



Putting pen to paper

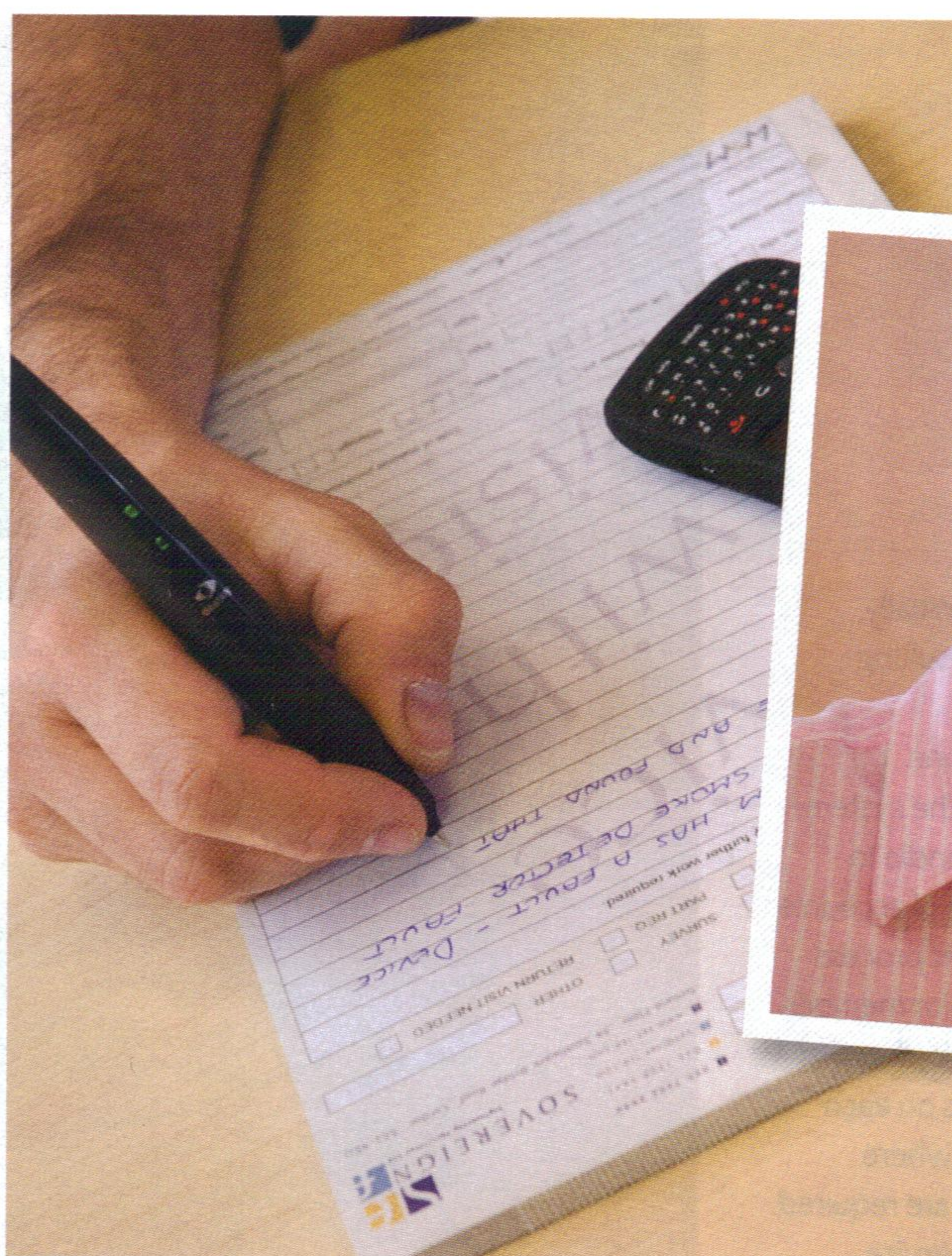
Delivering a diverse selection of offerings within the general heading of facilities management, Sovereign Engineering's recent efforts to improve its service operation were explained to Dennis Flower.

Using his experience of working for others over a number of years, Keith Webster established his own business, Sovereign Engineering Facilities, 12 years ago, initially providing support for users of catering equipment. The business quickly developed into a provider of a greater range of services as increasingly more contracts required the servicing of electrics, plumbing, heating, air condition and ventilation equipment within a selection of diverse commercial buildings. The company's contracts now vary from the provision of regular maintenance visits to establishing a permanent on-site maintenance team.

Growth can be seen to have taken place on a biennial basis and the company has increased its turnover to a current total of £5.5m. Employing 50 people, its profits have recently been shown to have increased by 10%, much of which can be attributed to its efforts in utilising new

► technology to raise productivity and reduce manual input in the management of data. As a result, more work has been completed by fewer office staff and no increase in the number of engineers employed.

