Cleveland Utilities

Company Facts

Overview

- Location: Cleveland, TN
- Industry: Utilities
- Website:
  www.clevelandutilities.com

Success Highlights

Challenges

- Inefficient, unreliable paper-based operations
- Cumbersome, manual processes
- Time-intensive tasks squander resources

Solution

- Content Management
- Epicor ECM (DocStar)

Benefits

- Automated, paperless workflows boost productivity and sustainability
- Slashed month-end check runs 50%
- Liberated resources to invest in higher priority activities
- Freed ~500 sq. ft. of physical space

Seeking a Smarter Way

Admittedly, utilities may not be the most glamorous business. They are, however, among the most essential. Power, water, sewage—smooth, consistent delivery of these utilities is critical to any community. In the Great Appalachian Valley in southeast Tennessee, Cleveland Utilities provides these mandatory services to approximately 32,037 electric customers, 32,468 water customers and 19,504 sewer customers in Bradley County.

Despite the indispensable nature of the company's mission, its financial systems were inefficiently paper-based, creating time and resource-intensive processes. In fact, when Marshall Stinnett, Vice President and Chief Financial Officer at Cleveland Utilities, joined the company ten years ago, the employees were still creating purchase orders on typewriters.

"For efficiency and sustainability reasons, we wanted to go paperless. We needed a complete solution to support end-to-end workflows, not just a piecemeal approach, because we fully intended to extend paperless processes across the company," Stinnett explained. "We visited another Tennessee utility, Morristown, which had deployed Epicor Content Management (ECM), and saw a demo of how it worked for them. The presentation, and the robust feature set, made the decision easy."

Connecting to Unique Needs

Cleveland Utilities' water and wastewater division had an in-house purchasing requisition database based on Microsoft Access and Stinnett wanted to avoid starting from scratch. With the help of Epicor ECM (DocStar) partner Mosaic, the transition team leveraged the division's Access table structure to extract PO information. Stinnett remembered, "When the team started new POs in DocStar, all the history was already there. The transition has been very successful because we can search for a PO, duplicate it, and just update the quantities and totals."

Cleveland Utilities also required integration with its existing ERP system. DocStar API allowed the purchase request initiator to enter in their account, GL and work order numbers, and those entries automatically got posted to the correct accounts. "The paper trail is much smoother, and the fact that we can easily find an invoice and it is directly costed to the right work order, is fantastic," Stinnett shared.

> **"We discovered that the PO process was not fully understood, meaning that too many POs were created after we received the invoice. With the implementation of DocStar, employees better understand the macro process and are creating POs at the right time."**
>
> — Melody Carroll, Manager of General Accounting, Cleveland Utilities

Total Visibility, Effortless Access

Now, nearly a year after deployment, the full advantages of the paperless office are strikingly apparent.

Melody Carroll, Manager of General Accounting at Cleveland Utilities, revealed, "Before DocStar, when a PO was created, the initiator retained a copy until the item arrived or the service was completed, at which time they signed off on the PO."

Now, POs are in the hands of the employees responsible for receiving the items, who then match tickets to the PO and sign off, and the system is ready to make payment. Additionally, DocStar enables electronic check approvals, instead of requiring paper checks to be physically endorsed.

Jill Beaty, Accountant at Cleveland Utilities, elaborated, "We discovered that the PO process was not fully understood, meaning that too many POs were created after we received the invoice. With the implementation of DocStar, employees better understand the macro process and are creating POs at the right time."

Another frustration for the accounting team was tracking down purchase orders to determine who ordered an item. "That's no longer an issue," Beaty highlighted. "With DocStar, we can find a PO no matter who created it. It is also easy to see when an invoice was paid and the check number."

Assured access to documents is a broader benefit of DocStar. Instead of creating physical folders by vendor and wasting time on fruitless searches for misfiled documents, everything is easily accessed. Carroll acknowledged, "Accurate document retrieval is a huge benefit. A quick search for information and it's at your fingertips."

Accelerating the Pace of Business

An immediate advantage of automation is speed. Stinnett disclosed, "Our vendors get paid more quickly because we're not having to track down and manage paper." Furthermore, the push to automate has incited the Cleveland Utilities team to move to paperless billing, saving vendors – and the environment – paper as well.

Beaty described how the payment process has been expedited: "When it's time to approve an invoice, the employee gets an alert, moving the procedure along in real time."

As a results, month-end check runs have been dramatically cut, from 150-160 checks to roughly 75-80. Plus, it used to take one employee a half to a full day to do month-end check runs. Now that happens automatically, freeing up even more hours.

In a similar vein, DocStar has gifted the finance team with newfound time. Carroll elaborated, "We've moved from a 'just keep moving' attitude to a more thoughtful, check-and-review posture."

Beaty cited one example, "Now, we review invoices individually, instead of on a statement. It's much easier and faster to read a single invoice, to check for any errors or double billings. Because we are not bogged down by menial tasks, we have extra time for more important tasks which gives us greater confidence in our work."

Another obvious impact has been the vanishing paper stacks. "We had four 6-foot-wide, 5-foot-tall filing cabinets filled with current year paperwork, and another 15 years' worth of information in storage," Stinnett described. "We've scanned almost all of that into DocStar, freeing up 400 to 500 square feet of physical space."

Finally, DocStar also made remote work hassle-free. Carroll stated, "Before DocStar, we needed two people in the office on Thursdays to sign checks. That's no longer a requirement because everything is done digitally."

> ## "DocStar has empowered us to transform our operation into a true paperless electronic workflow system."
>
> — Marshall Stinnett, VP/CFO, Cleveland Utilities Cleveland Utilities

A Transformative Foundation

The core value of adopting automated, paperless, work-from-anywhere DocStar is the freedom to focus on chosen priorities. Stinnett noted, "Adopting DocStar has brought more balance to our organization and greater ability to concentrate on objectives because we are no longer constrained by manual processes."

He continued, "DocStar empowered us to transform our operation into a true paperless electronic workflow system. Now, we have the right engine and accounting was just the first step. We hope to soon add expense statements, new hire paperwork, and engineering work orders to our paperless environment, too."

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