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Have you ever wondered how they get those huge 200-300 ton locomotives back on the tracks after a train wreck? Utilities and the vendors who serve them, especially CIS vendors, have been struggling with a very similar question for the last three years.

The locomotives that drove the great utility IT bubble of the late 1990s went off the tracks in 2001 with the stall of deregulation and competition in most states, plus all the other well-known problems. Those locomotives were primarily deregulation and competition, although utilities also got caught up in the great dot.com euphoria of a new generation of automation. But those locomotives have been lying on their sides beside the tracks for three years now, showing little indication of ever running again.

CIS vendors have been particularly hard hit with major utility CIS installations dropping from five to 10 per year in the late ‘90s to an average of less than one per year since the turn of the century.

Since mergers and acquisitions among utilities also stalled after 2001, there’s another locomotive lying beside the tracks. Utilities also have so many other systems now linked to their CIS (usually between 25 and 100+), they also are reluctant to pull out the roots and start over. “Currently I would say we have literally hundreds [of interfaces to the CIS],” says Mahvash Yazdi, vice president of Business Integration and CIO, Edison International, Rosemead, Calif. “One of the services of the architecture we are trying to put into place is application integration so we can eliminate the number of point-to-point interfaces.”

CIS vendors have been scrambling to find a route to survival. Probably the largest in the late 1990s, Andersen Consulting (now Accenture), gave up and left the CIS market. After making a large number of Customer/1 installations throughout the 1990s, Accenture now has stopped support for the 20 or more Customer/1s still in service, including at Florida Power & Light. Now Accenture offers CIS only as an outsourcing option under its Accenture Business Services (ABS) for Utilities after acquiring a Canadian outsourcer to form the basis of ABS.

SCT was the first of the majors to fall, being acquired in 2003 by Indus International, Atlanta, an enterprise asset management (EAM) vendor. Since then, SCT’s Banner CIS, which had dozens of installations across the U.S. and abroad, has been folded into Indus’ Service Delivery Management (SDM) initiative, which combines CIS with EAM, field force automation, and other integrated automation software. The SDM initiative also seeks to broaden Indus earnings growth by extending its integration of asset, customer and workforce management applications for the utilities industry into additional markets.

Excelergy and Lodestar also have sought survival in other markets, including load management, forecasting trading and settlement, as well as selling CIS abroad where competition is more established. Lodestar also has had considerable success in the Texas retail market. Excelergy has struggled, replacing its CEO in 2004, along with significant staff reductions.

SPL Worldgroup, probably the largest of the CIS vendors, after Accenture, got out in 2004 and also has sought to broaden its footprint like Indus has done with SCT. In early 2004, SPL acquired CES International, probably the largest vendor of outage management software. Then in late 2004, SPL was acquired by GFI Energy Ventures, LLC, a large venture capital firm formed in 1995 and based in Los Angeles. It also owned Synergen, an EAM vendor, and several other energy vendors, including, coincidentally, Lodestar.

The GFI buyout was engineered primarily by Harry Debes, CEO of SPL, who took over the helm in late 2003 and spearheaded the CES acquisition. Debes, who formerly was with PeopleSoft, announced a strategy to expand SPL’s footprint when he took over the company. In the GFI acquisition, Synergen, which earlier had acquired field automation vendor Axiom/Mobility of Atlanta, was folded under SPL and Debes remained as the CEO of the combined firms.

“We’re very pleased with how everything has gone to this point,” said Debes recently about two months after the GFI deal was completed. “Things couldn’t have gone better. We’ve been very busy making the integrations necessary to make our products compatible and making a solution that looks like it comes from one company. It takes a couple of months to do all those things. We’re in that stage right now and are very pleased with where we are.”
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Debes is enthusiastic about the prospects for the revised, expanded SPL, including the CIS market. “We’re in the proposal stage with several customers now,” he says. SPL also turned abroad when the U.S. market dried up and Debes says that effort has paid off. “We started [this effort] last year, and in the last year we’ve sold 12 new CIS accounts in the world,” he says.

