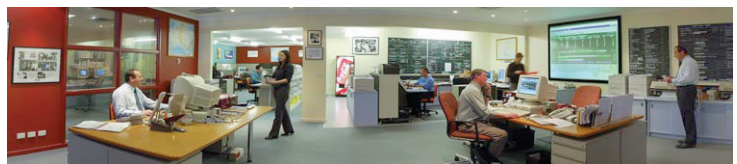


MCS Digital, Origin Energy partner in emergency call center in Victoria



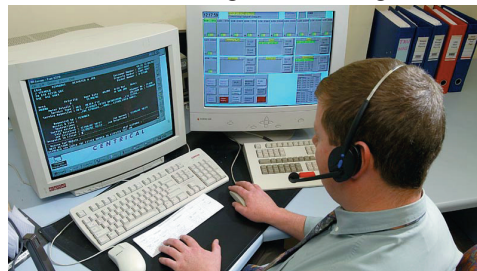
“The NRC serves seven major energy businesses that outsource their emergency call and field dispatch activities... nationwide.”

Shane Rayner

Like many state and national governments around the globe, the Australian state of Victoria privatized its government-owned utilities in the late 1990s. Among the assets sold off by the state government was an entity known as the National Response Centre (NRC), which had been established in 1972 to respond to Victorian emergency calls about natural gas leaks in the state.

“In 1999, Origin Energy purchased the NRC assets from the Victorian state government as part of the privatization process. The NRC is now operated as a “ring fenced” business unit of Origin Energy,” says Shane Rayner, Manager of the NRC.

As a result of the privatization, the NRC’s role has changed from being an



internal, reactive cost center servicing a single entity (the Gas & Fuel Corporation of Victoria), to that of being a commercially focused, proactive national service provider.

“The NRC serves seven major energy businesses that outsource their emergency call and field dispatch activities, not just in Victoria, but nationwide,” Rayner explains.

Some of NRC’s clients rely on the Centre for all their emergency call handling,

while others maintain their own call centers during normal business hours, but route calls to the NRC during off-hours. “In fiscal 2001-2002, we received more than 102,000 inbound gas emergency calls from all over Australia. We also handled another 88,000 non-emergency calls. Each of those calls was processed by an NRC response officer who took the call, assigned a priority to it, and either dispatched [Aussies call it ‘despatch’] a response team immediately or scheduled a latter dispatch,” says Rayner.

Radio communications essential
Integral to the NRC’s operations are radio communications for dispatch of individuals or teams to the scene of a gas leak or customer service request. “Before privatization, the NRC used its own UHF radio network in Victoria and southern New South Wales. Then, as now, other regions used a mix of owned and leased radio systems,” Rayner says. However, the government decommissioned and sold the 20-year old Victorian system in early 2000, and the NRC had to find a way to replace the network.

“We required access to a modern radio network that was both scaleable, and capable of voice and data transactions to and from the field,” Rayner says. Because of the emergency nature of the calls, the radio network also had to be extremely reliable. After some preliminary research into the matter, the NRC realized that

The National Response Centre in Victoria, Australia (right), has been responding to emergency calls about gas leaks since 1972.

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SYSTEM OVERVIEW

PRIMARY USE:
SMR system for utilities

CURRENT NUMBER OF SUBSCRIBERS:
400 NRC users; 1500 total

FREQUENCY: 800 MHz

CHANNELS: 55

COVERAGE AREA:
110,000 sq. miles

SPECIAL FEATURES:
Intrinsically safe portables;
mobile data

"We knew we had found the right radio system and the right partner to extend our business."

Shane Rayner

purchasing its own radio system was not feasible. "We just couldn't make the business case that we should construct, operate and maintain a new radio communications network ourselves. The cost was prohibitive," he says.

The NRC's search for a solution came to an end when they investigated MCS Digital's highly capable and reliable EDACS network. "We had heard good reports about the EDACS network that the Tasmanian Police and Tasmanian Hydro had installed between 1996 and 1998. We also knew that MCS Digital had a 17-site network in Victoria that provided coverage over more than 110,000 square miles," Rayner says. Most of the network's coverage was in Victoria, but it also reached into parts of South Australia to the west as well as north to the border towns of New South Wales.

Rayner says that it was clear that if it lived up to its promises, the existing EDACS network would be everything the NRC required, at least throughout Victoria and parts of New South Wales. Just as important was the fact that MCS was interested in developing a partnership with the NRC in order to further expand its network and to gain access to the same markets that interested the NRC.

EDACS thoroughly evaluated

However, before finalizing the deal in August 2000, the NRC conducted a thorough evaluation of EDACS voice and data capabilities by visiting three major gas and electric utilities in the US.

"We visited Consumers Energy in Michigan, Northern Indiana Public Service Company, and Texas Utilities in Dallas," says Rayner. Each of these utilities operates voice and data applications over EDACS networks. "We also visited the City of Honolulu in Hawaii, who uses an EDACS network for public safety and city services," he adds.

The visits were a success. "These visits confirmed what MCS had told us about EDACS' capabilities and reliability. We were very impressed by what we found from both a technical standpoint and from a business perspective. We knew we had found the right radio system and the right partner to extend our business."

Don Warring, MCS Director of Engineering, says the NRC and MCS were a perfect fit. "We had been providing radio communications to utilities and refinery operators throughout the region for years, and had invested about \$10 million (AUD) in our infrastructure. The EDACS network has a lot of capacity and we realized that partnering with the NRC would allow us both to expand our businesses," he says.

Rayner agrees. "We are both active in the utilities market and bring together separate skills. The NRC wants to build on its 30-year history of providing call center and dispatch services to the gas industry by expanding our operations into water and electricity utilities. These are the same markets that MCS serves. We complement each other with our separate expertise and together provide added value to customers."

For the future

In early 2003 MCS Digital added another site to their network, bringing the total to 18. Then in July, 2003, the NRC added Coliban Water, one of Victoria's regional water companies, as a client, and the company is actively pursuing other related utility providers throughout Victoria and the rest of Australia. At the moment, MCS is concentrating on areas already covered by the existing EDACS network. However, the company is keen on helping the NRC to grow by working on ways M/A-COM technology can help to bring down the cost of connecting the Centre to radio networks nationwide.

"Utility companies in all the different states around Australia use a host of different mobile radio technologies and many different vendors and operators. We're looking into ways that we might utilize NetworkFirst to help in our radio dispatch, for example. Since it provides interoperability to almost any system protocol, from any vendor and on any frequency, it may well prove to be extremely cost-effective to deploy. We'll just have to wait and see," says Warring. "In the meantime, we'll continue to provide cost-effective coverage over our 18-site network."

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