Covington Electric Cooperative sparks field operations advances with Industry-first integration of IFS MWM

Generating change

In 2012, CEC achieved an industry-first when it became the first utility to successfully integrate IFS's Multispeak-certified Mobile Workforce Management solution (MWM) with the ATS OpenOne customer information system (CIS), establishing a new standard for member service among cooperatives. The combined solution allows CEC to provide members with a faster service order cycle thanks to a single, real-time view of its service order process from the time an order is initiated, wirelessly dispatched to a crew, completed in the field, and then closed back in the office.

Harnessing technology

To modernize its field operations, CEC invested in key enterprise applications built with the intention of working together seamlessly, as opposed to disparate systems functioning in isolation of each other.

One component is IFS's automatic vehicle location (AVL) solution, which provides real-time visibility into vehicle location, condition and driver status information from the convenience of a web browser. For an even more powerful view of field activities, CEC leveraged the optional integration between the AVL system and its Esri-based GIS. Using the AVL map, supervisors can view comprehensive asset information dynamically in relation to vehicles. They can also display individual GIS asset layers at street- and satellite-levels, and overlay specific GIS asset layers against the location of vehicles, orders and geofences.

The AVL system is also integrated with IFS's MWM solution, which allows CEC to automate virtually any work performed in the field with real-time wireless communications combined with dispatching and mobile applications. Replacing legacy technology and satellite communications for managing orders, the MWM system supports sophisticated map-based work assignments directly from the AVL map. Using the map, supervisors can easily view orders that are assigned to crews; create orders by clicking a physical location, an address or latitude/longitude coordinates; and monitor the progress on orders throughout the day with real-time status indicators.

About Covington Electric Cooperative

Located in Sanford near Andalusia, Covington Electric Cooperative (CEC) provides electrical service to members in parts of six counties in Alabama through 2,700 miles of power lines. Being a cooperative means excess revenue is shared back with members over time through capital credits.

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In the field, crews have an at-a-glance visual representation of their work plotted on maps thanks to another integration point—this one between the IFS mobile application and CEC's GIS viewer from Partner Software. With this capability, crews don't have to spend productive time toggling between applications for service order details and geographic information.

The fourth integration point in the utility's technology platform is the Multispeak interface between the MWM system and its OpenOne CIS from ATS. Now, within seconds, service orders created in OpenOne are dispatched wirelessly to a truck and simultaneously appear on the AVL map for supervisors. As orders are finished throughout the day, field crews send completion details back to the office, also in a matter of seconds. By automating routine tasks and data collection efforts with real-time information capture and exchange, the combined solution closes the gap between order creation and order completion and allows CEC to focus on member service.

Conducting configuration

To ignite the business benefits that would flow from more efficient field operations, CEC required a high level of interoperability from its technology investments. This was an important consideration when the utility was evaluating different offerings. For CEC, one of the strengths of the IFS suite was its flexibility and adaptability. To configure its application suite and interfaces, IFS includes Genesis, a powerful, patent-pending, graphic-based configuration tool. Using Genesis, nearly all aspects of IFS's AVL and MWM systems can be configured by a utility's implementation team without any additional programming, which can be both time-consuming and costly.

Steven Walker, System Engineer, CEC, emphasizes its value, "In customizing validation rules and workflow screens for IFS's mobile and dispatch apps, Genesis gets an A+. It's incredibly easy-to-use and allows for tremendous flexibility in adapting the solution to reflect our needs." CEC also used Genesis to define the IFS interface to its ATS CIS host applications. Like the IFS suite, the ATS OpenOne solution was designed to facilitate interaction with other enterprise systems, not just link to them. Walker illustrates, "We wanted to collect a specific data point in the field, which would go back to OpenOne. With Genesis, the change was easy—and no reprogramming or recompiling. It actually took longer to open the file and add the new field than it did for the change to take effect."

Once the IFS AVL and MWM solutions were in full production, CEC continued to further refine usability by using Genesis. Walker elaborates, "In less than ten minutes, we've made changes with Genesis that would have taken months to implement otherwise. And not only would it have taken longer, it would have been an unnecessary expense. It really is an excellent tool." For the amount of configuration and integration that's in place with its technology platform, the fact that CEC was also able to upgrade its CIS and go live the next day without a single major issue operationally is impressive. "The integration is absolutely excellent; it was the easiest golive of a new system we've ever experienced," adds Walker.

Galvanizing benefits

With a wireless mobility infrastructure and seamless application interfaces, CEC now has a real-time service order cycle that is supported by the constant capture and exchange of enterprise information. "The wireless communication over TCP/IP is just so much faster and more reliable than the archaic ways we had outgrown," explains Walker. The data transfer between the office and the field, and the data integrity of both outbound and inbound communications has improved overall productivity in the field. "More accurate field operations data and more reliable communications mean we can deliver our services more efficiently and effectively to our members," he emphasizes.

Service orders themselves are no longer static, and both the field and the office are able to draw far more information from them. Walker offers this insight, "With the IFS solution, our orders are inherently more intelligent now. And what's incredibly powerful is the ability to manipulate them. We can dispatch orders in seconds and we can group them meaningfully using filters, sorts and views. We can reassign and remove orders in the office and, with wireless communication, synchronize changes immediately for crews in the field. It's just light years ahead of where we were previously when we had no real ability to make changes to orders once they had been sent to the trucks."

The ability to instantly overlay mapping information from the utility's Esri ArcGIS system onto the AVL map is also very powerful. By having a single platform to view asset data in relation to vehicles and orders, dispatchers and supervisors are managing field operations to higher levels of productivity. Previously, CEC did have a system to display a map-based view of service orders, but it functioned independently of the CIS where all order information resided. Now, thanks to the integration between the IFS and ATS solutions, CEC has a unified view of comprehensive field operations data. Data is easily maintained and people in various roles receive and access the information they need to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently. Teams in different areas of the utility also have greater confidence in the accuracy of the information they are interacting with thanks to checks and balances between integrated enterprise systems.

Propelling higher standards

For CEC, better managing its field operations represents a significant opportunity to carry through on the guiding principle to deliver value to its members. The utility took a consolidated approach to defining business needs for more advanced field operations and deployed a single, robust platform uniting AVL, MWM, CIS and GIS capabilities to create a real-time service order cycle. Walker summarizes, "IFS has built a strong foundation for improving field operations in the way it has architected its products, both functionally and in the ability to interoperate with other enterprise systems. We have more knowledge at our fingertips than ever before, and we can communicate between the office and the field so much faster and so much more reliably than we could previously. We're confident that the investments we've made will move us to even higher levels of responsiveness to members throughout our territory. A special thanks to IFS, ATS and Partner Software for making this a successful solution."

Find out more

Further information contact your local IFS office or visit our web site, ifs.com

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