Of the large CIS vendors—those who target mainly large investor-owned utilities in this country—only Peace Software seems to be trying to stay the course as a CIS-only vendor. “We do not believe in the wider footprint strategy,” says Sebastian Gunningham, who replaced company founder Brian Peace as CEO of the firm in 2003. “We believe in a far deeper niche strategy. We primarily build a product around the customer data systems for water, gas, and electricity — around the billing engine. Gunningham says Peace’s strategy is to “go deeper” into the customer management functions at utilities. The primary problem for utilities is the cost to operate these billing systems. That is borne out in surveys and interviews with utility CIOs who report increasing costs in maintain aging CISs is a current worry.

One vendor that usually isn’t thought of by most people strictly as a CIS vendor is SAP of Waldorff, Germany. In the late 1990s, SAP brought out a new CIS called its Customer Care System (CCS), which was, of course, tightly integrated with SAP’s enterprise system. But after a few installations primarily as test beds, CCS sales also have stalled over the last three years.

Of course there is a whole raft of CIS vendors competing in the smaller U.S. utility markets—for co-ops, smaller municipals, and even smaller IOUs. Those include such firms as Hansen Information Technologies, Sacramento, Calif., which has built a new headquarters in Rancho Cordova, Calif. Hansen offers a variety of products to municipal governments, including a utility CIS, but does not rely upon CIS sales for survival. OpenC Solutions, Minneapolis, a spin-off of National Water & Power Corp., Santa Anna, Calif., has made a few installations, including one at Washington Gas Energy Services, a deregulated subsidiary of Washington (D.C.) Gas Co. However, in February, OpenC’s parent organization (NWP) announced it was outsourcing its own CIS functions to Accenture Business Services and the deal included Accenture acquiring OpenC. What Accenture will do with another CIS is unclear at this point.

AMX International, Sioux Falls, Idaho, has a CIS called Utility that grew out of J.D. Edwards Co., an EAM vendor acquired by Peoplesoft, which now has been acquired by Oracle Corp. Utility has been installed at a number of smaller utilities around the country and abroad.

So to say the CIS market is dead is not entirely accurate. But among the large, investor-owned utilities, which represent about 70 percent of all customers in the U.S., and have most of the buying power for large CIS replacements, it definitely is on life-support. That is because of the engine problem, which means there are currently no drivers for large IOUs to replace CISs.

Even with a slow CIS replacement market, CIS vendors face another threat, the growth of outsourcing. Although no large IOUs have outsourced their CIS directly, several of them have outsourced their entire IT departments, notably Xcel Energy to IBM, Entergy to SAIC and TXU to CapGemini. There are a variety of CIS outsourcers available should they decide to go that route. The largest of these, Alliance Data Systems (ADS), Dallas, has been acquiring its competitors over the last two or three years and now has successfully eliminated most of them. Alliance continues to push the potential savings available to utilities by outsourcing.

“Asset transfer is a proven avenue to both financial and operational recovery,” says Tony Johnson, a senior strategic and change management consultant at ADS. “Asset transfer demonstrates what might be necessary to realize a ‘step-change’ in both cost reductions and improved customer service. Through asset transfer, many utilities are able to transfer risk, right their balance sheet, and win back favor on Wall Street. As we reach the mid-point of the decade, it’s time for customers, shareholders, regulators, and utility CFOs to seriously examine this financial tool.”

Even though they have no plans for replacing CIS, CIOs at large utilities continue to keep a close watch on the vendor market — some of them with concern, others with more sanguinity. “I think we’ll continue to evolve our system—we have the Andersen Customer/1—but I have no desire to replace it in the near future unless absolutely necessary,” says Charles Bremer, vice president-information technology at Ameren Corp., St. Louis. “We want to add functionality to it and put web front-ends and customer self-service on it. We look at how best to manage and process some of the more complex billing structures, whether to do it in the system or external to the system. But I don’t anticipate a full-scale replacement any time in the near future.”

Necessity is the mother of invention, says Brunson White, vice president and CIO at Energen Corp., Birmingham, Ala. “It’s hard to see anything that is going to be a market dynamic that’s going to force our industry to be highly innovative in the immediate future,” he says.

