

# Better business: technical

## Water in boilers, employee data

### BOILERS

### Clarifying the use of softened water in boilers

For years now, many boiler manufacturers have not allowed artificially softened water to be used in the primary water of a central heating system. This has generally been due to a fear that artificially softened water might corrode the interior components of a boiler.

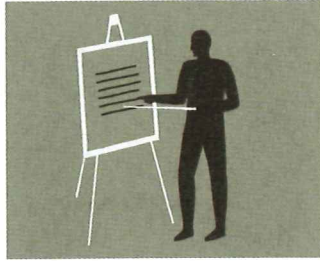
The limitation of this approach was that the service engineers employed by many manufacturers, when called out to attend one of their boilers under warranty, would quickly discover that a water softener was connected to the property's water supply and advise the homeowner that this was not allowed. This would inevitably create a degree of complication and confusion.

As a result, the industry has come up with an approach where it is considered acceptable to fit a water softener to a house in a hard water area. This comes with the condition that, at the filling point of the system within the property, the water remains untreated.

#### Revised position

In light of this newly clarified stance, homeowners are permitted to fit a water softener to the property's incoming cold mains supply, on the basis that they either take a separate cold water mains feed to the filling point of the sealed heating system before the water softener is connected, or operate the water softener's bypass while the heating system is being filled.

This accepted industry guideline permits the use of a water softener, as long as the treated water is not entering the sealed heating system. What this does is remove the uncertainty that led a number of engineers to put any problems with the boiler's performance down to the presence of a water



softener, without necessarily taking a more in-depth look at the manner in which it was connected to the domestic water supply.

While this is not a dramatic break from what was in place previously, it does offer a degree of clarification for those engineers tasked with regular boiler servicing and maintenance.

The end result should be that the presence of a water softener is considered perfectly acceptable, as long as the water entering a sealed heating system is untreated.

It would make sense for the next stage of the move towards greater clarification for service engineers and homeowners to include a label at a boiler's filling point warning of the risks of filling the system with treated water.

With manufacturers working hard to drive improved efficiency levels without compromising the durability of appliances, it is important that installation, maintenance and servicing best practice is adhered to.



Martyn Bridges is director of marketing and technical support for Worcester, Bosch Group

### BIOMETRICS

### Tracking onsite attendance and time can pay off

With margins continuing to be squeezed across the industry, firms looking to stay competitive are seeking to drive efficiency.

This is stalling, however, due to a lack of transparency throughout the management chain.

Advances in technology are helping to overcome some of these challenges. The latest biometric solutions and cloud-based platforms mean users can gather large amounts of accurate time and attendance data across a multitude of sites and store it securely.

Not only can this make site management easier, but when data is mined effectively, it can reveal patterns and anomalies that can impact future business decisions.

#### Don't be put off

Despite the futuristic feel of the concept, biometric technology is simple to use and cost-effective, and when integrated with cloud-based software, it can deliver an excellent return on investment.

A fingerprint scanner or alternative biometric hardware can be used to collect the data and send it to a hub via a secure network for storage and analysis.

In the context of a building site, the software needed to process and present this data can be integrated with existing hardware and installed at points of site entry and exit, or on handheld wireless devices. It can also be integrated with a company's management business processes and software.

The data can then be accessed using a web interface at any time, with customised reports showing live up-to-the-minute data,

including hours logged, absences, qualifications and lateness, sorted by individual, team, contractor or site. It can also be secured and stored centrally in the cloud. Not only is the data secure, but it can be accessed by the user and stakeholders via a secure web interface.

Cloud-based software is extremely scalable; as the capital expenditure is minimal, it is an extremely attractive proposition for firms of all sizes, as they only pay for what they need.

#### Massive potential

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the application of biometrics to time and attendance tracking is the potential of the data, which goes far beyond the creation of reliable timesheets.

When a large quantity of employee data is mined and analysed, it can reveal the story of your business over time. Trends and anomalies can signpost areas that need attention, or where money can be saved.

This can also be invaluable when it comes to pitching for new business. Proof of an effective reporting system and reliable data on the number of people you employ and the time they spend on site can significantly enhance your bidder profile, because you can then demonstrate efficient project controls.

For building services firms to be successful, they need to do more than undercut rivals. Firms need to closely manage their projects to ensure employees are delivering on time and to budget. Key to achieving this is clear communication of accurate data.

Although time and attendance is only a small piece of the puzzle, it is undoubtedly a critical element and is currently an area where money is being lost due to inefficiency and the use of outmoded technology.

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Ollie McGovern is chief executive officer for Simeio