



SCHEDULING METER READS IN AN INCREASINGLY FRAGMENTED MARKET



The energy market in the UK is regulated by Ofgem the Gas and Electricity Market Authority. After many years of low prices, energy bills in the UK are rising and the tit-for-tat price hikes and reductions have had widespread repercussions. British Gas for example lost over 100,000 customers when it failed to adjust its prices in line with industry trends. Rising prices have encouraged consumers to change their suppliers on a regular basis resulting in the market becoming more fragmented. Ofgem has encouraged this competition so any supplier can supply gas or electricity and sometimes both to anywhere within the UK.

WESTERN POWER DISTRIBUTION

WPD is the electricity distribution company for South West England and South and West Wales, delivering electricity to 2.5 million customers over a 26,000 sq kms service area.
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One result of this market fragmentation is that the meter reading process has become more complicated. It is no longer possible for suppliers to read a meter at the beginning of a street and then move on to the next house. In practice the next read might be hundreds of yards or even miles away. Meter reads also have to be carried out during a particular time period to ensure that bills are accurate and generated on time. The fact that customers come and go and switch suppliers means that meter reading routes are never the same which makes the whole meter reading process more difficult to resource and manage.

When Western Power Distribution (WPD) won a meter reading contract covering over 200,000 properties in the South West stretching down to Lands End and up as far as Bristol, they needed to find a way to optimize their meter reading routes as cost effectively as possible.

“The volume and complexity of the meter reading process posed us a significant problem as the routes are always changing due to competition between suppliers in the industry, so scheduling the meter reads manually was no longer an option,” said Andy Shean Commercial Manager for WPD.

Having looked closely to see what was available in the market WPD chose 360’s Dynamic Scheduling Engine (DSE) to automatically generate the meter reading routes.

Each day WPD receives a file from the energy supplier for reads that need to be completed within the next three days. The reads are not ordered in any way.

This file is then loaded into an SQL database and passed through to the 360 DSE, which creates the meter reading routes. These are then passed back to WPD’s own ‘MAPS’ meter reading system, which sends the optimized routes to the meter readers’



PDA's over a mobile network. The DSE works to a set of complex rules and then generates routes by postcode area and by meter reader.

"360 have understood the intricacies and complex rules involved and enabled us to provide our meter readers with full eight hour work schedules, taking in to account start and end points and travel time. The system is able to cope with the volume of data, process it very quickly and demonstrate significant routing and scheduling efficiencies," continued Andy Shean.

With such a large area to cover, much of it rural, the onerous task of sorting through over 150 meter reads per reader per day has effectively been handed over to the 360 DSE. This has enabled the day-to-day management of this contract to be handled by a single person within the operations centre.

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