With no market dynamics for innovation and CIS that spit the bills out as required, there isn’t any reason for replacing them. Most utilities are waiting for the smoke to clear before any engines get reassembled, much less put back on the tracks.
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Nobody ever said installing and implementing a modern customer information system (CIS) for energy utility applications was simple, but for Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) in the 1990s, the process became a decade-long ordeal of failed efforts and cost overruns. After several false starts, PG&E has finally found satisfaction with SPL WorldGroup’s CorDaptix Customer Care and Billing platform that works to improve the processing of accounts for its 6.5 million electric and natural gas customers in Northern California. “It’s working great,” confirmed Tracy Harizal, PG&E’s director of customer information systems. “In two years, we’ve never missed a billing date or cycle.”

Meanwhile, Oneok, Inc., the Oklahoma-based utility company, claims success with the first two phases of a three-utility CIS implementation of Indus International’s Banner Advantage platform in combination with several other Indus business applications. With the successful installation of the system for 550,000 gas customers at affiliates Kansas Gas Service and 650,000 accounts at Texas Gas Service, Oneok and Indus are well into the third phase of the project.

“Oklahoma’s next,” said Charles Moore, vice president and chief information officer for the utility parent company. The company expects that 850,000 customers of Oklahoma Natural Gas (ONG) will be on Indus’ integrated “Customer Suite” of applications by summer of 2006, with the Banner CIS at the core. “We wanted to get our own platform with an ability to grow and to standardize process across all the LDCs,” Moore said. “Basically, we can now control our own destiny.”

On a smaller scale, rural cooperative CoServ has announced full implementation of the CIS Infinity product from Advanced Utility Systems for its 138,000 electric and gas customers in the Corinth, Texas, vicinity. “CoServ has automated repetitive tasks, put paper-based processes on line and freed up countless hours for customer service representatives, billing staff and field workers,” said Stacia Sims, senior vice president of information services.

Taken together, these three utility experiences with CIS implementation illustrate both the challenges and rewards of bringing antiquated customer accounts systems into the 21st century.

Achieving a successful implementation on time and within budget is always the goal for utilities, but for PG&E, the task of replacing a 1964 legacy CIS system seemed an impossible dream. “We made a couple of attempts at replacing it,” Harizal said.

According to documents from PG&E’s last general rate case at the California Public Utilities Commission, “In the last decade, PG&E has made several attempts, since abandoned, to accomplish major upgrades to its CIS.” In 1990, the CPUC reported, the utility received funds for a major rewrite of the legacy system, but “after spending millions of dollars, PG&E abandoned this project. In 1994 and 1995, PG&E undertook development of a non-core CIS (nCIS) to meet the needs of PG&E’s 200 largest customers using a client server technology. PG&E terminated the nCIS project in 1995, after completing the system analysis and design programming phases and beginning system testing.”

Difficulties continued. After issuing an RFP that led to a contract with IBM to purchase and modify an off-the-shelf system called IBM Integrity, PG&E spent $44.2 million, but terminated the project in 1997. Then, with the restructuring of electric service markets in California looming, the utility began a crash conversion of its existing patchwork CIS at the same time it contracted with SPL to install the wholly new CorDaptix system — at a cost exceeding $200 million. PG&E also spent up to $50 million annually on CIS operations and maintenance, although that figure is decreasing each year.

“Restructuring forced our hand to make extraordinarily expensive adjustments to our old system,” recalled Roger Gray, the former chief information officer for PG&E. “People worried if it would be compatible with the future.” In all, he estimated that the two projects cost PG&E over $330 million, in addition to what had been previously spent in the aborted attempts.

At the time California was creating an entirely new market structure, featuring competition for retail electric services — called direct access — as well as the functional separation of utility operations, divestiture of generation and the “unbundling” of associated rates on customer bills for distribution, transmission and power supplies. In
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addition, a complex mechanism of accounting for utility recovery or stranded costs on generation infrastructure and a legislatively mandated retail rate freeze and 10 percent rate reduction for households, meant that bills would take on an entirely new look and level of complexity.

