

# AUTOMATIC METER READING: PILOT PROJECT OFFERS VALUABLE LESSONS

By Betsy Loeff

If you're going to do a successful AMR project, there are a lot of things you need to check that may not be obvious from the start," says John Yanek, AMR director at PPL Electric Utilities. He should know.

Yanek orchestrated project planning, a two-month trial, plus installation of 400,000 of the 1.3 million total, AMR-ready meters in his central eastern Pennsylvania service area between February and year-end 2002. He planned for every contingency yet learned plenty during the trial to facilitate an efficient installation.

Following is a look at how Yanek and others have used trial time to hone processes, test equipment and prepare for implementation of new AMR technology.

## MAKING A LIST: HOW PPL PLANS A TRIAL

PPL Electric was sold on the technology used in its initial research, provided by TWACS by DCSI. The utility used its pilot as a due diligence tool and an exercise to practice process changes. In fact, PPL's AMR team worked with subject-matter experts from departments throughout the utility to determine a

list of more than 100 processes that would be affected by the AMR implementation.

"We identified three classifications of processes," Yanek says. "Phase One consisted of processes that had to be reworked before the trial and made up about 40 items on the list. Phase Two processes were ironed out during the trial. These were things like generating customer bills using automated data to verify that the equipment and system changes worked. Phase Three processes are things we'll revise before the installation is completed at the end of 2004. For instance, as we move from a deployment mode to an operating state, we'll go through all our Phase One and Phase Two processes to make sure everything is complete."

## TWEAKS AND OVERHAULS

Yanek notes that some process changes required nothing more than wording changes in written training materials, while others required a major overhaul. Among the processes streamlined for the project were those associated with change meter orders (CMOs). "Usually you do 20,000 CMOs in a year," says Yanek. "We were doing 400,000, so we had to become very efficient. Among other things, we looked at how we could generate the CMOs electronically so that they went directly into the handhelds, and the installers knew where to go next."

Yanek and his team also planned for added call center traffic. "Less than 10 percent of our customers have indoor meters, and many of those people need to make appointments to have those meters changed. We needed to plan for the additional call volume," he says.

"An installation this size put stress on PPL's meter testing facilities," adds Joe Schilling, program manager at DCSI. "PPL was the last utility in Pennsylvania to use sampling instead of testing 100 percent of new meters they received. Other utilities had obtained Public Utility Commission approval to use sampling, and before this project PPL did the same."

Schilling adds: "DCSI also learned a great deal due to the size and timing of this project. Specifically, DCSI took on the meter ordering and installation contractor management. New monitoring and reporting requirements had to be developed to ensure that project goals were achieved. The PPL team was instrumental in assisting the DCSI onsite team, as well as TWACS technical experts in St. Louis, in defining requirements and priorities."

Along with the above processes, PPL used its trial to smooth out a number of areas including scheduling, performance and teamwork.

## SCHEDULING

To save money, PPL planned to retrofit about 67 percent of existing meters. The utility used its trial to determine the turnaround time involved in the retrofitting process.

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