How Can Utilities Transform Billing Process and Redefine Customer Experience

Recent studies show that close to 4 billion energy customers were over-billed last year. Amongst other reasons, 'wrong product details', 'incorrect fee application', and 'incorrect meter reading' accounted for close to 90% of these billing errors.

Discrepancies affect utilities companies in a great way, as they negatively impact customer experience in addition to attracting heavy fines from regulatory bodies. There have been many instances where utilities companies have borne heavy fines due to inaccurate billing. Regulatory bodies like Ofgem continuously monitor the market to ensure customers are not at loss. When customers reach out to organizations via social media or via contact centers, there is an imminent need to do it right the first time in order to maintain brand reputation. Errors in billing processes and/or delays in resolution often result in churn.

There is an inherent challenge for utilities companies in handling huge amounts of data and delivering efficient billing operations. The billing processes are, most often, carried out on a mix of ERP systems and legacy systems.

Unfortunately, majority of the billing process activities are manual and repetitive and are prone to human errors. These errors lead to irate customers, who then call contact centers to get a resolution. In such cases, if the technology landscape of contact centers is unequipped to handle customers in the most efficient way, with agents toggling between screens without any insights on the customer, it will only mean unhappy customers.

High turnaround times and huge costs are the key deterrents that stop businesses from deploying technological solutions to fix billing issues. Any large scale IT deployment involves high CAPEX and long lead times. However, companies can transform processes using standardization and automation to improve operating metrics, leading to better customer engagement. Investments in automation require shorter deployment timelines, low CAPEX and ensure quick returns. Also, automation is a perfect fit in the utilities industry which handles millions of transactions on a regular basis.

To ensure improved customer experience, businesses need to follow the shift-left approach by

avoiding problems/incidents before they occur. For ongoing problems, customers should be sent proactive messages about the status. Also, self-care channels and tools should be made available to customers. An analytically-backed Customer Experience (CX) platform suite will enable the contact center agents to handle customers efficiently by providing first contact resolution with less average handling time. A complete visibility on the customer journey is essential to understand the customer and his/her needs.

Transforming billing process with automation and CX platform

A typical billing process involves invoice generation and processing of any exception that may arise during invoicing. It includes applying appropriate consumption amount, billing rate based on the service plan, applying relevant taxes, validating the inputs, generating the invoice and sending it to customers on time. Also, the process involves capturing data, pasting data and switching between different applications in order to generate the invoice. Most of the steps in this process are manual and repetitive. Automating the entire process ensures doing it right the first time and elimination of human errors.

A process in scope of automation is exception handling. Typically, when ERP systems find data mismatch or come across an exception during a process, the record is set aside for manual inspection and handling. The number of such exceptions are quite huge in a utility scenario, and often constitutes a big chunk of the time spent. By applying appropriate business rules, handling of exceptions can be completely automated, thereby eliminating manual intervention. Handling varied exception types and complexity requires specialized skill set and investigation without compromising on accuracy and turnaround time. Hence, Robotics Process Automation (RPA) can be utilized to automate the process.

Typically, companies can break their automation journey into two phases. In phase 1, RPA can take away the pain of doing highly mundane, repetitive, volume intensive, non-judgmental activities. The data that will be generated from bots in phase 1 can be utilized to build intelligence around processes and prepare the ground for cognitive injection. And in phase 2, cognitive intelligence can help support the futuristic expectations where machine learning, natural language processing, reasoning, knowledge and algorithmic intelligence can support quantum turnarounds.

Also, to further improve customer service, it is imperative for organizations to give customers the option to experience state-of-the-art technologies that enable them to self serve. Take, for instance, a scenario wherein the customer signs in to the company's website or mobile app to understand the billing issue. The customer probably checks for the detailed bill available on the customer portal and will need customer support channel to obtain clarification on the issue. One wrong step by the agent will result in an unhappy customer and might result in churn. An analytics-backed CX platform can help agents to resolve queries in a more efficient way. A strong analytics model built around the

customer-related data will bring out relevant insights that can help agents provide better customer service. With the available data on customer's previous communication, usage patterns, and billing information, the system will be intelligent enough to anticipate the issue even before the customer and agent interact.

Technology is changing the way utilities operations are handled. A calculated technological intervention will save companies from losing customers, and improve their brand image in the market. By implementing RPA in the back-end process and CX platform in contact center operations, utilities companies can move ahead of their competition in providing best-in-class customer service.

About the authors

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