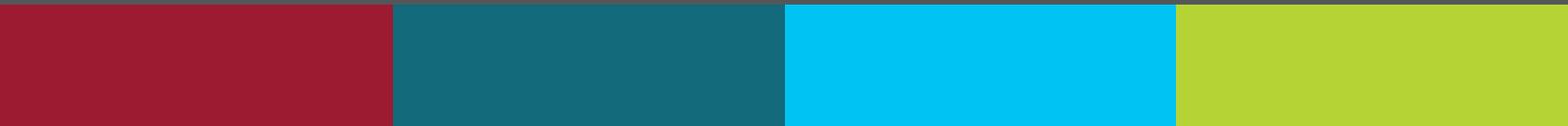




From 22 Vendors to One
Decatur Utilities Increases Efficiencies and Improves
Customer Service Through the NISC Enterprise



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About

One of the earliest multi-service adopters of NISC solutions, Decatur Utilities is a municipal utility that provides four essential utility services (electric, natural gas, water and wastewater collection and treatment) for residents and businesses in the city of Decatur, Alabama. In addition, Decatur Utilities bills customers for sanitation collection services provided by the City of Decatur. Decatur Utilities prides itself on not only providing these services, but also the active role it plays in the community it serves.



“We have a personal relationship with our community and with our customers,” said John Kuhlman, Information Systems Manager at Decatur Utilities. “We have a similar relationship with NISC, so it really goes hand in hand. We really appreciate that we have the same values, which makes us more like partners than customer and vendor. We are part of the NISC family, just like we are part of our community.”



Reducing Complexity, Increasing Efficiency

Prior to converting to NISC solutions (Financials in 2012 and the full enterprise in 2019), Decatur Utilities used around 22 different software vendors, which was difficult and extremely time consuming. “Trying to get all the data synced up, trying to make sure we were reviewing the accuracy of the data between all of the systems was very challenging,” Kuhlman said. “We also had to point our customers in several different directions to do business with us.”

Ray Hardin, General Manager and CEO, said all those different vendors’ software systems had to try to communicate with each other to make the utility’s functions and processes happen, which didn’t always work the way it should. When they started looking at improving those processes, their number one goal was to find a vendor that would allow them to realize the benefits of a highly integrated enterprise system that could support all the services Decatur provides, as well as help simplify and improve the customer experience.





Reducing Complexity, Increasing Efficiency

“One of the things we needed was a product that could serve multiple utilities,” Hardin said. “There are a lot of products out there that serve utilities, but NISC offers versatility for multiple services, including natural gas billing, which can be very complex. “We did a thorough evaluation of multiple options, and we felt like NISC provided the best solution for us, allowing us to transition away from multiple vendors to a single enterprise solution that handles everything from start to finish, including what the customer needs to interact and do business with us. It’s been a big benefit to our IT team, and they have been able to support other areas of the company better because they’re not so tied up babysitting a program that isn’t well suited for what we do.”





1 Reducing Complexity, Increasing Efficiency

“Having a central database is the biggest efficiency,” Kuhlman said. “All of our modules are accessing the same data at the same time. From an IT standpoint, I would say that we’re saving at least 15 hours a week, or three hours per day, where we’re not massaging data, verifying that data was syncing correctly between all of the systems and working with the third parties to correct any failures through the synchronization process. This allows us to spend more time utilizing the features of the system and not so much fighting data inconsistencies.”

Another advantage is that all the data is now real time, whereas before, everything was done in a batch process once every several hours. Now, the entire employee base gets access to real-time information, no matter which application they’re using within the NISC enterprise.

NISC solutions have also helped Decatur Utilities move to a more paperless approach, which has saved significant amounts of time and reduced the potential for errors, especially for field technicians and billing representatives. “A lot of the processes that we had before were very manual and very paper-oriented,” said Billing Supervisor Kristie Witt. “Before, we’d have to print out orders for field service reps when we’d need to send them to a customer’s home to check things out. Now that is done electronically on their iPhone, and there’s no longer a need to print out paper which can get lost – or get coffee spilled on it. That helped us out tremendously.”

