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Early Municipal Adopter Has a
'Happy Crew' With NISC Enterprise



About

Deep in a heavily treed area in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains lies Newport, Tennessee, home of Newport Utilities. This municipal utility provides essential services such as electricity, water, wastewater management and broadband to nearly 25,000 residential and commercial customers.

While the utility is located within city limits, its service area extends approximately 500 square miles throughout Cocke County and parts of Jefferson, Sevier and Greene counties in eastern Tennessee.



Multiple Services, Countless Combinations – One Enterprise System

When providing multiple services, including countless combinations of them, managing functions such as billing, operations and customer service can be extremely complex, both for employees and customers. This complexity was the reason why Newport Utilities chose to become Members of NISC in 2008.

One of the earliest municipal adopters of NISC solutions, the decision to implement the NISC enterprise was led by the accounting department but ultimately impacted the entire utility. “Prior to joining NISC, one of the biggest problems the business faced was that all its departments were totally independent of each other – there was no integration,” said Cindy Calhoun, Newport Utilities’ NISC System Administrator and Accounts Payable Analyst. “When they discovered that NISC software had the ability to integrate all the different aspects of the business, they knew that was the direction they wanted to go.”

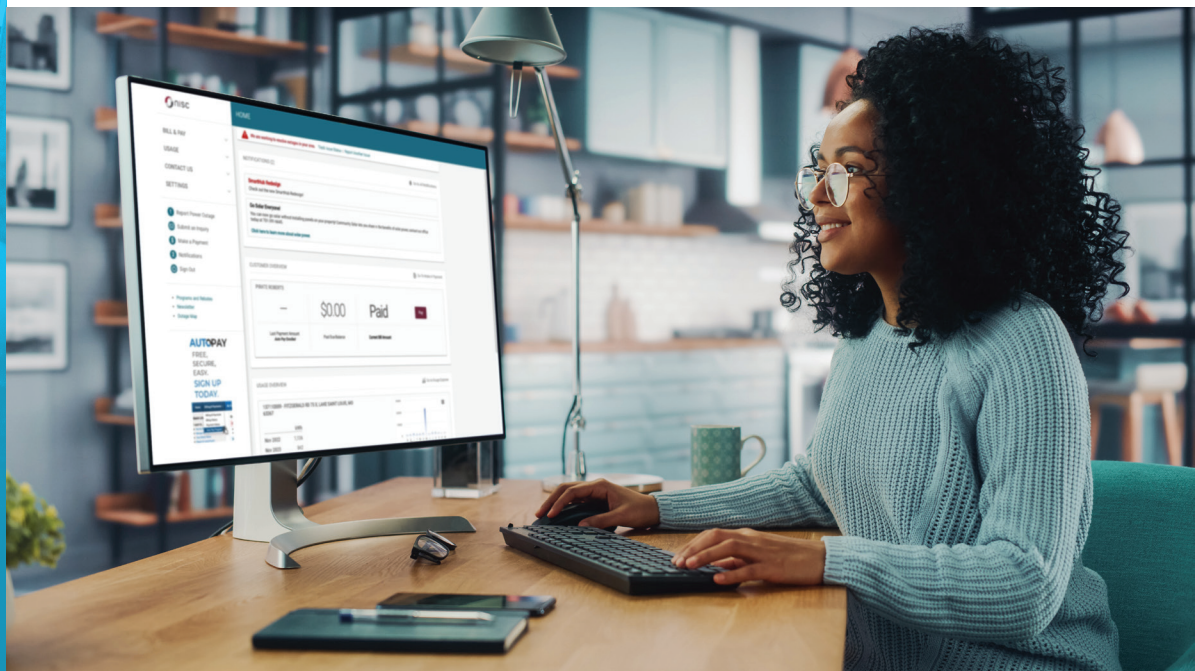
Calhoun said the areas Newport Utilities serves are small-town communities and many people, including their employees, did not have computers at that time, so it was a big adjustment for everyone. “They had to learn the computer, then the software, which was a real challenge,” she continued. “With any change, it’s hard, so even though they knew it would be easier in the long run, it was very hard at first.”