This necessitated changes in all of the business processes related to customer accounts, including demands for more accurate and timely meter-data collections and billing, sometimes on behalf of a new class of energy service providers. In short, everything was changing at the same time and in ways that the 35-year-old legacy CIS simply could not handle.

Key for PG&E’s vendor selection was the need for a system that could handle the huge volume of customer information that was compatible with modern computing technologies and Web-based interfaces. “We made a strategic decision not to build a homegrown system, and to go with a custom solution,” Gray said.

Originally, SPL was hired to “bolt on” a customized customer accounts program called CIS-Plus to the legacy system to account for direct-access customer accounts, but leave all the inherent system data intact. “That’s way different than a conversion of the data base to CorDaptix,” Harizal explained. But after running the two vintages of CIS simultaneously, PG&E realized it needed a thoroughly modern CIS.

“We could not make many more structural changes and still meet our processing window. This is a full-scale replacement,” she said. The utility’s positive working experience with SPL gave the company an edge in vendor selection against other major CIS providers like SAP.

Also underlying the selection was executive-level and regulatory intolerance for further failures. “SPL has a 100 percent success rate,” Harizal said.

The successful project, still considered the most extensive CIS installation in the utility industry, hit its budget targets and was online by early December 2002. Harizal admitted that was the latest of three projected installation dates called for in the update plan, with the slight delay caused by a regulatory decision to reintroduce the 20/20 Program of customers’ rebates for energy conservation in the wake of the California power crisis.

“We had thought the program was over,” Harizal said. But it was easy to insert the 20/20 Program back into the CIS because CorDaptix featured “soft table maintenance” to accommodate changes. “The rules inherent to the legacy system were hard-coded,” she said. “Now, we can manage changes and it doesn’t require changing the functionality of the system. This minimizes the cost and impact on applications.”

Besides improving data accuracy and turnaround times, PG&E’s new system allows for customer migration without needing to assign new account numbers or create new files. The account numbers in the legacy system were tied to a specific location, Harizal said. “If the customer moved, we’d have to change the account. Now, we can track the customer. You can move across the city or in and out of the service territory, and the information doesn’t have to be re-input.”

That’s an invaluable feature in a highly mobile place like California, where nearly half of the population moves every five years.

The CorDaptix Customer Care and Billing platform also allows for real-time changes to account balances when customers pay on-line or at a PG&E service center. And, most importantly, the meter collection and billing cycle can be accomplished within PG&E’s goal of a 24-hour window. “The meter is read today, the data is processed tonight, and the bill goes out tomorrow,” Harizal said.

Although PG&E has taken much criticism from regulators, consumer groups and the news media for early problems with delayed bills and its continued use of estimated bills — up to $60,000 per month in mid-2003 but significantly less currently – the fault does not lie with CorDaptix, Gray said. “Delayed bills are a business process problem, but there’s no doubt that the problem becomes manifest in CorDaptix.” He cited a 99.7 percent rate of being able to process account changes overnight, compared to figures as low as 90 percent at some other utilities using a new CIS system.

THE ONEOK STORY

In contrast to PG&E’s arduous history with CIS implementation, Oneok faced the relatively straightforward task of introducing a whole new set of customers into its systems when it acquired gas utilities in Texas and Kansas. According to CIO Moore, the plan in 2003 was to standardize the CIS systems for ONG and Kansas Gas Service, but when the company bought Texas Gas Service, it moved implementation of a new CIS for that utility to the front of the line.

Each utility has its own complications, he noted. In Kansas, the gas utility had been part of Western Resources (Westar Energy), did co-billing with the electric utility and shared customer service centers. “Even now, we combine meter reading,” Moore explained. “A single meter reader still collects the data.”

The challenge in Texas is that the utility operates in multiple jurisdictions, each with its own tariff and tax structures. And in Oklahoma, there were a multitude of technology changes. “We are automating a lot of processes,” he added.