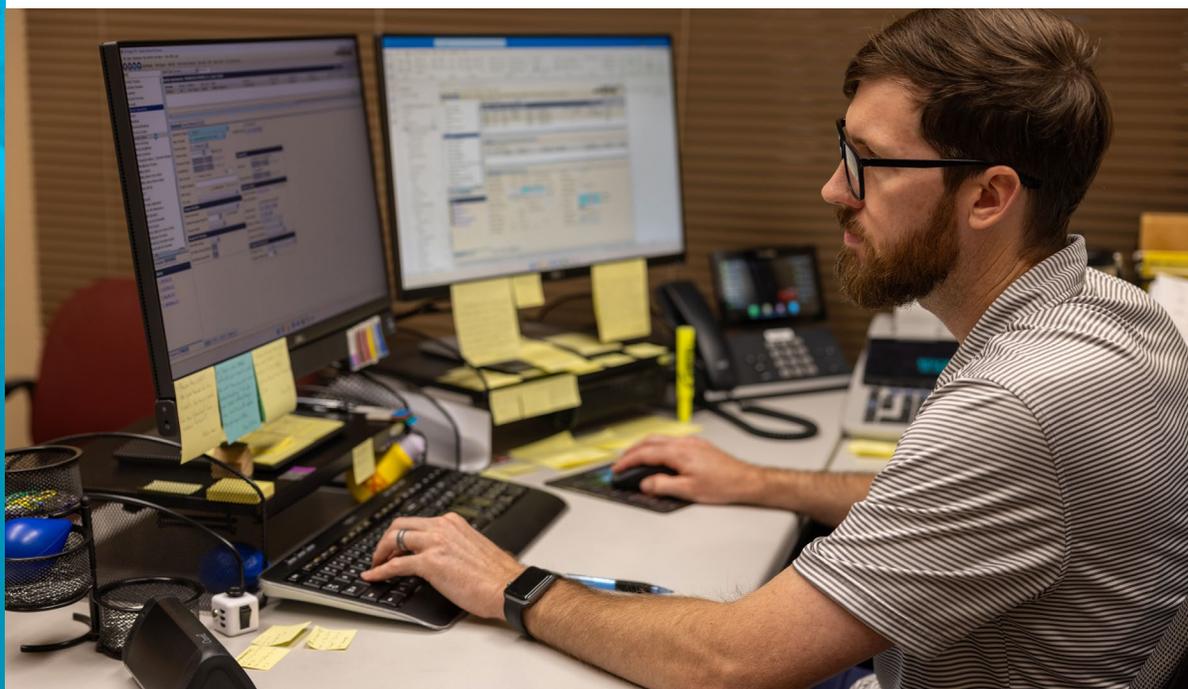
Witt said another huge benefit is the ability to provide one bill, due on the same day each month, for all utilities, sanitation, and if applicable, Tennessee Valley Authority’s EnergyRight heat pump and weatherization loans as a convenience to its customers. “Being a multi-service utility, this capability was extremely important to Decatur Utilities,” Witt said. “NISC allows us to manage all this on one account, providing one consolidated bill that ensures a positive customer experience.”



Saving Time, Increasing Safety in the Field

Derek Miller, Utility Engineer III (Electric), said iVUE AppSuite, a mobile app connecting office and field employees, is a favorite among Decatur's line workers. "They love being able to trace a line and see where it goes, all the way back to the substation," he said. "Most importantly, it helps keep them safe when they're asking for the correct switches to be turned off. And, when they get called out at night, they have all the information they need to know what equipment to bring, as well as where the lines are being fed from and where the fuses are. It definitely saves them time, as well as paperwork. They don't have to go back to the office and scan it, it's already there."

Witt said another useful feature is the ability for field technicians to upload a photo to a service order, which allows employees in the office to actually see what the techs are seeing in the field. "That cut down on the number of times we had to send a truck to a location if we weren't certain about





Saving Time, Increasing Safety in the Field

an answer we received,” she said. “That saved a tremendous amount of time. I mean, when you think about a truck rolling out to a customer’s home and all the other things they have to do in a day – having to go back to a location more than once was a drastic waste of time. And now, it’s also in real time, where before we had to wait until the end of the day to get our orders back from the field (crews). Now, we can see it as soon as they work it. It is a great time saver.”

Originally, one of the deciding factors to move from multiple vendors to an enterprise system was the need to implement an Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) system, which their previous vendors could not support. NISC was able to assist in this implementation for both electric and gas services, which Hardin said was “a game changer” for meter functions and the technicians that performed them. “Our field service crews have a lot of different types of orders they perform as part of their jobs,” Hardin said. “With the AMI system, they can focus more on providing service to our customers, because they’re not spending so much time turning meters on and off – those kinds of truck rolls are no longer part of their workload.”

The data NISC provides in conjunction with the AMI system also helps decrease the total number of truck rolls, because customer service representatives can use the AMI data to help solve certain customer issues. “Before, we could only send the field (service crews) out there to investigate, because we did not have the resources NISC provides with our AMI,” said Julie Shell, Customer Service Coordinator. “We could basically just kind of guess what was going on, but we always had to send the field out there to double check. Now that is not needed as much, because we can often figure it out ourselves at our desk.”



Giving Customers the Experience They Deserve

Transitioning to NISC's enterprise system also helped Decatur achieve their goal of improving the customer experience. When they were using multiple software vendors, they were forced to point their customers in several different directions to do business with them. "A consolidation to one application and a true enterprise system was the number one reason for choosing NISC," Kuhlman said.

