



Effective IT 2006 Awards

Most Effective Use of IT in Utilities, Energy & Telecoms



WINNER

Sutton and East Surrey Water

Project: The Speech Recognition Project

Business goal: To use speech recognition technology to create a 'virtual call centre environment' that cuts customer interaction costs while enhancing customer services.

Project partner: Fluency Voice Technology

Dealing with customers is an expensive and resource-hungry business. Until recently, customers calling Sutton & East Surrey Water to pay their bills cost the company an average of £1.60 per call. And at peak times, the limited number of available agents meant customers were often kept waiting for long periods or told to call back later.

Towards the end of 2004, the company, which provides water to 270,000 customers in the south east of England, went in search of a solution and found the answer in automated speech recognition.

By integrating a speech-enabled call handling service from Fluency Voice Technology with its HiAffinity billing system from DST International, the company was able to automate much of its customer interaction at peak periods, cutting costs dramatically and freeing up call centre agents to focus on customer concerns that require more human attention, such as emergencies or complaints.

Customers calling a toll-free number are now identified and verified and offered several options, including bill payment by credit/debit card, balance enquiry and direct debit set-up.

The decision to employ speech-recognition, as opposed to a simple touch-tone system, was informed by the fact that speech systems are now relatively inexpensive to deploy – Sutton & East Surrey Water pays for its solution as a managed service by each successful call handled. And the fact that Fluency's software can be trained to recognise accents and local terminology, like the word "quid" instead of "pound", means the system's value appreciates over time.

Moreover, says customer accounts manager Nigel Hammond, "touch-tone systems are an anathema to most people. They hate them."

The system was immediately successful. In the first year, it dealt with 30,000 customers (22% of calls), cutting the average cost of a payment over the phone from £1.60 to 40p. That equated to a £2.5 million gain for Sutton & East Surrey.

For customers there are some real gains too: there is no wait-time as the system provides for an unlimited number of lines, and the service is available 24x7.

The company is now looking to expand the scope of the Fluency system. In the next phase of the project, it plans to introduce meter reading input, change of payment method and change of occupier.

The long term objectives to deal with all routine process calls through the Fluency system. "Anything that is transactional can be scripted," says Hammond.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

BP

BP's business demands the highest possible levels of control of often-volatile physical assets, in remote and risky regions. So BP has pioneered the development of sensory networks that combine RFID (radio frequency identity) chips and related technologies. The impact of the "Sensing Success" project is game changing, bringing £50 million in annual savings.

Orange

Few modern businesses are as competitive as today's mobile phone companies. Orange last year raised the stakes in the market with data warehouse technology from Netezza. It can now analyse a day's worth of market intelligence in 90 seconds and respond to customer enquiries in real time.