'About 12 years ago, when we started, software such as Maximo and Concept was really starting to take off,' Webster recalled. 'And I ended up heavily involved in Concept, which was a good tool for maintenance, but that was about it.' As the business grew further, it was decided to look at systems that would improve operations such as invoicing, planning and contract management. There was no deadline for a decision and the lengthy process of analysis continued over a number of years. Following



The write solution
Sovereign's use of digital pen technology has been enthusiastically received by MD Keith Webster (above).

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further expansion 18 months ago, however, the project gained more urgency.

After due consideration, the decision was made to use the Wireless Service Management solution and Webster was keen to explain the number of benefits achieved. The company had previously operated a paper-based system that involved considerable duplication of effort when processing reports and creating the various spreadsheets required to keep track of work completed and required. These reports are now completed using digital pen technology.

The WSM solution was originally created for the fire and securities sector, adapted for use in more general field service operations through close working with Sovereign Engineering. The final result has been the creation of WSM's Digital Pen Plus.

The implementation of the system means that data sent back from the field is now processed with far less effort and manual input. In addition to the savings in staff time and consumables previously required in the creation of paper records, the quality of information available to

analyse operations and processes is considerably more detailed than before, delivering a number of additional benefits to the business. One of these is the improved use of time through the system's scheduling and diary management processes.

'It's the sort of system that will help us to add three or four million pounds worth of maintenance to our portfolio without actually increasing our admin staff,' said Webster. 'It's just reduced one of the [administration] jobs to next to nothing.' The task described involved the processing of information from sub contractors. While the company carries out core maintenance operations with its own staff wherever possible, there are a number of additional areas where it is more effective to outsource. In some instances, this can add up to as many as seven or eight outsourced operations.

'We use Sage for our accounting and we used to have to track all the subcontractor call outs on an Excel purchase order sheet,' said Webster. This involved a considerable amount of paperwork, most of which was generated manually. The company found it difficult to track

every detail, which meant that chargeable items could be missed from invoices with no means of highlighting errors. This has now changed and the details of every operation can be now be imported from the WSM solution into Sage for the creation of spreadsheets and invoices. The company states that 90% of its work is now processed automatically, with the remaining 10% often made up of minor exceptions where engineers have raised questions that are usually resolved relatively quickly. One of the clearest benefits was explained as being that maintenance invoices, which could previously take up to three days to produce, are now created in 15 minutes.

'Very few systems do 100% of what you want,' Webster continued. 'Most of them do about 80%. We wanted a system that does 95% and the system we have does everything we wanted it to do, without compromise. We're not a big company and I didn't want to just throw money at something.' This high level of satisfaction was the result of a gradual introduction of the WSM solution, with adjustments made on an ongoing basis to match requirements. Describing the

► financial benefits as the main driver initially, Webster stated that the additional resulting advantages are regarded as a bonus.

The company has recently made one administrative person redundant as the system has seen their work requirement dwindle to almost nothing, while the processing of accounts and invoice creation is a much simpler process that can be completed by a more junior member of staff than was the previously required. Another benefit is that profit and loss on each contract is far more visible, showing where efficiencies or changes of processes are required. There is also less requirement to supervise engineers and constantly check to make sure paperwork is correctly completed, said Webster. 'I had to spend two or three days on a very important job myself last year, going through all the paperwork to make sure everything was up to date,' he said. 'It means that we're now doing what I originally set out to do in my business 12 years ago which we obviously failed to do because of all the bureaucracy.' The company's engineers use Destiny digital pens and note pads to complete a report of work carried out on site. The sheet they write on becomes the site record, signed and retained by the customer, to provide an account of work completed which can also



Forward facing
Keith Webster in the reception area of the company's central London headquarters.

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serve as a reference for engineers attending the customer's premises in future. The company receives a digital replica of the form. 'From an engineer's point of view, nothing has changed,' said Webster. 'Apart from the fact that they now have a fatter pen and need to write more clearly.'

The use of digital pen technology is also proving popular with customers, says Webster. 'There's a little bit of a novelty factor with it, because clients like to see this,' said Webster. 'and they like the fact that they're not signing a PDA.' Customers also like to be presented with a paper record of the work completed, he continued, avoiding the bother of having to log on to an internet site and print off their own copy. There was no training required for engineers and the only problems experienced have been through poor handwriting. Once the report has been sent, the system sends a message to the engineer's mobile phone, allowing them to check that details such as job numbers are correct.

Sovereign Engineering is now in the position of having created additional capacity within its service operation that will allow it to take on more contracts in the future. Although there is no projected ROI time scales for the WSM system, the company's recent rise in profits and savings in reduced administrative staff and consumable items is considered as sufficient proof that its investment in new technology has been extremely effective **SM**

Web enabled

The company's website provides a detailed overview of its various operations.