Hardin said the biggest benefit they've seen from converting to NISC has been the availability of SmartHub, a customer-facing web and mobile application that allows customers to manage their accounts, pay their bills and access usage data online. "We talked for a long time about providing an app of some kind for our customers, and our previous software vendors just didn't have that solution," he said. "It was a goal of ours to promote more self-service, and it's been something our customers have enjoyed. We've seen our self-service payment options increase substantially over the last five years, and SmartHub has been a big part of that."



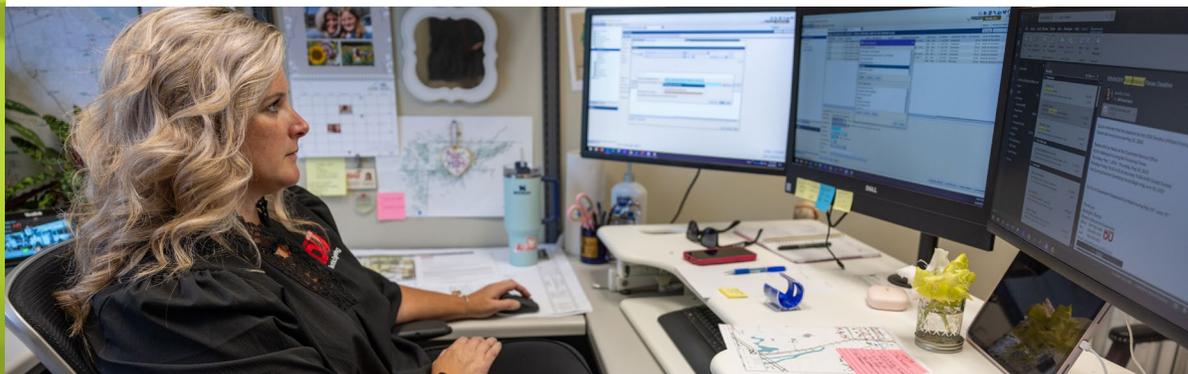


Giving Customers the Experience They Deserve

Prior to offering SmartHub, Decatur Utilities solely sent paper bills to their customers through the mail, but now, customers who choose to sign up for SmartHub get digital notifications when their bills are available, as well as several online payment options.

“SmartHub is an amazing tool, especially with our younger generation – actually, everyone – but our younger generation really loves SmartHub, because they always have a phone in their hand, so they can do everything on their phone through SmartHub,” Shell said. “They can go on there, and set up a bank draft, modify their payment, look at their bill, look at their usage and report outages. It’s really been great for our customers.”

Shell said the graphs showing the customers’ daily usage are valuable tools that help them better understand their bills. “We are actually able to de-escalate a lot of situations because we can talk to them about their daily usage and also the temperature graphs that are provided by NISC,” she said. “We can explain to them that the last three days of the month, it was very hot outside, so that’s why your electric bill went up. And you can see this day to day versus one lump sum at the end of the month.” The graphs can also indicate increased water usage, which often signifies a water leak. When that happens, they are able to send a field service representative out to help find and solve the problem.



IV

Streamlined Outage Communication

As Shell mentioned, SmartHub also gives customers an additional option for reporting outages. “Some customers still prefer to call us, but now they can report them through the mobile app as well,” Miller said. “Outages also come in through AMI alerts. Having multiple options to report outages is beneficial for both us and our customers.”

Customers are also able to see the real-time status of an outage. “As outages are coming in, both employees and customers are looking at the same data at the same time, which is not something we had prior to NISC’s enterprise system,” Kuhlman said. “Customers are also able to see when crews are out working, as well as anticipated restoration times. When a bad storm comes through, they can see that we have 5,000 customers out, and it may be a little while before their power is restored. And they are notified through multiple channels, which helps provide for all different demographics in the city. That’s a great enhancement to our customer service and has drastically improved the way we do business.”



IV

Streamlined Outage Communication

Decatur Utilities has been so pleased with NISC that they routinely invite other utility providers to their office to demonstrate how they are using NISC solutions to create efficiencies and improve customer service. Shell says that when she talks to other multi-service providers about her experiences with NISC, she tells them that she understands that change can be difficult, but once you get your feet wet, NISC provides top-notch service and solutions that help Members like them excel.

“A true enterprise system for the value, I don’t think you’re going to find another out there,” Hardin said. “We’ve been able to decrease IT overhead because of the system. There aren’t many systems out there that allow IT to decrease – most are going the other direction. We’ve found a partnership with a software company that is delivering all the tools that our employees need to be successful and that our customers need to be able to do business with us in this day and age.”





Organizations like Decatur Utilities have improved their efficiency and customer experience by partnering with NISC.

Would your company benefit from integrated systems that optimize your efficiency and improve your customer experience? NISC would love to talk with you. Call us at 866.999.6472 or visit nisc.coop.



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visit www.nisc.coop to learn more

