to the requirement for more verifiable corporate business activity as enshrined in the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the Turnbull Report and Basel II, etc. Although these are primarily financial guidelines, they nonetheless have a bearing on other aspects of the way companies operate, including the way they manage their health and safety at work policy. For example, this extract from the Turnbull Report, states:

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"...directors should, at least annually, conduct a review of the effectiveness of the ...system of internal control and should report to shareholders that they have done so. The review should cover all controls, including financial, operational and compliance controls and risk management"

Source: 'Internal Control: Guidance for Directors on the Combined Code' published by The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales.

- More far-reaching health and safety at work directives as a result of EU legislation
- A more litigious accident/incident 'claims' culture

As the global market 'ripple effect' cascades, the foregoing is not just relevant to large international enterprises, but also to smaller companies that supply corporate customers, with the resultant potential impact on the well-being of their businesses.

The following table compares the features, attributes and benefits between aSap's PCMS electronic permit-to-work system and a 'traditional' paper-based permit system.

Features, Attributes, Benefits	Paper system	PCMS
Can raise a basic permit	Yes	Yes
Can print a basic permit	Yes	Yes
Has full visibility and accountability of all safety procedures	No	Yes
Can disseminate accurate/timely information throughout company	No	Yes
Has robust and disciplined compliance mechanisms with relevant SOP and EHS directives	No	Yes
Can interrogate the status of Risk Assessment and permit-to-work issues in real-time, anytime, from anywhere	No	Yes
Can easily trace permits and provide full audit trail and reporting	No	Yes
Can examine risk assessment of work to be carried out at source	No	Yes
Can instantly identify conflicts between permits	No	Yes
Can precisely identify location of permits using tabular or pictorial layout	No	Yes
Ensures that all sections of permits are correctly and fully completed	No	Yes
Identifies and captures details for mechanical/electrical isolations & tagging	No	Yes
Provides instant access to MSDS to enable proper PPE to be assigned	No	Yes
Interfaces with other MMS, ERP and management information systems	No	Yes
Issues instant alerts and notifications based on severity of tasks being performed	No	Yes
Provides links to overall integrity of safety operations and behaviour	No	Yes
Provides dynamic real-time monitoring and status of all active permits	No	Yes
Gives immediate access to all current and historical permits	No	Yes
Provides hazards analysis as part of risk assessment integration	No	Yes
Has workflow mechanism ensuring correct in-house safety procedures are always followed	No	Yes
Is scalable and extensible to suit the needs of any size of company, for single site, multiple site or trans-national operations	Limited	Yes
Paper based deployment	Yes	Yes
Server based deployment	No	Yes
Web-based deployment	No	Yes
Provides remote permit access and monitoring	No	Yes
Internationalisation, multiple language support	No	Yes
Provides role and competency based work assignment	Limited	Yes
Provides integration to proximity card readers	No	Yes
Has pre-populated database of Hazards	No	Yes