

Public Utility Saves Money and Improves Data Security with Electronic Archiving

A Washington public utility district has eliminated the space and cost required for archiving paper reports and greatly reduced the risk of data loss by installing an electronic archiving system. To avoid the rising cost of microfiche, the Cowlitz County Public Utility District (PUD), Longview, Washington, switched back to paper archiving but ran short of storage space and was concerned about a fire or other disaster that might destroy vital records. Cowlitz PUD evaluated a number of digital document management storage alternatives and selected the Metafile solution because it worked well with the AS/400 and provided full-text indexing which eliminated the need to determine in advance which field could be used to locate records.

"We now can produce multiple copies of our data on CD-ROMs and store them in secure locations, virtually eliminating the possibility of losing data," said Gary Seroshek, Systems Administrator for the Cowlitz County PUD. "Another major advantage is that we can provide better service to our customers and management by providing almost instantaneous access to needed information."

Cowlitz County PUD is a not-for-profit, customer-owned utility that provides electricity and limited water service throughout Cowlitz County. Cowlitz County is located along the Columbia River in Southwest Washington, to the north of Portland, Oregon. It is home to approximately 94,000 residents and covers 1,144 square miles. Cowlitz PUD was chartered through a Washington state law that gives the citizens of each county the right to form a PUD through a public vote. Currently, 23 PUD's provide electric service to more than 768,000 customers in Washington and five others provide water and/or sewer service only. Cowlitz PUD was formed in 1936 and employs 150 women and men, all residents of Cowlitz County. It provides 44,500 customers throughout the county with electricity and supplies water service to about 3,500 homes in the Longview and Kelso area. Cowlitz PUD's residential electric rate is 30-50 percent less than the rates of most utilities in the Northwest.

Cowlitz PUD maintains its financial records, including accounts receivable, accounts payable, payroll, inventory, and general ledger, on an AS/400 system. Managers, accountants and customer service representatives need to access these records on a regular basis. For example, when accountants are

creating journal entries for the current month, they often need to go back to a previous month's entries for reference purposes. The organization has always addressed this requirement by printing paper copies of the reports and distributing them to staff members. The problem with this approach was that the reports were lengthy so it could take a considerable period of time to sort through them to find the needed information.



Aerial view of Mount St. Helens from the north looking over Mount Margaret (US Geological Survey)

"The accounting department comes to me constantly and says: 'You can't believe how much time I saved today.'"

Gary Seroshek
Systems Administrator
Cowlitz County PUD

Industry:
Utilities



Metafile Solution:

Accounting
Vital Records
Customer Service
AS/400 Integration

Cowlitz Company Profile:

Public Utility District
44,500 Electric Customers
3,500 Water Customers
Established in 1936
150 Employees

METAFILE
Capture
Index Organize
Deliver™

<http://www.sbsusa.com>

Providing a permanent and secure archive of these records is another critical requirement which is governed not only by sound business practices but also by a state mandate that PUDs maintain different types of financial records for specified periods of time. In the past these goals were accomplished by filing paper copies of recent reports for use by staff members and delivering spool files to an outside contractor that created microfiche records that were stored in a secure location. However, the cost of the microfiche service has risen dramatically in recent years. Another problem with microfiche is that the fiche was often inaccurate which meant that Cowlitz PUD had to spend a considerable amount of time checking them each month. For these reasons the organization switched from microfiche back to paper as an archiving method, but over time it began to run out of space to store the paper records. Another concern was the security of the paper archives. They could have been destroyed by a fire or flood or other catastrophic event. A considerable amount of time was also required to retrieve the paper records from the off-site buildings in which they were stored.

Search for a solution

In an effort to solve the problem, Seroshek began investigating various products that are designed for the purpose of providing electronic archiving and retrieval of reports in the AS/400 environment. He identified 10 different products in this area and investigated them by obtaining product literature, reading reviews and case studies in magazines, and viewing product demonstrations. The organization's requirements included, first of all, the ability to capture both of the two major formats by which the AS/400 is capable of generating reports, standard printing and advanced function printing. Second, Seroshek was interested in a software package that could archive scanned documents, such as invoices from suppliers. This wasn't intended to be part of the initial implementation. The idea was that eventually the organization might want to image information other than was generated from AS/400 reports, and the ability to handle these needs from the same software package would be a major plus.

"After considering all of the options," Seroshek said, "we selected the Metafile solution. One key reason was the fact that this software package works very smoothly with the AS/400. Unlike most of the others that we looked at, it captures everything that the AS/400 can put out. Metafile also offers a powerful imaging system that works within the same architecture and user interface as their COLD product, providing us with a clear growth path to the future. Beyond that, the software is the only one of those we considered that provides full-text search capability. The other packages would have made it necessary for us to define in advance which fields in which reports our users could use to locate individual records and would have made it difficult or impossible to search on fields that hadn't been defined. With Metafile, on the other hand, users can simply type in whatever information they have, a check number, an invoice number, a date, a payee, or whatever, and call the record up in seconds."

Implementation and results

A Metafile service representative visited Cowlitz PUD. In only four days he installed the software, configured it to automatically capture, index and archive about 80% of the organization's reports, and trained the IT staff in how to administer the software, train users, and capture new reports. "Overall, the software was so easy to install that after it was in, we wondered if we had forgotten something," said Cathy Salisbury, IS Operations Supervisor. Several standard output queues were established on the AS/400, and reports that are intended to be archived are placed in these queues. Standard file naming conventions were established to identify the reports. To add a new report, a staff member simply puts it into the stream that is exported to the output queue, then goes into the Metafile administrator and establishes a definition for it. The entire process takes about 5 minutes. As of now, 91 users throughout the company use the software to view reports. They include 15 power users that use it every day, mainly in the accounting and also in the billing and collections department. "Our original idea was to use the viewer to replace microfiche, but as we became more comfortable with it, we realized that we could obtain additional savings by eliminating paper entirely for many reports," Seroshek said. Of the 189 reports that are currently archived on the COLD system, paper reports have now been completely eliminated for 25.

Seroshek said that the organization has substantially improved the security of critical records while saving time and money. "Now we can easily cut a CD that contains specified records and stick it in a bank vault," he said. "This eliminates the danger that we will lose important information if we suffer a fire or other disaster. While we may have been hanging out in the wind before, we are meeting the requirements to a tee now. Next in importance is the amount of time that we are saving throughout our organization. Instead of rummaging through filing cabinets or fumbling with a microfiche reader, our users can get information in seconds simply by typing in a keyword or two. The accounting department comes to me constantly and says: 'You can't believe how much time I saved today.' They can go out to a specific journal from a previous month and cut and paste the information into an Excel spreadsheet while in the past they would have had to type in each number from scratch.

Seroshek concluded that the support for the software has been excellent as well. "When we call with a large or a small problem, they provide the answer nearly immediately, he said. "All in all, we dramatically improved the security of our critical records while saving time throughout our organization."

"All in all, we dramatically improved the security of our critical records while saving time throughout our organization."

Gary Seroshek
Systems Administrator
Cowlitz County PUD