7 EDGE APPLICATION REMEDIATION TIPS FOR UTILITIES IMPLEMENTING A CUSTOMER SERVICE TRANSFORMATION PROGRAM

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Utilities worldwide are focused on enhancing customer experience by providing facilities in a digitized manner. Digital experience along with improved operation efficiency, enhanced safety and security to end customers and better service at cost-effective rates are key considerations when consumers evaluate a utilities service.

Presently, the Utilities industry in the US is undergoing a digital transformation in customer service. This is at various stages in all major utilities. The pre-work for digital transformation starts at an early stage with a focus on data and core meter-to-cash processes. However, we see that challenges crop up when there is inadequate focus on peripheral/edge applications during the pre-work and the prototyping phase of the customer service transformation program.

Keeping various challenges and experiences in mind, here are some key areas that utilities and service providers need to consider while planning their customer service transformation program.

Fig: Edge Applications integrated with the Customer Information System

1. Early Involvement

Legacy, edge, or peripheral applications as various Utilities call them should be introduced during the preparatory phase – while doing an overall assessment of the application – of introducing a new customer relationship and billing (CR&B) system. This phase should also be used to assess processes that run in the system. Often a single user application or an obsolete process which is no longer needed runs in the system. Some of the key deliverables during the prep work should be application disposition, business process assessment and relevance, and integration specification document.

2. Data Mapping

Most of the focus in the data tower / track is in the mapping of the legacy CIS system, with the new CR&B system and key meter-to-cash processes. This method risks excluding data which may be required by the peripheral systems or by downstream and upstream applications like reporting, data warehouse, work management system, and transmission & distribution application.

3. Historical Data

This is an interesting and critical topic for edge applications since there are application which require interval data, meter results, billing statements data from 5 or 10 years for regulatory purposes and these cannot be ignored. Since it is recommended that the new CR&B system not be overwhelmed with excess historical data, a deep dive will be required to categorize the requirements and determine the quantity of data that will be required to be loaded onto the data warehouse system.

4. Domain Consultants

Having the right representation of SME's from the edge applications from business, IT, and QA during the white boarding session is important to extract the correct requirements and processes that are running in the system for end-to-end understanding and test planning. The complexity of change in edge applications can vary from very low to very high and it is not possible to form a team with varied technologies, domains, and business process. Thus, a proper agreement to leverage the application SME's or domain consultants who might be working in production support or other projects or similar experience to be a part of the team for a smooth delivery is required.

5. Parallel Program synchronization

Often, utilities undergo parallel transformation in multiple areas, for example, grid modernization, and workforce management transformation. This increases the risk of impacting data and process and needs to be planned keeping timelines in mind. A dedicated program and release management team can ensure adequate collaboration between programs to discuss on the impacts and reconciliation.

6. Environment Availability

This can be a major bottleneck for edge applications since there will be application with no available environment for testing. Environment availability planning with timeliness is important for the timely completion of system and integrated testing and hence needs to start early.

Another critical component for the success of customer service transformation and legacy remediation is the integration with regulatory applications, payment channels, DA/CCAs. Proper communication should be established explaining the transformation program with timelines. This should be followed with frequent meetings for updates and changes in process or data during the course of the program. Sometimes, third parties are reluctant to tweak their systems because of involved costs. This can be addressed at an early stage during the business process design and data functional specification designs.

CIS transformation happens every 25 years for a utility company and it provides a credible opportunity for application rationalization and even modernization of edge applications which will continue to stay but cannot fit into the new CR&B solution. An early beginning of the assessment of these applications enable the utility to consolidate and modernize incompatible applications even before the actual re-platform starts.

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