

## What Dealers Should Know About

# "DIGITAL EQUITY

By Kevin Hancock

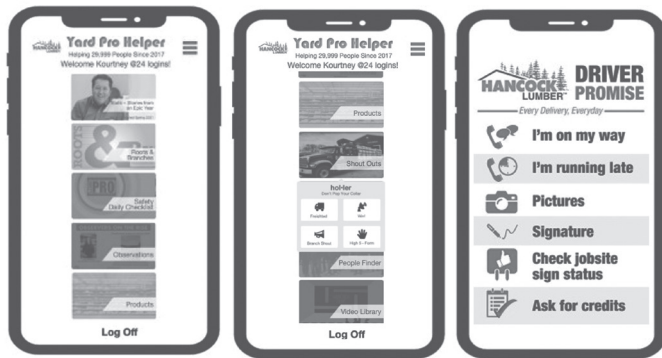
**T**he digital age has produced two classes of employees in most lumberyards across America. The first group uses laptops and computer terminals regularly as a core part of their job. The second group does not. The first group consists primarily of management, outside sales, in-store staff, and the shipping-receiving leaders. The second group includes the drivers, along with the yard and warehouse front-line service teams. The first group has access to all the information about customers, products, and business performance. The second group traditionally does not have the same access and is therefore held back, dependent upon group one. This is digital inequality, and it divides the team, slows the organization, and underestimates the potential and capacity of group two.

I've become a strident believer in shared leadership, dispersed power, and respect for all voices. As a result, I oppose any element of our business structure that gives certain groups more power, information, or control over others. The truth is that every role in our company is critical and every individual is capable of leading. Hancock Lumber has 620 team members scattered across 16 retail and manufacturing sites in Maine and New Hampshire. With the click of the send button on my laptop, I can communicate with all of them instantly. Yet if you look at the open rates of an email, you will see the digital inequality. Most people whose jobs involve computers will read the message, but many of those in manufacturing, warehouse, or yard roles will not. This results in two classes of people within the company. The first group has more,

better, and faster information. The second group has less, poorer, and slower information. This, in turn, creates unnecessary division that may manifest subtly or dramatically. We all know that the second group is just as important as the first to the success of the company. More importantly, the second group is equally human and valuable to society. For these reasons, we have targeted the elimination of digital inequality as a priority at Hancock Lumber.

After discussing the issues and associated challenges, our retail operations and technology teams went to work. Within months, using basic report writing software, the group created what we now call our Yard Pro app. The Yard Pro app is designed to put all the information that traditionally lived within the store into the hands of the people working in the yard and warehouse. Today, simple icons that are friendly to navigate lead everyone working without a laptop to the same information, communication, and resources that previously only lived inside the store. To enable this transformation, we made sure everyone working outside had a handheld device of some sort (phone or otherwise) on which the software was deployed.

Three important outcomes followed. First, all information is now universally accessible. Second, yard and warehouse positions became more versatile, digital, and modern. Third, our most important corporate values were reinforced. Every voice matters. Every person leads.



In today's digital age, no role in a lumber company needs to be inferior to any other. Every person should have access to real-time data and information. The benefits of achieving digital equity are deep and diverse. Cross-training and advancement are enhanced. Information searches and other time-sucking exercises are reduced. Most importantly, everyone is empowered, trusted, and given fingertip access to the same resources. This sends a clear message about the importance of every job.

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In 2010, I acquired a rare voice disorder known as spasmodic dysphonia. Suddenly, the simple act of speaking was a chore. As a result, I often couldn't say what I wanted to say. In this way, I came to understand what it was like to not feel fully heard.

In 2012, I began traveling periodically from Maine to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. There I encountered an entire community that felt as if a piece of their authentic collective voice had been taken or stolen.

These two events got me thinking about leadership and its historic impact on the voices of others. I concluded, unfortunately, that leaders across time had done more to limit, restrict, and direct the voices of others than to liberate them. That's when it occurred to me that perhaps my voice condition was a gift or invitation to lead differently in a way that strengthened the voices of others. This is what sent me down the tracks of shared leadership, dispersed power, and respect for all voices.

Today, I look for any corporate system or management practice that restricts or limits the voices of others. This is what brought me to see the digital inequality that has traditionally existed within our industry.

Like most problems, digital inequality is easy to fix. Once you see it, you can rectify it. But, like any longstanding work practice, you must stay vigilant. Take this article, for example. Who in your organization is likely to read it and who is likely never to see it? That's the digital divide line, and you can help your organization eliminate it. [LQ](#)

**About the author:** Kevin Hancock is an award-winning author, speaker, and CEO of Hancock Lumber, one of the oldest companies in America and six-time recipient of the "Best Places to Work in Maine" award. Kevin can be reached at [khancock@hancocklumber.com](mailto:khancock@hancocklumber.com).