



"Technological, regulatory, and competitive forces lead utility executives to believe their companies will look very different in the next three, five, or 10 years. What will that change look like and how will the industry manage it? ^[1]

Everywhere in the industrialized world, the electric power and utilities sector finds itself pulled to economize and pushed to innovate — two goals that might seem to conflict, but that are actually in harmony. The pull comes from a prolonged downturn in consumer energy revenue on both sides of the Atlantic. ^[2]

The heat is on for energy and water companies

Top 5 challenges

- 1 Overcoming staff shortages
- 2 Securing payments & data
- 3 Fending off new competitors
- 4 Digital transformation
- 5 Richer customer experiences

Water, electricity and gas companies face a tough and uncertain 2019, as expectations soar and the demand to increase efficiency ramps up.

On one level, the utilities sector hasn't changed much at all. A similar number of US businesses and millions of consumers are essentially still buying the same products as 10 years ago. But the world outside has changed dramatically.

For energy, that means a big push towards renewables, smart meters, electric vehicles and other innovations. For the water industry, there are environmental and regulatory pressures, as well as competition in the market for non-household water retail.

However, you get the sense that whatever good is accomplished, it's never quite 'enough' to satisfy politicians, news organizations or social media. Rising tariffs, company profits, executive pay and any service blunders can easily whip up a storm.

The good news is that performance and perceptions can be transformed. In this report, we look at five areas for utility companies to conquer in 2019. Address any of these, in any order ... and you'll start to see the benefits coming through.

1 Overcoming staff shortages

In the face of an increasingly competitive market for talent generally in the US, the utilities sector looks set to face a major shortage of employees.

According to the Department of Labor, as much as 50% of the nation's utility workforce will retire in the next five to 10 years.^[1]

What's more 72% of energy employers are finding it difficult to find the talent to replace these employees. Between 30% and 45% of all energy employees state that the lack of experience and training is the reason for this challenge.^[2]

This could pose an acute problem for contact centers who need experienced staff to solve customer issues quickly.

How we help...

With skilled agents becoming scarce — and proving expensive to hire and retain — contact centers should rethink their strategy.

The best way forward is to free up your existing agents for those more important and complex tasks, while you take advantage of the new generation of Chatbots. With advanced artificial intelligence, these can handle many repetitive, resource-draining enquires.

This means your customers can get answers instantly and at any time of day or night. In another sector (retail), researchers have found that 78% of customer queries can be answered by bots, with no drop in customer experience.^[3]

At the same time, valuable information about your business can be captured within a powerful Knowledgebase which can provide your Chatbots and new

employees with a bank of correct answers. It's possible to enrich and fine tune this over time, selecting relevant words, phrases and responses to make sure your Chatbot will truly deliver.

General enquiries are another way your customers can help themselves to product or service information 24x7. This can include anything from how to report problems with their supply, to finding out what to do in an emergency.

2 Securing payments & data

The utilities world is used to dealing with legislation. But [GDPR](#), [PCI DSS](#) and other regulations pose big challenges at a time when customers want water and energy companies to be more open, accessible and transparent.

Security risks are rising too. Data breaches, card exposure, ransom attacks and other increasingly clever scams pose real dangers to water and energy firms. And any damage to a company's reputation will make it harder to hold on to customers.

How we help...

Data breach disasters and those involving people's card details are especially damaging. The best response is to reassure customers their data is protected and that your company has minimized the risk of

any breach. You need to consider how best to achieve your [PCI DSS compliance](#) to tackle the impact of a data breach.

Eckoh's PCI DSS compliant secure payments solution — [CallGuard](#) — along with patented [Audio Tokenization](#) or automated solutions — mean customers can be secure, whichever channel they use. We can even offer the same payment security with [Apple Pay](#), [Google Pay](#), [Paypal](#) or [ChatGuard](#) for Web Chat payments.

Meanwhile, Identification & Verification will help you to minimize the risk of fraud and identity theft — as well as reducing agent call handling times and operational costs. The service can work with other Eckoh security solutions and your CRM.

Eckoh also offers [Cloud Call Recording](#) so that contact centers can maintain call recording without compromising compliance to regulations, industry standards or best practice.



3 Fending off new competitors

Utilities companies want greater customer loyalty and satisfaction — so they can protect and grow their revenue streams.

But how's this possible when customers seem to be more fickle and harder to please? With competition increasing in the energy sector in particular, companies need to find a way to build lasting relationships.

As people's lives become more connected, so do their expectations of customer service. They expect to be able to engage in more natural and intuitive ways — and get answers 'in the moment'.

So while some consumers will always plump for the lowest cost — using comparison websites, for instance — others are searching for a better all-round experience.

