

Hannibal, Missouri's dedication to historical preservation offers visitors a sense of what the small city on the banks of the Mississippi River may have looked like when Mark Twain walked its streets more than one hundred years ago.

While Hannibal's residents are proud of the city's history, its 115-year-old public power utility realized that it needed to break free from its historical way of doing things to better serve its customers and adopt more efficient ways of doing business.

By leveraging the latest technology applications, Hannibal Board of Public Works, which provides electricity, water and sewer to the city's 17,800 residents, has quickly been able to improve operations in many areas including customer service and field work.

Until recently, when field workers for Hannibal Board of Public Works had trouble finding a meter or underground asset, they had to call back to headquarters for help. Calling seemed a bit dated in an age of texting and apps.

And the task at headquarters was gargantuan. Staff had to "dig through a mountain of books," eight-inch-thick binders, about 11,000 pages in all, searching for the address, says Matthew Jones, who serves as senior information technology specialist for the public power utility.

"As you'd be looking through the antique pages, you would hope that they would not disintegrate," he says. Eventually these documents were made available electronically but only accessible from an office computer.

Similar problems existed in locating water system and hydrant valves. The records were particularly vague for buried equipment, and again only available on the office computer. "The measurement was from the back of the curb or center line of the road. Trying to locate all that in the middle of the night during a snowstorm when there was a water leak was sometimes difficult," Jones says.

Fortunately, these arduous tasks have come to an end thanks to a partnership Hannibal began four years ago with the National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC). This partnership allowed the organization to justify the purchase of mobile technology to enhance field efforts.

"We've come a long way as a technology driven organization. We have basically revamped every task we do, except for manual labor in the field of popping in the meter, turning the wrench, or setting the pole," Jones says.

Bringing Together New and Old

With its OSS/Billing provider of 15 years preparing to replace its existing platform in 2017, Canby, OR-based DirectLink decided to see what kind of improvements it might be able to realize by evaluating what other OSS/Billing providers had to offer, according to Sharon Puhlman, Member Services Support Supervisor for the cooperative, which currently serves more than 8000+ members.

The triple-play provider continues to see steady growth across a wide demographic – from farmers to commuters – within its ~100 square mile rural serving area adjacent to Portland. While most members have two or three types of services and make changes from time-to-time, others do not change anything in a three- or four-year time frame, according to Puhlman.

In business since 1904, DirectLink takes great pride in its current 90% positive customer service ratings. Many of the company's 60 employees live and work shoulder-to-shoulder with the co-op's members in Canby and Mt. Angel, which gave DirectLink all the more reason to choose the very best OSS/Billing platform on the market.

Recognized for Reliability

"No OSS has everything, but when we began looking at what other vendors had to offer, we knew we wanted to work with a company that would provide us with better and more localized support on a consistent and timely basis," said Puhlman. After all, DirectLink offers its own members a 24/7 technical support line. Expecting the same strong support from its future OSS/Billing supplier made sense.

"Our reporting and other needs evolved and demanded more complexity that we were not able to create on our own," she explained. "Our cost for reports depended on what we needed done and how long it took to create them."



Sam Henkes, Network Technician II

DirectLink also was unhappy with ongoing billing and promotions issues caused by the previous system. For example, it would drop discounts too early for some members, while others would continue to get discounts after the promotion had expired until someone spotted the error.

Overall, DirectLink was looking for a new system that would offer the co-op leading edge integration and scalability, said Janet Bailey, VP Member Services. “We wanted a new platform that would be able to do more and do it well into the future,” she added.

After issuing an RFP and gathering the responses from interested vendors, DirectLink narrowed the field down to four suppliers. All four provided software demonstrations of their systems. One supplier, which offered what looked to be excellent reporting capabilities, gave the DirectLink team a look at its system in action, said Puhlman.

Lessons Learned

National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC) provided a live demonstration of its OSS/Billing solution – the iVUE Enterprise System – in the offices of an NISC member located very close to DirectLink. NISC, also a cooperative, provides OSS/Billing solutions to 825 Member-Owners which include telecommunication companies, electric cooperatives and other public entities across the United States, Canada, American Samoa and Palau. The company’s headquarters span across four facilities: Lake Saint Louis, Mo.; Mandan, N.D.; Shawano, Wis; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

In addition to the live demo, a few DirectLink employees had personal experience with NISC’s iVUE, which they gained while working for previous employers, said Puhlman.

Ultimately, NISC demonstrated its abilities to meet DirectLink’s OSS/Billing needs and won the telco’s business. From accounting to customer care and billing, and, operations to technical services, NISC’s iVUE promised to seamlessly integrate all of its solutions into a single robust platform with a common look and feel. In addition to providing total system integration of its broad, scalable and flexible solutions, iVUE also offered DirectLink the ability to integrate with third-party applications.

