

Farm Costing Solutions

New products and services incorporate the latest technology

Since it was founded over 20 years ago, Farm Costing Solutions (FCS) has established itself as the leader in hardware and software solutions when it comes to managing farm expenses and labour.



Because of its innovative products and superior customer service, FCS has attracted some of South Africa's top agricultural enterprises as clients – including Dutoit Group, De Keur, Fruitways (Melsetter), Namibian Grape Company, Cape Orchard Company and Capespan. FCS's renowned Time Management Solutions (TMS) system eliminates the need for manual paperwork by electronically recording all labour-related activities on a farm, including Time and Attendance, Piecework, and Job Costing.

In addition, FCS's software includes a Payroll solution and a complete Farm Management suite that simplifies managing a variety of other costs, including spraying, fertilisation and fleet.

To ensure that it continues to lead the way in the coming decades, FCS has introduced a number of fresh products and upgrades, including rewritten software, a brand-new reader and a Communications Hub. These solutions incorporate the latest technology and have been developed in response to extensive client consultations.

So it's no surprise that when FCS unveiled its new product range at a launch event in Ceres, companies were quick to sign up.

IMPROVED SOFTWARE

The FCS engineering team has rewritten all of the software in a central SQL database. SQL allows for seamless integration between every FCS product, including TMS, Payroll and the Farm Management System. In addition, clients can now write their own reports and manipulate data in any way they wish to.

Other benefits of the new software include: improved speed; greater stability; increased database size; enhanced security; faster software upgrades; and easy portability between devices.

"We have spent a significant amount of time and resources on re-developing the software in SQL. The packages now work seamlessly with one another and is superior to the old system" says Fritz Wesson, the company's founder.

V5 READER – SMART AND USER-FRIENDLY

The new V5 portable reader is a smarter and more user-friendly device, packed with innovative features. The sleek, smaller design means that the device slips into a pocket, while remaining sturdy enough to withstand conditions on a farm. A lithium-polymer battery allows for two days of usage without the need to recharge.

Other new, built-in features include: the display of employee details, orchard, activity, variety information, LCD backlight, humidity/ambient sensor; and GPS tracking.

Future programming: Electronically the reader has four digital and four analogue input/ outputs and a built in GSM chip with a sim card slot. Software development will take place to enable the GSM (cell phone communication), a biometrics scanner, an interface for turnstiles or magnetic doors; a scale or load cell; and a camera. The device language and display options can also be customised for each client.

When it comes to storage, the new readers have capacity for +/-60 million transactions, compared to about 20,000 on the old devices. All data is stored on an 8 gigabyte SD card, which protects against external forces such as hard knocks, magnetic fields and lightning.

Three prominent buttons make it easy to switch between the Time and Attendance, Piecework, and Job Costing modules. Information on individual workers can be accessed directly from the devices, and supervisors can easily check an individual or team's performance. Workers' names and progress are displayed on

the screen when they swipe their tags.

To combat cheating, each reader also has a re-swipe timer, which prevents workers from swiping more than once within a certain period of time. While the old system allowed for a single re-swipe time across the board, it can now be set separately for each reader. To further avoid abuse, an alarm goes off when a worker tries to swipe more than once.

COMMUNICATIONS HUB

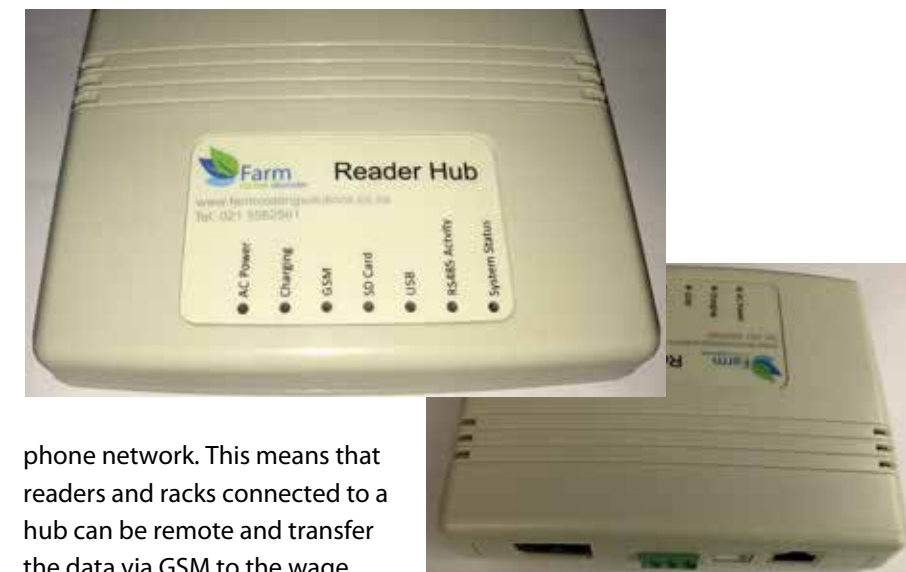
The Communications Hub has been developed to make it easier for clients to download data from the readers. With the previous system, data was sent directly from the readers to the client's computer. However, this became problematic due to electricity load shedding and Windows-related malfunctions.

"Following discussions with our clients, we decided to address the challenges associated with transferring the data directly to a computer. There were some factors beyond our control – such as sporadic power outages and computer glitches – that caused the data to sometimes not download properly. But with the new system these problems are a thing of the past," says Wesson.

When readers are plugged into reader racks, data is downloaded to the Communications Hub, where it is stored until the PC is ready to accept it. The built-in battery means that the Hub works even when the electricity is off. Two SD-card slots (active data and a backup) ensure that data of up to 60 million transactions is safely stored.

From the Communications Hub, data can be transferred either through a USB cable or through the Ethernet PC network.

Future programming: The Hub has a built-in GSM chip with a Sim Card slot, and the software will be developed to communicate via the cell



phone network. This means that readers and racks connected to a hub can be remote and transfer the data via GSM to the wage office.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

FCS continues to use clients' license fees to improve its offerings. Wesson says that among the new products and features on the horizon are biometric identification, weighing capabilities and a breathalyser. Next year FCS plans to launch an app, and it is also considering hosting the database in the cloud.

"We are constantly keeping up-to-date on global technology trends and incorporating them into our solutions, to make sure that our clients can run their businesses efficiently and cost-effectively," concludes Wesson.



From its head office in Cape Town, FARM COSTING SOLUTIONS serves farmers across Africa.

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