This situation called for a CIS system that could be both standardized across the company while accounting for the particular needs of the three utilities, such as billing flexibility and rate monitoring for the different jurisdictions. “We picked SCT two years ago,” Moore said. “At the time we were putting in our system, we knew SCT/Banner was going through some product changes, and we wanted to be a part of that. Also, we didn’t want to do it with anyone who couldn’t do it on the scale we needed.”
The firm had been developing a good track record for its Banner Advantage system with medium-sized utilities such as Nevada Power and Public Service New Mexico and in the public-power market, where excellent customer service and flexibility are critical components of a vendor/utility relationship. Then, midway through the first two Oneok company installations, SCT was purchased by Indus.

That introduced another level of system integration to the project, and Indus now touts Banner as a core component of its Service Delivery Management suite of customer solutions. Moore called it a “connect to everything approach” that’s particularly well suited to Oneok’s varied circumstances.

Oneok says it is highly pleased with the results. In Texas, the system went live by Memorial Day 2004, and Kansas Gas’ CIS was on-line the following Labor Day. Besides meeting targeted deadlines and staying within a budget estimated at $30 million to $40 million, there were few of the usual problems with code conversions. “The code that we got was of a higher quality than what I expected Indus to provide, even though we had a high level of customization,” Moore said.

Still, change is never easy for accounts and billing staff, he acknowledged. “The old legacy system was mainframe-based, so we have a total technology upgrade and different end-user experience,” he said. “These people had been using the same system for 20 years.”

While the system is working well, the staff acceptance level has been a challenge. “We’re still getting people up to speed,” he said. “In Texas, we trained users on a moving target. Basically, we gave them a parachute and threw them out of the plane.”

DOWN ON THE CO-OP
While Oneok needed to find a flexible system to accommodate different companies, the CoServ organization found it needed to combine accounts, data, workflow and business processes for its two affiliates — the CoServ Electric Co-op and CoServ Gas, Ltd.

The electric co-op was founded in 1937 while the gas utility was added in 1998. The North Texas companies experienced tremendous load growth in 2004, adding 16,000 new accounts – a more than 13 percent increase.

The CIS Infinity product turned out to be ideal for the co-op’s needs by giving the utility the ability to integrate membership tracking with billing, in real time and via the Internet. It also allows for a single point of customer contact for those who take both gas and electric services while minimizing custom programming and eliminating much of the manual labor previously used for keeping accounts current.

Sims, CoServ Electric’s vice president of information services, credits the vendor, Advanced Utility Systems, for its thorough training and partnership with utility staff. “Because of the preparation and training, implementation was one of the best I’ve ever seen,” she stated.

The CIS industry has taken its fair share of criticism for costly and problematic implementations in the past, and many utilities have avoided changing out nearly obsolete legacy systems until it becomes absolutely necessary. Given the experiences at PG&E, Oneok, and CoServ; however, it appears that the newest generation of products are bridging the performance gap between completely customized applications and standardized but flexible solutions.

Harizal said she considers the SPL CorDaptix platform to be as close to “off-the-shelf” as is possible for such a complex task. “It’s similar to a Microsoft product,” she said. “It’s not unique to us. We like the fact that we get the benefit of other clients’ use and as SPL refines the product, we can incorporate those changes.”

Moore sees things a little differently, while still praising the flexibility of the Indus applications. “It’s a panacea to say that CIS is going to be completely off-the-shelf,” Moore said. “In utilities, CIS is the system that gets customized the most.”
Utilities historically have been very reluctant to replace customer information systems (CIS). To gain insight on what utility chief information officers (CIOs) in the utility industry think about CIS today, we interviewed six of them — five in the United States and one in Canada.

Centering around issues currently facing the CIS market at utilities, we asked the experts about vendor consolidation, the availability of customer information for business intelligence strategies, interfaces to CIS (which are a major expense and deterrent to replacing a system), planning for CIS replacement, and cost trends associated with customer care.

**CIS Roundtable**

With the stall of deregulation and competition, most utilities have stopped replacing CIS and really never got started in the industry. What do you see as the future of customer care in your utility and the IT systems that support it? What is your take on the consolidation now taking place among CIS vendors? Is that good or bad for your utility?