Overall, NISC focuses on providing its member owners with the service and solutions they need to excel in customer service, maximize their diversification opportunities and compete effectively in the ever-changing utility and telecommunications industries. In fact, more than 20 million consumers receive utility or telecommunications services from organizations using NISC’s solutions, which offer innovations such as:

- Internet bill payment presentation and order management
- Graphical and mobile mapping systems
- Telecommunications switch provisioning
- Marketing and sales lead repository to leverage and grow your customer base and revenue
- Mobile apps providing access to critical data and integrated communications tools in a connected or disconnected environment

Post Conversion Successes

As with all conversions there were challenges and learning curves, said Puhlman. However, NISC provided plenty of support during the conversion process and continues to be readily available.

“NISC’s support team has been helpful and they are quick to get answers for us. They have a deep knowledge of their product and they know what to look for right away whenever we have a problem or a question,” said Puhlman.



Paul Hauer, President

In addition to providing support from its own team of professionals, NISC also offers its member companies many opportunities to access insightful peer-to-peer support. In addition to providing live demonstrations at its members' facilities for companies evaluating iVUE, NISC holds a yearly Member Information Conference (MIC) with a full complement of sessions that enable its member systems to meet each other and learn from one another. All of the sessions at each MIC are recorded and they can be referenced any time a member wants more information on a specific topic, said Puhlman.

"I appreciate having a helpful and friendly user community that provides a place to ask questions, learn tips and tricks, offer suggestions," added Dan Reel, GIS Technician II, for DirectLink.

Better Billing



NISC's iVUE already is providing DirectLink with many expected and unexpected benefits. For example, the system has significantly reduced the time that DirectLink spends on billing.

"Billing used to take us three days. Now it takes eight hours or less, and, we can do it in-house," said Puhlman.

iVUE's total system integration also makes it easier for DirectLink to discern the root causes of billing issues. For example, Puhlman went into the system to try to find out why usage was being generated for a telephone number that was supposed to have been disconnected. The system provided her with the access she needed to see that the number was still connected to the switch. Instead of having to physically access the switch to see the problem and correct it, she was able to do everything remotely.

Other examples of billing improvements DirectLink has realized to date include easy credit refunds and the ability to set a specific date for price changes.

Improved Reporting



The ability to create reports in-house is a significant improvement made possible with iVUE. It also is easier to create reports on the spot that search for specific information for DirectLink's marketing team, said Puhlman. For example, a recent report helped to streamline an upgrade in broadband speeds for members that were served by a specific type of equipment. Puhlman used iVUE to generate a report detailing members that were connected to the equipment and the system used the information to create a mass service order that upgraded every member on the list. There was no need to generate individual service orders for each upgrade.

In this particular case, members who received upgrades were notified individually. However, Puhlman currently is in the early stages of learning how to use iVUE Messenger to send out coordinated notifications whenever mass changes are executed. Messenger also can be used to inform members about promotions via the notification method they prefer – e-mail, SMS or letters. To date, DirectLink has used Messenger to let members know that their bills are available and when they have expired or declined credit card numbers, she said.

"Messenger can do so much, we are just starting to skim the surface," said Puhlman.

In addition, hyperlinks throughout the iVUE system and in query builder reports make it easier to get around and find more direct information. For example, clicking on a service address hyperlink in a member agreement form takes one directly to more details on that address, including facilities, which are in a different part of the system, said Amy Crawford, Patronage Specialist, for DirectLink. The system provides the ability to launch its SmartHub feature from members' accounts, too.

"Further along that line, I love that we got the whole suite so that all of our data is in one place: billing, engineering, finance, etc.," said Crawford. "There is a lot less room for errors and misunderstandings this way."

Because iVUE is so tightly integrated, data integrity is critical.

"Checks and balances are built into the system for much of the data," said Reel. "If data is incorrect you will find it and correct it for things to work properly. This is a very good thing for data integrity."

iVUE also provides DirectLink employees a significantly improved ability to visualize its data geographically on a map, noted Reel.

Conclusion



Overall, many OSS/Billing improvements are making themselves known each and every day, and more will become apparent as the DirectLink team becomes more closely acquainted with iVUE over time, said Puhlman. For now, reports are easier to pull, and vacation orders and ownership changes are easier to execute. Also, DirectLink now is able to auto-provision broadband services, POTS lines, voice mail and television. Last but certainly not least, NISC's system updates come out on a steady schedule, she added.

"We are excited about realizing the full potential of the system and seeing where it takes us in the future," said Puhlman.

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