Loving the Integration

But they did learn to use the computer and the software, and for over 10 years they used the basic functionalities of NISC's solutions to make their jobs easier. "Everyone loves the integration NISC products bring – how things work together and that they can easily access all parts of the system whenever they need to," Calhoun said. "There are times when this is especially useful. One example is that we have multiple CSRs (Customer Service Representatives), and each specializes in different products, features or customers. NISC software gives them the ability to access one another's information, which can be very helpful in resolving different issues that come up."

NISC solutions also allow customers who had accounts for multiple services, such as electricity, water and wastewater, to go from three separate accounts to one. "It is so much easier for our customers to be able to go into SmartHub (an NISC product that allows customers to access their accounts and pay their bills online) and look at their accounts or pay for all of their services with one account number rather than having to go into an account for each individual service," she said. "For those who still prefer to come into the office to pay their bill, they now only need to remember that one number."



“We Bought a Lamborghini and Drove it Like a Yugo”

Calhoun joined the Newport Utilities team in 2020 to help further increase efficiencies with the software. After implementing many improvements, she wondered if there was anything she could do to make other employees' jobs easier. “I am the wife of a retired military officer and a longtime homeschool mom, so I'm not afraid of change,” she said. “I'm not about change solely for the sake of change, but when I see someone struggling, I start asking myself how I can help fix it.”

Calhoun said in these situations, her brain starts calculating how many hours employees are spending on it and what their salary is to determine how much that one thing is costing the company. She said there have been times she's found that it is essentially costing an entire employee's salary. “When we have that information, we need to decide if that is where we really want to spend our resources. If not, we discuss ways we can make it better.”

In her work to streamline processes and make things more efficient, Calhoun began working more with the NISC solutions they use every day and found many features that addressed the issues employees were struggling with – they just were not being utilized.

“Shortly after I started, I was told that we bought a Lamborghini and drove it like a Yugo. It didn't take me long to learn that if I could think of something that would help make our jobs easier, NISC has probably already figured out a way to do it. I found the NISC Community and began taking trainings that showed me new ways of doing things. When people would leave for lunch, I would go in and change things to see if I could get them to work, then changed them back before they came back,” she said.

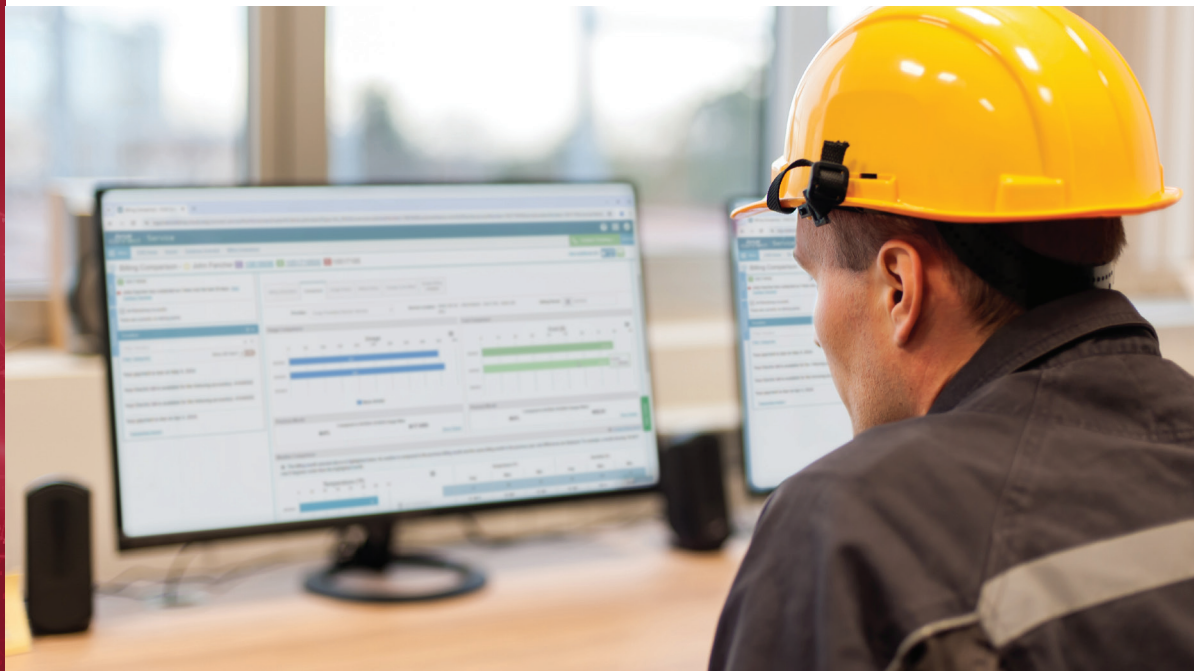
When she was confident in the new process, she'd show other employees how to use the new feature. “They can be fearful when trying new things, so I would tell them to keep doing it the old way, but do it the new way, too – if it works after a few times, try not doing it the old way anymore. They appreciate that and it helps build confidence in the process until they feel comfortable,” she said.

