



Aquila Case Study

Shared Goals Foster Dramatic Solutions

Aquila, a Midwestern electricity and natural gas utility, attributes its success to efficient, straightforward customer service delivered by a well-informed, well-resourced workforce, driven by the values of teamwork, integrity, openness, and accountability.

The company's customer-focused business philosophy is rooted in its origin as Missouri Public Service, an electric utility serving western Missouri since the early 1920s. The company experienced tremendous growth in the mid-1980s, acquiring a number of natural gas and electric utilities in surrounding states.

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Challenge

The newly acquired utilities initially continued to operate autonomously. However, as Aquila grew, so did the challenge of managing so many independent divisions. Leadership saw an obvious need to develop new and optimize existing processes in order to remain successful in delivering safe, reliable energy in ways that exceed expectations. Key to the company's success would be effective management of field operations for a primarily rural and expansive service territory.

Service technicians were necessarily scattered across several states, and work orders were being dispatched manually through a paper-based system that was prone to error and delay.

Within an overall re-engineering effort, Brett Williams, today director of Aquila's field resource operations, assumed responsibility for leading a team to address the challenges of issuing and managing work orders. Williams explains, "We found it difficult to track

the activities of field staff. Once they collected their work orders and were on the road, we lost track of their location and job status at any given time. We could not be sure that we were working efficiently. A technician might be performing low-priority work at one location while a nearby tech was struggling alone to complete high-priority orders. We had no easy way of reassigning our resources."

Solution

Williams' team investigated how other organizations—both utilities and non-utilities—addressed similar concerns. The team concluded that Aquila had to automate and centralize dispatching processes and management, and needed a robust, effective workforce management solution. The search was on.

The process was intense. "We began by visiting our field supervisors and technicians to discover what worked well and what they would like changed," Williams recalls.

“Combined with the vision of our executives, these insights helped define our requirements. We researched companies that provided mobile dispatching solutions, and then issued RFIs. With due diligence, we drew up a shortlist of companies that we believed capable of meeting our needs.”

After thorough research and an extensive interview process, the choice was ViryaNet, a leading provider of software applications that automate business processes for mobile workforce management and field service delivery.

“ViryaNet was competitively priced, but its people distinguished it from the competition. We were particularly impressed by their commitment to understanding our needs and meeting our requirements, as well as their flexibility in customizing the system for us.”

Jack McAvoy, vice president of marketing at ViryaNet, says, “The values that drew Aquila to us are those on which ViryaNet has built its global reputation for creating partnerships of mutual benefit with its customers. ViryaNet will continue to nurture its strong relationship with Aquila.”

Process

The ViryaNet solution featured wireless technologies to carry data and voice to technicians equipped with notebook computers and radios in their vehicles, linking the multi-state workforce. Covering such a large service area was a significant challenge and involved multiple wireless protocols in remote areas with no data-capable RF service.

“During the months preceding implementation, we facilitated a series of training sessions to explain the background of the project and help staff become familiar with the new equipment and instill confidence in its use,” Williams said.

Results

One of the main objectives of the project was to centralize control and establish standard business processes for Aquila’s short-duration, on-premise service work. Williams is emphatic about the outcome, “There can be no doubt that this has been achieved. Instead of separate utilities operating independently, managing work from hundreds of local offices, there is now one operation controlling work from two field resource centers.”

He also is clear about the benefits, “Standardized processes improve our productivity and the quality of the work we do.

The ability to track our activity, manage it in real-time, and report on it across the entire operation means that we have one view of our business.

ViryaNet continues to ensure we can measure utilization and productivity.”

Williams emphasizes that mobile workforce management is central to this achievement, “Immediate communication with field technicians means they no longer have to drive to the office each day to pick up and return their paperwork. It also allows Aquila to dynamically reassign field staff to higher priority work. This means the company can respond to customers’ most urgent needs first. Our customers reap the benefits of this. Being able to prioritize and respond quickly is especially important when a service level agreement drives the work. For example, with the ViryaNet solution, we know we are dispatching gas emergencies in an efficient and timely manner. We never had these analytics before.”

Williams explains, “In addition to the savings achieved through the rationalization of our field offices, centralized dispatching has delivered hard dollar efficiencies by reducing the number of service work FTEs. Similarly, by moving from paper to electronic processing, we have dramatically reduced the burden of manually closing the 700,000 orders we handle each year. Receiving data directly from the field has enabled us to achieve a reduction in the FTEs involved in closing orders as well as a significant percentage of dispatching FTEs.”

Today, Aquila’s commitment to ViryaNet and the ViryaNet solution remains strong, with an upgrade to the latest ViryaNet innovation in process.

With the rollout complete, Williams summarizes the achievement, “This was probably the most rewarding project of my career. This ambitious project was successful as a result of true cooperation among dedicated employees from both companies working side-by-side toward a shared goal. The benefits have been numerous and ongoing.”