**GOGEL:** CIS is where the richness of our interactions with our customers is driven. If there are fewer opportunities to select there, I don't think it's a good thing as we go forward. It's probably too early to tell right now. Most CIS engines are driven as transactional engines, but part of the richness that could come is when we start understanding what dynamics are embedded in a process that a utility can really drive to influence customer satisfaction. I'm hopeful there will still be research dollars going into that particular domain as opposed to just funds going into swallowing up and standardizing the architectural solutions that are on the marketplace today.

**KLINGER:** There will be more than one CIS vendor anyway, so I don't have a concern about it at this point. To the extent that they also try to connect with other third-party providers, it might be good. I wouldn't be interested in going with small companies anyway, where we might be at risk for non-support. I believe there will be consolidation. I believe there will be only a few suppliers. I am not overly concerned with that. I don't know who I would pick right now if I had to pick one. But as far as I’m concerned, as long as I’m here, this company will never do another big CIS install. The people I talk to, including SAP, all are trying to recognize that and modularize their offerings so they can offer them in smaller pieces you can mix and match. That's the way I think the business has to go, and it's the way we will go.

**MCDERMID:** We’re ambivalent at this point. We know there are other areas we have to focus on. We have two big CIS systems — one on the gas side and one on the electric side and have resigned ourselves to the fact that we’re going to have to learn to live with those and optimize that investment. We don’t plan on replacing them anytime soon. However, we are building things around them to optimize the situation, such as Web front ends, call centers, certainly the whole business intelligence initiative, and getting customer information out of those systems and into places where people can use it.

**TICKLES:** In my opinion consolidation is
good. I don’t see a billing system as necessarily a strategic IT investment as much as it is a commodity kind of investment. Of course I’m speaking in terms of a regulated utility business. Having more fixed technologies and being able to provide standards within the application, with a variety of billing options, is good. CIS is such a huge part of an IT infrastructure within a utility. Integration of that back to service, to work orders, wireless, back to all the technologies and applications across the company is a point of success for a CIS system. And having all that integration sitting there waiting for us is a good point. Now what starts driving you away from it is the thought that you’re going to buy best-of-breed applications. But I think with today’s technology, they’re building that type of integration back to their tool sets. They’re probably doing it in standard tool sets so you can still attach a best-of-breed off the edge of it, so I think it’s good.

Woo: In Ontario there have been some implementations of CIS in the last two or three years, brought about by our market opening. All the utilities in Ontario are considering consolidating their back offices, including CIS. We’re in discussions about that now, so we will be interested in what’s available when those decisions are made. All the utilities will consolidate on one CIS.

Yazdi: We built our own CIS at the time there really weren’t any players that could scale up to four or five million customers. Now that we have made the investments, we are maintaining that investment by doing technology upgrades as much as possible. We’ve added a lot of capabilities to our home-grown system, particularly in the area of call center automation. Those are off the shelf, but the main engine of our customer information system is designed and developed and maintained by us. Frankly, I don’t see us revisiting that in the foreseeable future.

Gogel: Since we are focused solely on getting ready to do our cut over next month from an existing Andersen/Accenture Customer/1 to a new Peace system which will replace our last CIS system, we’re not focusing on the BI component, although we are sensitive to it and know what we are going to do once we have that cut over done.

Klinger: We have had a database for many years and applied tools to that database to mine all the customer information that we do collect. It tends to be more around what utilities do and not much what the household is doing otherwise. But if we did know that information, we could put it somewhere and mine it. So I would say the answer is yes. It’s one of our more mature data warehouses.

MCDermid: We do a little of both data warehouse mirroring and actual run-time sourcing depending on what the data is used for and how real-time it has to be. But primarily we are building warehouses.
or data marts to provide that reporting capability and analytical capability to our users. The CEOs of two of our business units get next-day information about production. The one bit of real-time information that goes to our delivery business execs is customers out-of-service. So we do have a real-time view built so that at any time anyone in the organization can go in and see geographically how many customers are out.

**Tickles:** We’re able to extract the data out of it and use it in other tools if we need to, but I don’t think having it as an operational system and a data warehouse is an effective use of it. We have a minor outboard data warehouse, but we’re probably not using it as effectively as we should be. But we have the infrastructure there to build upon.