Newport Utilities was also able to eliminate multiple third-party vendors, with the required functionality integrated into the NISC solutions, which saves the utility money and is ultimately more secure. “Every time someone in the office mentions hiring a third-party vendor, I tell them to wait and check with NISC because they might already offer what they're looking for – sometimes as part of what we already have,” Calhoun said.

iVUE Connect Brings Even More Efficiencies

In the spring of 2024, Newport Utilities began another leg of its NISC journey when it migrated to iVUE Connect, NISC's cloud-based solution that creates even more efficiencies in all aspects of their businesses.

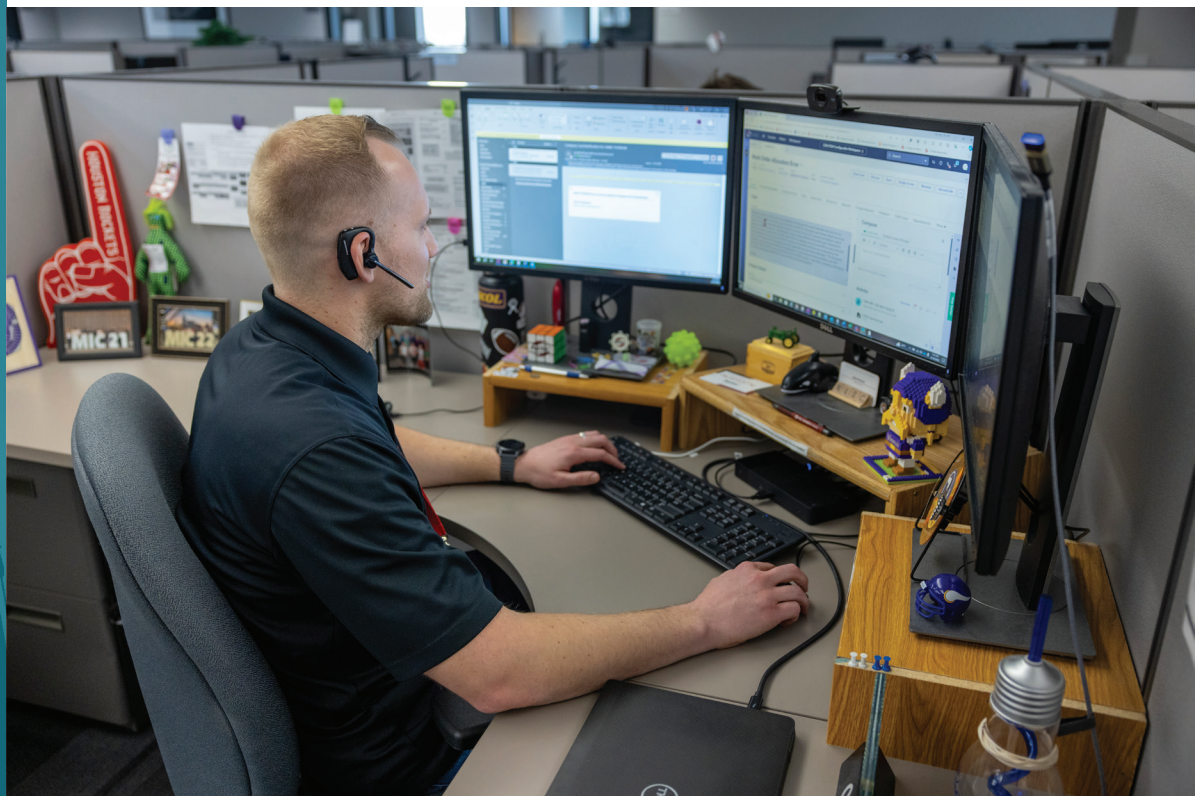
“When we moved to Connect, there was some hesitation, because it was another change, but as we've moved forward, I'm hearing, ‘This is so much easier! We love this so much! Thank you so much!’” Calhoun said. “I can't point to one single thing that they like the most, but I do know that it saves everyone an enormous amount of time. Now we don't have to do things like walk around the office to get things authorized and approved, print everything out on paper, or even dig through files to find old invoices or cancelled checks then physically delivering it to an employee – all of those things are just right there in the computer. We all see the value and the time it is saving us. We're a happy crew with the new Connect, that's for sure.”



