Thinking Big in Software Transition Pays Off For Concord, Mass., Utility

When Concord Municipal Light Plant (CMLP) received notice that its financial and accounting software would no longer be supported, it turned out to be a good thing.

When a vendor stops supporting an application, it can create quite a headache for an organization, setting off a time-consuming and disruptive process that involves finding and testing a new software package and then transitioning to the new program, migrating data and retraining employees.

That is why organizations do not make the decision to switch software lightly, let alone switching the software platform across the entire enterprise.

Enterprise Benefits Emerge

Originally, the Massachusetts public power utility was just looking to replace its financial software, but as CMLP explored its options, "we quickly realized the value of what an enterprise system could do for us," said CMLP Utility Director Dave Wood.

The Concord utility had multiple software systems, but they did not talk to each other. That meant they did not have access to a service order system to track projects and their progress. It also meant CMLP had to maintain two separate databases, one for the town's electric and broadband customers, the other for its water and sewer customers.

CMLP's customer service representatives had to log out of one database to see the information on the other. In addition, the customer information was not always in harmony. A customer's information in one system, such as an address, could be different in the other system. It was a source of confusion and inefficiency. And, despite the fact that information was being stored and processed digitally, many back-office functions were still being recorded and managed on paper or by email.

In addition, CMLP was in the midst of a program to transition to advanced metering infrastructure (AMI). Even though the utility had already installed smart meters for about 10% of its customers, the data had to be entered manually into the customer information system, an inefficient and error-prone process.

As CMLP did its homework, Wood began to see the benefits of looking at the larger picture. An enterprise solution could unite the utility's accounting, customer service, metering, purchasing, engineering and operations, and water service functions on one platform. It also became clear to Wood and his team that the necessity of finding a new financial and accounting software package was an opportunity to realize two other goals the utility had set for itself: to have all customer information in a single database and to have one point of contact for customers for all the town's services.

One of the biggest factors driving the decision to go with an enterprise software solution was the ability to combine customer service and billing into one department, said Carole Hilton, the utility's customer service administrator.

"That required one database for all the town's utilities, and there were not a lot of vendors who would convert our existing separate databases into one," she said.

After a year of deciding on goals, mapping out the scope of work, reviewing offers from various vendors, and talking to utilities that had been through a similar transition, CMLP chose NISC to supply an enterprise solution to serve all its needs.

"NISC was very attractive," Wood said. "It handled everything," from combining the utility's separate databases and bridging previously separate departments within the utility, to guidance on the transition process itself.

CMLP had its own project management team for the software transition, but also signed on to use NISC's assistance in the form of an enterprise project manager to help guide the utility through the transition.

Although it was more expensive than just replacing the financial software, an enterprise solution also had the advantage of bringing CMLP into the "new era" and preparing it for coming technological changes, Wood said.

And after factoring in the cost of the maintenance agreement for the previous financial software, the enterprise approach proved to be "very favorable and, from a budget standpoint, not a heck of a lot of difference," Wood said. "We are paying a little more but are getting so much more."

Increased Integration a 'Game Changer'

Originally, CMLP was going to begin the transition by switching over its finance department, but with guidance from NISC, the utility began the process with its billing department.

"We were a little nervous at first, but at the end of the day what they suggested was the right move for us," Wood said. "I'm glad we followed their advice."

Since signing on with NISC about two years ago, CMLP is nearing the finish line with its software transformation.

Although some details still remain, the customer piece of the installation has been in place for about a year, Hilton said. The accounting and business solution portions were installed about six to eight months ago, and the installation of software to handle engineering and operations was begun about three or four months ago and is still under way.

CMLP was in the midst of implementing the transition for engineering and operations when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which slowed implementation progress because staff had broken into groups that worked on alternating days and were focused on providing essential services only.

Overall, switching to a single enterprise solution was "an enormous project for our team," Wood said, but "the effort has paid off."

Switching its engineering and operations software, for instance, particularly for processing service orders, required redefining tasks and workflows, in part, because work orders could now be issued more quickly and precisely. "It was a very big step for us" and a "game changer," Wood said.

NISC's integrated solutions are also a boon for CMLP's broadband offerings. Network provisioning and billing enabling technicians to play the roles of account administrator, customer service rep and network support tech, all on one screen.

"NISC has been a terrific partner in every sense of the word," Hilton said. "Their project resources guided us through our implementation with expert knowledge of the utility industry plus sharing their own extensive experience as subject matter experts."

The process was also helpful in understanding the capabilities of iVUE and NISC's other modules, as well as informing the redesign of CMLP's best practices, she said.

NISC's user interface for employees is iVUE. The interface draws together data from billing and collections, customer histories, bill adjustments and service orders and allows employees to communicate directly between different departments, such as engineering and meter crews and the water department.

NISC also offers iVUE Connect—which ties into and uses the data from the iVUE system—and SmartHub, an interface that allows customers to manage their accounts, pay their bills, track their energy usage and communicate with their utility from a computer or mobile device.

"The iVUE experience has made my tasks simpler, quicker, more organized, and researching is easier since everything is all in iVUE," CMLP Purchasing Administrator Rhonda Buscemi said.

And even though the installation phase of CMLP's project is nearing completion, Buscemi is pleased with the continuing support NISC offers. "If you are stumped on how to do something, being able to go into the NISC Community, NISC's online communications platform for Members and employees, to find information on the issue or adding a question is a great resource for help."

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