**Woo:** We do not do a lot of business intelligence because we are a distribution company. We are unable to sell to our customers for energy-related products. We are a separate company so we can’t mine our CIS for selling energy services. Basically we don’t do any of that.

**Yazdi:** We have an entire strategy around customers, and we are segmenting the customers using different criteria to try and determine how we serve them better, how do we reduce the cost of service, how do we anticipate their needs. That initiative is fairly comprehensive. It is tied to our business process integration initiative. It clearly requires segmentation of the customer information in our data warehousing capability. We have built some of those data warehouses, we need to build more to enable this initiative, but we have some in place.

**energybiz:** Do you think there will be a need to replace your CIS sometime in the future? If so, how far in the future? Are any studies currently under way? What has been your main disappointment with the CIS you now have? What are the most rewarding aspects of it?

**Gogel:** Not on my watch!

**Klinger:** The only thing that would make us replace CIS—and we look at it every couple of years—is growing operating costs there. Although I’d love to do it, when I look at the investment, and I don’t mean just dollars but also resources and distraction of management, it isn’t the place where we get the biggest bang for our buck. Consequently, we aren’t doing it. What would force us to do it is some kind of business change in Florida or some kind of acquisition or merger where we wanted to normalize our systems across a larger portfolio. At this particular point, our strategy is not to invest and get ready for that merger. If and when the merger comes we’ll see if we get something better from whoever we do it with, or the acquisition, or we make the upgraded systems part of the acquisition and we invest in it that way. There’s going to have to be some kind of external force to drive us to change our CIS, because in Florida doing the business we do, I don’t think anything out there is better than what we have.

**McDermid:** The good thing about them is they are functional, they’re stable, and they get the bills out every month. They do the job they’re intended to do and we have no plans to replace them. The
The challenging thing about them is that they are still very expensive to maintain and because they touch so many parts of our business, any business change or any business process change touches the CIS. So we have to keep a fairly large staff to maintain and enhance those two systems. We’ve had to develop in-house support. In fact, we had to hire some Andersen (now Accenture) and Price-Waterhouse people to come in and help.

**Tickles:** CIS is one thing we cancelled main-tenance on and moved that total support in-house. We don’t have any plans for major upgrades to the core CIS. We’ll do enhance-ments around it to the peripherals and interfaces to it. The advantage over our previous CIS is the ability to make rate changes much simpler — the capabilities it has for inter-facing back to bill print. There are several advantages to it over our previous one, but it’s not as flexible as we thought it was going to be when we first put it in.

**Woo:** We definitely are looking at central-izing all the back offices of various utilities in Ontario, and all of us will be converting to one centralized CIS. We will not be going to different CISs; we will have to agree on one.

**Yazdi:** I think our disappointments are behind us because our system has been in place for about five years. If you had asked this question four or five years ago when we were in the initial stages of implementa-tion, there was all kinds of noise in the sys-tem. But most of that is gone now, and we’re pretty happy with its functionality. The salient capability of our CIS system is that it is structured in such a way that it allows us to add rates and capabilities in a modular fashion. Its design is far more modular than the traditional monolithic type of CIS.

**Gogel:** How much do you anticipate spending on customer care management in 2005? How does that compare with one year ago, five years ago?

**Klinger:** Incremental costs are going up in maintaining the system, but overall they will remain about the same.

**Mcdermid:** Our spending has probably increased by 10 to 15 percent over the last couple of years because we have not spent enough on things like call center technol-ogy or core systems information. After going through Hurricane Isabelle and having many discussions with emergency response people, what we found out there was that they need better information. We’re working on that.

**Tickles:** My IT spending as it relates to cus-tomer care system and environment, billing systems, and service orders probably still represents about 50 percent of the entire IT budget. I don’t think that has changed over the last five years.

**Woo:** I think we are staying flat with our mandate to keep our costs flat. It’s not going up or down.

**Yazdi:** I don’t have a specific number, but we anticipate we will be spending about the same as in prior years. In our business pro cess initiative, we will be looking at customer care in a more innovative way, and decisions on what system capability would be required are yet to come.
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