A Technology Partnership

In addition to the software that makes employees' jobs easier and more efficient, Calhoun said the service Newport Utilities receives from NISC's support staff is unparalleled. "I adore all the support staff and know I can call them with any issue we're having. There have been times when I've called and as I'm explaining the issue, I figure it out myself. There are days when the person on the phone will not only talk me through our issue but explain why it is happening, helping us to fix the root issue. And there have also been a couple of times when I have called and they have said they have never heard of that happening before and they have to look into it and call us back – which they always do. We can bounce things off each other and I love that we can work together as a team."

Calhoun said there have even been times when she has mentioned something she would like to see in the software and was told that if we want it, others likely do, too, and the idea is brought to the larger team to be researched as a possible new feature. She said that actually just happened when she was talking about something on the water side of the business.



Effective and Useful Training

The training and education NISC provides its Members is a big benefit, as well. The online Community has hundreds of in-person and virtual training sessions available that walks employees through different aspects of the software. “We have had people that have resisted training because whenever they sit in on training, they start to hear Charlie Brown’s teacher talking, but NISC training makes things so easy that they’re just pros at things now.” One example is the Business Intelligence and Reporting product that uses customer data to create graphs and charts that can be used in dashboards to see progress, help in the planning process and many other uses.

Calhoun said the annual Member Information Conference (MIC) is another invaluable learning opportunity. She has gone herself for the past three years and after going once, has brought in different employees that she thinks would benefit from the sessions and collaboration.

“As a utility, you cannot afford to send everyone and you cannot afford to do without everyone, so it’s so nice that all the sessions are recorded,” she said. “The recordings give everyone the opportunity to benefit from what was offered. I cannot wait for the recordings to come out so I can send them to different employees that I think can benefit from them – sometimes we will even play one of the videos at an employee meeting and then discuss what we’ve learned. And, the motivation the keynote speakers give you is so beneficial. It helps pump you up and encourages you to come up with new ideas and ways of looking at things. I think that when you’ve worked at a utility for a long time, complacency can be a problem. All of the employees strive to do a good job, but it’s important to strive to make things even better. The MIC is a great opportunity to see what’s out there, what’s new and to connect with others to see how they’re using NISC software to make their lives, and their customers’ lives better.”



Small But Mighty

Calhoun said that with just over 100 employees at Newport Utilities, this “small but mighty” group is greatly benefiting from the efficiencies NISC solutions provide. “When you wear so many hats, even taking a few steps out of the different processes ends up saving a lot of time, and I can see the difference it makes in employees’ outlooks on their jobs. And the customers – especially the younger ones – love that they can pay their bills online or easily drop money into their accounts as they have it, to keep their accounts current. The benefits we’ve gained from NISC software are greatly benefitting everyone involved.”





Can your company benefit from a fully integrated enterprise system, improved efficiencies, and a better customer experience? If so, NISC would love to talk with you. Call them at 866.999.6472 or visit nisc.coop to learn more.



866.999.6472



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