Sydney's smart take
on metering data

Australia's largest water utility Sydney Water has adopted a smart strategy for their meter data collection, blending automated and manual approaches to achieve the best commercial benefits – as Datacol's **Michael Dennis** explains.

The complexity of serving a catchment of over 4.6 million people, consuming around 1.4 billion litres of drinking water every day, means deploying technology in commercially smart ways is critical to Australia's largest water utility, Sydney Water.

When it comes to the collection of the lifeblood of any utility, metering data, their approach has been no different. After evaluating strategies and technologies for collecting and processing metering data from their customers, Sydney Water decided on combining manual and Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) approaches.

"We've done a lot of work on it, we understand exactly what the pros and cons are, and the case just isn't there for an AMI roll out at this stage," says Mirko Sramek, Customer Metering Manager of Sydney Water.

"In the foreseeable future, in the next five or 10 years, there is a very strong place for manual meters and a very strong place for AMR meters."

Sydney Water found that implementing a smart combination of AMR and AMI was the best solution to read multi-level buildings. They use AMR in buildings three levels or lower, and AMI in buildings over three stories. "The technology is used where it is cost-effective," says Sramek.

Sydney Water has worked with meter data management experts, DataCol Group, to implement this approach, using a solution based on DataCol's SevenX meter data management product, which combines software that manages field force logistics and collects meter data from handheld units in the field via manual or automated reads. SevenX is used by water, energy and gas utilities across Australia, New Zealand and the African continent.

"Sydney Water is one of the largest utilities in Australasia and their needs are varied. There couldn't possibly be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution that would work for these requirements – 'out of the box'. The DataCol team delivered a solution that was flexible and customised specifically for Sydney Water's business requirements", says Bruce Franks, CEO of the DataCol Group, who pointed out the SevenX solution was originally developed in the electricity sector and had been extended for use by gas and water utilities.

Sydney Water has been able to improve and simplify their quarterly reading cycle by providing added functionality and visibility.

"It's enabled us to pull in new technologies and there are some significant benefits in how the SevenX system allows us to read mixed routes with manual and AMR meters," says Jason Dagger, programme manager, Metering at Sydney Water.

"If we weren't able to do that, it would push the case for AMI a lot better. But by being able to cost effectively read AMR allows us to defer a large capital outlay that comes with implementing AMI."

Sydney Water meter readers now complete their rounds faster using SevenX AMR. It enables them to read all meters in a building as one group, regardless of meter brand, rather than one by one, says Sramek. "The ability to adapt the

system to be able to read AMR, and particularly to be able to read two different AMR manufactured metres and be able to incorporate them with our manual reads has been a real bonus.".

He also points to cash flow previously being restricted due to an inflexible billing system. Whole routes needed to be completed before customers could be billed. "Under the new solution our cash flow, or billing process, hasn't been held up while we wait for the entire route to be read."

This has helped Sydney Water to send bills faster, which has sped up the cash-flow process, helping customers and the utility to stay up to date with payments.

"The speed, accuracy and the quality of meter reading is essential to a utilities organisation striving for customer satisfaction, as well as being cash-positive. SevenX allows the streamlining of the 'meter-to-cash' process," says Bruce Franks.

Clever SevenX features like being able to add notes in, ensures that customer messages and information updates are passed on to readers. "It's a big improvement to make sure that the reader got that message," says Dagger. "It makes for much better customer service and a lot less customer calls."

Customer service has also benefitted from photo identification of meter faults. "The photo capability has reduced our need for check reads and improved the efficiency of our back end office processes, where previously if you had a reading, you didn't know if it was a data entry error," says Dagger. "But with a photo you don't need a check read and that exception can be processed there and then and then it's done." The customer can be notified and action taken immediately to remedy the problem.

Although added confidence, efficiency and functionality have been the outcomes of the SevenX rollout, the real success x-factor throughout this process has been the strong partnership between Sydney Water and DataCol.

DataCol are available for any enhancements and upgrades and can turn these around in a timely manner – another advantage that the giant vendors often struggle with. There is an open exchange of ideas between the two organisations that then make up a roadmap for ongoing enhancements.

"In essence this solution processes billions of dollars' worth of billing data and nothing but the best technology will do, to ensure absolute accuracy with class-leading efficiency of operations. We understand this is a mission critical system for Sydney Water and we're proud of the role we play in the delivery of this service," concludes Franks.

Sydney Water's pragmatic approach to implementing new meter data collection technology has meant they can meet their commercial drivers, as well as ensure customer service is maintained at a high level. A truly smart approach. **WNZ**

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