Case Study

City of Seattle

CUSTOMER PROFILE

Government

WEBSITE

www.seattle.gov/utilities

LOCATION

Washington, USA

BUSINESS NEED

- Reduce backlog
- Reduce processing time
- Reduce error rates
- Simplify training
- Consolidate information

NICE RPA SOLUTIONS

- NEVE Assist (Attended Automation)
- NEVE Unattended
- NEVA Studio

THE IMPACT

- AHT reduced by 90%
- Savings of $3,000 per day
- 107 hours of labor saved
- Invalid data entry errors reduced
- Task backlogs relieved
- Staff free for value-added activities

ON THE NICE SOLUTION

"Automation is the only technology in my toolkit that directly reduces my staff's workload."

Robert Cromwell
Seattle City Light Executive Sponsor

City of Seattle

The City of Seattle Streamlines Utility Workflows with Hybrid Automation

ABOUT CITY OF SEATTLE

The city of Seattle, Washington, is located on Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Washington's largest city, it contains thousands of acres of parkland, a large tech industry, and approximately 740,000 residents. With a growth rate of 21.1% between 2010 and 2020, Seattle is one of the nation's fastest-growing cities.

The City of Seattle has two utility departments: Seattle Public Utilities (SPU), which provides drinking water, sewer and garbage services; and Seattle City Light (SCL), which provides electric energy services. SPU employs 1,400 people and manages 200,000 drinking water and 350,000 garbage collection accounts. SCL employs 1,900 and manages 460,000 electricity accounts. Together, both utilities account for roughly one third the city's budget, revenue and staff count.

THE GOAL

City of Seattle Utilities noted that its teams were facing a large backlog of tasks. Many workflows included repetitive, manual steps, often involving siloed information, which meant significant processing time and risk of human error. Complicated training was also necessary to get employees onboarded due to the heavily manual processes.

In particular, the Utilities leadership took a look at improving workflows and relieving the backlog for several processes. These included manual readings and data entry for electric, water and sewer meters, as well as rebates in the event of water leaks.

Case Study

SCL installed automated remote electric meters for most of its customers in recent years. However, some of these meters are in areas with poor reception for sending the data and sometimes meters stop working. In such cases, an SCL employee must go to the meter and manually record the reading on a handheld device, transfer the reading to a spreadsheet and then manually enter the data into SCL's meter data management system. About 40–50 such electric meter reads are processed every day.

Another process that was time-consuming and dependent on hardcopy forms with handwritten notes is ensuring accurate water and sewer meter readings when a property changes hands. Such readings are important for determining final utility bill for the party leaving the property and the first charge for the new customer. SPU processes about 15–30 of these readings per day.

In the event of a water or sewer leak, a customer notifies SPU and, after a field investigation, they may receive a rebate for charges incurred due to the leak. The investigating agent has to have access to all the relevant information of the case, calculate the rebate in an Excel spreadsheet, and update all relevant systems.

In light of the routine and repetitive tasks involved in those processes, City of Seattle Utilities decided to implement automation. The goal was to reduces the staff's burden, save time and increase accuracy.

THE SOLUTION

City of Seattle Utilities considered seven possible automation solutions but settled on NICE robotic process automation in light of its robustness and maturity. Unlike other vendors, NICE offered both attended and unattended automation features in a single, coherent solution, as well as a next generation automation design platform. In addition, the NICE package was determined to be most cost-effective, including the capability to scale up or upgrade without additional expenditure or disruptive transitions.

Seattle was one of the early adopters of NICE's automation design platform, NEVA Studio, which has a host of robust features and an intuitive interface. It supports both attended and unattended automation development. For attended automation, the city adopted NEVA Assist, which provides each employee real-time, contextually assistance through interactive callout screens on their desktop.

Creating automations where needed

Four automations (two unattended and two hybrid attended-unattended) were developed using NEVA Studio. The attended automations were designed to support 200 seats and the unattended automations were essentially made available as needed.

One of the hybrid automations City of Seattle Utilities implemented was to calculate any rebates owed to a customer due to water leaks and to enter the necessary adjustments into the billing system. The attended automation included an interface for SPU investigators to access the relevant information and select a period of time to which the rebate applies. Once the rebate is automatically calculated, the SPU agent submits the adjustments to several unattended robots that create documentation for each case, make adjustments to the billing system, and prepare letters to be sent to the customer.

With NEVA in place, each task is recorded with its relevant business data. This provides an accurate audit trail for all automation activities, which can then be easily presented using NEVA's out-of-the-box report configuration features. City of Seattle Utility staff leverage the audit reports to confirm that all tasks were completed and to identify the reason for any unsuccessful processes.

Another example of a hybrid automation is the SPU process for property ownership transfers. Data entry for the water and sewer meters is attended, while processing of the changes in billing is accomplished by behind-the-scenes unattended automation.

A fully unattended process was developed for SCL's management of manual readings from remote electric meters that are out of range or have failed. Robots can now process the collected information from the field, in the case of technical exceptions, whenever needed, 24/7.

THE RESULTS

The benefits of embarking on automation began even before the robots were designed. City of Seattle Utilities discovered during preliminary assessments that its business processes were very complicated, which led the relevant teams to undertake a streamlining process that saved staff at SPU and SCL many hours of work.

Measurable results from the various automations included:

- Leak adjustment process: AHT reduced from 30 minutes down to 5; i.e., a 90% improvement that is equal to approximately $3,000 per day.
- Non-communicating meter data entry: 95 hours of labor saved.
- Ownership transfers: 12 hours of labor saved.
- Reductions in errors due to invalid data entry.
- Utilities backlogs relieved.
- Staff freed to undertake more value-added activities, such as handling unusual events or customer issues, etc.

The utilities staff and management value the automations, finding them useful and promoting efficiency. In fact, they are interested in seeing more automations deployed in their various departments.

The city will be more automated

Having seen the success, user acceptance and savings associated with NICE automation solutions, City of Seattle Utilities is planning to expand the use of robots.

With NEVA Studio, the department's IT team will design and deploy automations to assist about 100 customer service back-office employees of both SPU and SCL. The next stage will be attended automation for around 100 frontline personnel in the City of Seattle Utilities call center. This is planned to be followed by automations among other groups of employees of each utility in the organization.

About NICE RPA

NICE has been setting industry-wide standards in Robotic Process Automation domain for over 20 years. NEVA is NICE's innovative, fully integrated AI-powered automation platform. It unlocks the full power of RPA, combining the best of attended automation with the advantages of RPA and AI-based process discovery grounded in real data and insights. It enables intelligent process optimization while unleashing employees' potential to ensure exceptional customer experiences. We develop and manage our automation suite from a single platform, hold the largest scale automation projects in the market, and are known for driving digital transformation across the enterprise.

www.nicerpa.com

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