

Arcos to supply crew management for 4 NU utilities

CEO explains his firm's edge over other services

Arcos was picked by Northeast Utilities (NU) to deliver its web-based “callout” and crew-management database software to four of its five New England utilities to help line crews restore electric and gas service, the software firm told the press yesterday. The product helps utilities get their crews – and crews from other utilities when they come to help – to areas with troubles or outages quicker, Arcos CEO Bruce Duff told us yesterday.

This summer, Connecticut Light & Power, Public Service of New Hampshire, Western Massachusetts Electric and Yankee Gas Services will start a phased implementation of the system.

Many work rules, business rules and agreements need to be followed, not only from a labor perspective but also from a safety perspective, to ensure utilities get the right crews to the right kind of work to get the power back on, Duff explained. That work was mainly done with “paper, pencil and manual telephone work,” before the advent of Arcos, he added.

The firm's product automates calling needed repair crews, which after a big storm could typically mean calling thousands of crew members at the same time. Arcos' system does that “with just the push of a button,” letting them know that they are needed, Duff said.

“If they are available to work, we track their availability to work and how long they can work – from a safety perspective, so the utility knows exactly who is coming in, where they are coming in from, when they are coming in and what work to give them,” Duff said. The whole Arcos system is geared toward getting the power on quicker and as safely as possible.

Arcos differentiates itself from firms that “appear to offer similar services” with the integral way the system incorporates all of the work rules, labor agreements, who the utility calls first, job classifications and more, he added. “Nobody is really doing what we do and that is why we have been so incredibly successful with something so very complex.

“We configure to the way the utility's system works and do not dictate or force them to the way our system works. For example,

American Electric Power has a presence in 11 states and at the end of the day, they have 57 separate union agreements that we complied with, and the callout was different in every one of them,” he added.

Dispatch and supervisors have a detailed knowledge of the people coming in to do the jobs, which offers a “full circle” that no one else has, Duff said. “On top of that, we have a new ‘Crew Manager’ product where you can use tablet PCs and large smart boards to literally drag, drop and move crews to where they need to be today, and also start planning for where they need to be tomorrow or the next day.

“This allows the utility to see exactly what their crew deployment looks like, right down to the hour, as far forward as they want to plan,” he added.

He called that ability critical to running a utility since they have to report this to their PUCs and they also want to be fair with regards to expectations from their customers about when power will come back on. Utilities are always trying to provide an accurate “ETR” – the estimated time the power will come back on.

The system helps with the customer communication and customer engagement campaigns of the utilities, he added.

The Arcos system is not an outage management system but it aids the management of outages when there is an outage report from the smart grid or a customer calls in to report an outage, Duff said. This leads to the generation of a trouble or repair ticket that needs to be assigned to the crew.

“We are the intersection of that work ticket and getting the crews to do the work. In other words, we are providing the crew to do the work the outage management system is tracking.

QUOTABLE: The data we have on crews get shared with other applications that need to know them, which could be the outage management system, the work management and mobile dispatch system or their GIS system, because they want to know who the actual people are, where they are working, how long they have been working and what they are working on. – *Arcos CEO Bruce Duff in an interview*

Arcos customers tell the firm that, even though smart grids report outages and the outage management system can have trouble tickets, “at the end of the day, when it comes to repair,

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it's about the trucks. You have to get people moving to get the actual repair complete and that is us," Duff said.

"In the utilities we work with, we are the system of record of all the crews, what they are qualified to do, how to get a hold of them, are they actually available? Are they working? What is their status and how long have they worked?" he noted.

Overtime doled out fairly

Another detail that can be "actually a big deal," is to "equalize the opportunity for these crews to make overtime money." The Arcos system lets the utility dole out such an opportunity in an equitable way.

This is usually negotiated into the contract of how the utility will do that, and the Arcos system will handle all of the rules, "because in some cases, you can only call qualified persons, you do not want to waste time on someone who is on vacation, or someone who is already working, so you have to follow the overtime rules," he added.

This is big money for the "front line," noted Duff, and the compliance with that while calling crew members fast is the key, Duff noted. "To give you an example, to get a four-person

crew, for utilities that are doing this manually today, would take up to two hours.

"We have got up to 110,000 line workers in our system and our average callout for a four-man crew across our customer base is about 15 minutes."

CAIDI compliance improves

"If you follow some of the reliability metrics that some of these companies are regulated to, such as the Customer Average Interruption Duration Index [CAIDI], we are well documented for cutting anywhere from five to 20 minutes off CAIDI, which is a big deal, not only for utilities and their regulators but also for customers who get that much time shaved off the average outage," he added.

Arcos' pricing is based on the number of people a utility wants to manage in the system and the bigger utilities get more work tickets set up, meaning the system scales according to the size of the utility, Duff said. Its customers are utilities with 50,000 or more customer meters, "so we are in the medium to larger-sized electric cooperatives and municipals, all the way to Duke Energy, Dominion, National Grid, FPL, Exelon, Northeast Utilities, PG&E and so on," he added.

The company focuses on utilities in the US and has 100 customers, including 23 of the top 25 utilities in the country," Duff said.