How we help...

To fend off new competitors and increase customer satisfaction, utilities companies must be positive and proactive 24x7. Stepping in at the right time is critical.

Firstly, it's important to prevent customers from abandoning your website because they have unanswered questions. Services like Chat, Callback and Co-browsing can stop them leaving.

What's more, introducing a service such as Chat can be a game changer in virtually any marketplace.

In one business study, 44% of customers said that having a Chat specialist available during an online purchase was one of the most important features a company can offer. And 77% of customers said they wouldn't make a purchase if there was no Chat available.^[2] So it makes perfect sense that water, gas and electricity companies can use Web Chat, including [ChatGuard](#) for payments within Chat, to win new customers and help them to find the best tariffs.

Another way to get a competitive advantage is by making it easy for people to pay securely on any channel using PCI DSS compliant secure payments solutions which can include [Apple Pay](#), [Google Pay](#), [Paypal](#) or [ChatGuard](#) for Web Chat payments.

"Energy competition, also known as energy choice, exists in states where deregulation has been voted into law. Those competitive energy markets help to keep the energy industry innovative in its product and pricing options, inevitably benefiting consumers."^[1]

4 Digital transformation

The drive towards digital transformation is unstoppable in virtually every industry. Enterprises know that digitalization transforms relationships, leading to greater satisfaction and increased profitability.

Utilities companies can see the advantages. One study found that 76% of energy firms believe that digitalization will create more seamless interactions with customers across multiple platforms. However, researchers also found that 89% of respondents stated that siloed data was an issue they were facing.^[1]

How we help...

When it comes to customer interactions, it's possible for utilities companies to adopt a 'digital-first' mindset without excessive cost, risk and disruption.

More utilities companies are discovering they no longer need to replace their infrastructure if they want to innovate. Instead, hand-picked solutions can breathe new life into older systems, make use of data and deliver dramatic benefits.

Cloud-based Customer Engagement tools add layers of capabilities — and make use of the expensive hardware owned by consumers themselves. Meanwhile, a [Unified Desktop](#) will ensure your agents have everything at their fingertips.

"In a sector that is becoming increasingly digital, distributed and personalized, the door is wide open for truly innovative companies."

'Disrupting Utilities: Is it anyone's game?' - PwC ^[1]

5 Richer customer experiences

The utilities industry is unique: What other sector supplies its products non-stop — to virtually every customer in the country?

However, increasingly companies will have to provide customer service that operates 24x7 as well.

When it comes to delivering a world-class customer experience, the utilities world has lagged behind retail, finance and telcoms.



Today's business customers and consumers expect speed, personalization, control, useful tools and contact — all on their terms. Interactions won't just be about bills or complaints either.

Customers can be your friend or your worst enemy – depending on the quality of your engagement. According to research shared by ICM^[1], as many as 31% of people will post online after they have had a bad contact center experience.

How we help...

Each of your customer contact channels needs to be the best it can be ... and you need all of them in your armoury. Tasks should be quick, simple and secure as well as available 24x7x365 — whether it's about checking usage or working out which buttons to press on a meter.

Offering Omni-Channel solutions can be a massive differentiator for utilities companies. You can enable an easy customer journey across channels to suit people's lifestyles. You'll offer the channels they want, when they want them.

Customers can channel shift as much as they want, while you communicate with thousands of customers anytime, on any device, no matter where they are.

Whether it's Web Chat, SMS, Email or Automated, Self-Service IVR, seamless interactions will keep your customers engaged.

Meanwhile, services like Visual IVR can allow agents to send — rather than read out — more complex information, such as user guides and T&Cs, so interactions feel light and easy.

Using Knowledgebase content via web and apps, as well as implementing technologies like Chatbots, can deliver an accurate and consistent service across a large customer base, freeing up agents who can personally handle calls from more vulnerable or less tech-savvy customers to ensure they are not excluded.

If things are going wrong within your contact center, it's good to know early. After Sales Surveys can tease out accurate feedback on your phone, web and mobile channels.

Who we work with...



About Eckoh...

Eckoh is a global provider of Secure Payment and Customer Engagement solutions via our Customer Experience Portal as well as Third Party Support and Unified Desktop solutions. We've an international client base and offices in the US and UK.

We're experts in transforming contact center operations by delivering a better customer experience across every channel, boosting agent productivity, reducing operations costs and maximizing payment security. We've over 20 years' experience in contact center solutions and organizations rely on us every day.

Eckoh has been a PCI DSS Level One Service Provider since 2010, processing over \$1 billion of card payments annually.

Make every contact center experience satisfying and secure.



[1] ICM, November 2017