North American Utility Sparks Up its Complaint Handling System

Electric utility's new complaint handling system reduces resolution times, increases staff productivity, boosts customer satisfaction and improves regulatory compliance.

Business Situation

Electric utilities must be prepared to handle unpredictable volumes of customer complaints, whether they're due to a storm-related service outage or an unexpectedly high bill. The more efficiently and effectively they can handle complaints and prove they're quickly resolving customer issues, the better utilities can control costs while meeting ever-changing regulatory demands.

However, an outdated, inflexible complaint database and reporting system made it difficult for the third-largest electric utility in the U.S. to correctly assign different types of complaints to the proper staff, track the progress of complaint resolution and notify regulators that issues were resolved. With approximately 4.7 million customers and a total installed capacity of 41,000-plus megawatts from natural gas, thermal, nuclear and wind turbine, this meant excessive costs, delays and the risk of punitive actions from regulators for the Fortune 200 company, which has revenue of more than $17 billion and more than $74.9 billion in assets under management.

Challenges

The utility's legacy complaint tracking system was developed more than 16 years ago to meet what were then more narrow regulatory requirements. It relied on a database of text documents describing each complaint and the action taken. However, the system lacked the workflow capabilities to ensure that support staff took the proper steps at each stage of the resolution process, such as following up with the customer to confirm the complaint was resolved. It also didn't provide updates into employee workloads to help supervisors efficiently allocate new complaints to employees, nor did it automatically route work to the proper department. For instance, it couldn't send questions about billing amounts to customer service or allow users to create subtasks within a complaint.

The need to send e-mails for task assignments meant extra work for employees, and it was more difficult to track the status of the complaint, raising the possibility of unaddressed complaints if the user who began the e-mail thread left the utility or was absent from work.
The system also could not differentiate among complaints that required varying amounts of effort to solve or different levels of regulatory detail to report. Because changing the database to accommodate such information was difficult and time-consuming, if it could be done at all, much of the extra detail was stored in separate data stores, such as Microsoft Excel. The need to update the spreadsheets led to additional – and costly – manual work.

**Solution**

While the client initially planned to rewrite the legacy system, we recommended an Agile approach to developing a new, integrated complaint management system that was assured to meet users’ needs.

To obtain a complete understanding of such needs, we conducted joint requirement workshops with subject matter experts from various functional areas, such as power delivery and customer service. In these workshops, we defined the existing processes and capabilities of the legacy system and performed a gap analysis based on industry benchmarks, as well as new capabilities the utility sought. We then defined and developed requirements for the new system for the entire customer complaint lifecycle, from ticket creation to issue resolution.

We first performed the system design and developed the end-to-end workflow for one type of ticket and used that design as a framework for the utility’s 17 other ticket types. This enabled us to ensure we were meeting user needs for everything from the information presented, to the design of the application screens, while significantly reducing design time (see Figure 1).

The use of an Agile framework also ensured that the new system met user needs through the continuous involvement of the concept, delivery and validation teams. Our Agile-aligned Sprint Demo and Sprint Retrospective sessions allowed us to continually add improvements and ensure the software and new processes met the needs of the business.

**End-to-end Complaint Resolution Workflow**

![End-to-end Complaint Resolution Workflow](image-url)
Benefits and Results

The improvements to complaint tracking and workload management have reduced resolution times, increased staff productivity and boosted customer satisfaction while reducing regulatory infractions.

Major improvements included the following:

- **Supervisors can now assign** varying units of work to each complaint, so the work is assigned to employees based on the amount of work each complaint takes to resolve rather than the number of overall complaints.

- **Users can plan their work better** because rather than having to check various e-mail threads for different complaints and complaint types, they can see all their pending tasks in one place.

- **Users can also, for the first time, create tasks** for other individuals and assign a due date. This increases employee productivity while helping to ensure all required steps are followed for each complaint type.

- **Employees can now quickly and easily adjust** the business rules that govern areas such as work assignments, due dates for complaint tickets, notification preferences and security access privileges.

- **Administrators can configure** service level agreements for various complaint types based on changing business needs and regulatory requirements, without the cost and delay of asking the IT group for help.

- **For the first time, management has real-time data** on, for example, the due dates that indicate when tickets are scheduled to be closed so they can redistribute work as needed. Managers and employees now have a holistic view of the “open” activities assigned to each employee, as well as the amount of work handled by each. This has resulted in better workload management.

- **Trending reports alert employees** to a rise in the number of complaints from a given area or a surge in the same type of complaints, which helps managers and employees identify and resolve issues more quickly.

Based on our work developing this complaint tracking system, we also used the Agile methodology to significantly improve the utility’s main customer-facing Web site. Among the improvements are self-service features that allow customers to start and stop service, track their energy consumption and pay bills.
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