

Distribution Automation – A Key to Customer Retention

Deregulation is descending upon the utility industry like an ice storm. As a result, many utilities are turning to technology as one of the most cost-effective ways to meet increasing customer expectations. These utilities see technology as a key strategic asset, rather than an expense.

Baltimore Gas & Electric (BGE) is an integrated utility that serves more than 1 million electric customers and 600,000 gas customers spread over 2,300 square miles on the East Coast. In 1986, BGE began investigating communications technologies to support future applications such as Distribution Automation and Remote Meter Reading. Since then, BGE has implemented leading-edge technology to improve access to information. This vision has helped build their reputation as a world-class energy provider.

In 1994, BGE invested in MOSCAD™, Motorola's Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system, to monitor its 1,200 distribution feeder lines. This made BGE one of the world's first utilities to use Distribution Automation (DA) to automate line recloser remote operation and capacitor bank monitoring over a wireless two-way radio network.

BGE Manager of Distribution Engineering, Ken DeFontes, says, "Our main objective was reliability improvement. We were looking for ways to prevent or minimize the duration of outages. Once a fault occurred, our traditional response was to send someone to track down its location. That could take an hour, maybe more."

"With our DA system, everything happens faster," says DeFontes. "The integrated monitoring capability of this technology gives us enhanced control of the system and precise evaluation of customer usage. We can pinpoint where the fault occurred – and what part of the circuit is affected. We can then send someone directly to the outage site – or use DA to reroute a circuit. Either way, power may be restored in minutes instead of hours, helping to save time and money."

During 1997, BGE saved approximately 75,000 customer hours of outages. And says DeFontes, "Don't think our customers – business and residential – don't notice. They want the benefits of competition – better service and lower prices. DA is making a significant impact in helping us address these issues.

DA can be a cost-effective way to help utilities meet increasing service standards of reliability. As DeFontes points out, "The future of the utility industry is in better managing information. DA is an important tool to bring that information back to a central control point where we can use it to help improve performance. BGE's investment in DA technology is really an investment in customer retention."

But, improving reliability is just the beginning. DA is also helping BGE identify ways to maximize productivity and make better use of its resources. Since DA can create opportunities to add new revenue streams, BGE created a subsidiary to market energy services to other utilities. This positions them well for today and into the future.