



## Self-Service Customer Service: **KCP&L's Award-Winning eServices**

*Customers really like being able to just dial up, look at their balance and pay their bill. It's the quickest and easiest way to pay the bill.*

Kansas City Power & Light Company (KCP&L), a wholly owned subsidiary of Great Plains Energy Incorporated, is a regulated provider of energy-related products and services for more than 490,000 customers in the Kansas City metropolitan area. KCP&L launched its web site ([www.kcpl.com](http://www.kcpl.com)) and introduced AccountLink®, a self-service account management tool, to residential and small business customers in 1996. Very quickly, KCP&L's web presence earned recognition, including being named one of the world's top utility web sites by Andersen Consulting and CIO Magazine, clearly demonstrating the sophistication and usability of the website.



AccountLink is a free web-based self-service through which customers can securely access personal account and billing information as well as make payments online. AccountLink users can view information such as:

- **Bill Comparisons** - View side-by-side comparisons of current and prior bills
- **Daily Usage** - Track usage by day
- **Transaction History** - View detailed, real-time account of billing and payment history
- **Bill Notifications** - Receive email notification when a bill is issued.

What makes AccountLink powerful is its integration with KCP&L's AMR technology. The CellNet-based AMR technology reads virtually all KCP&L meters daily, thus

providing daily usage information to AccountLink users. The combination of these two technologies provides real value-added services to customers. We spoke with Randy Vance, KCP&L's eServices product manager about AccountLink and other eService offerings.

AccountLink has been well-received by customers, with usage increasing gradually since 1996. While the eService was available in late 90's, KCP&L was somewhat ahead of the Internet billing curve. However, now acceptance and usage is growing rapidly. Approximately 12 percent of KCP&L's residential customers are registered.

As these customers log-in, they are not only able to look at usage, billing, and payment history, but they can quickly and easily pay the bill. Vance indicates that online bill payment is the primary driver of usage for AccountLink, "It's the fastest way to pay and customers like that best. Many want to pay the bill quickly to avoid late charges." AccountLink is simple to use, and compared to other payment channels, it's the quickest and easiest.

Some customers will never adopt online payment services, instead preferring to pay by automatic debit or check. KCP&L recognizes this and doesn't force the issue. For instance, KCP&L offers customers the option of eliminating the paper bill rather than forcing customers to give it up as a condition of use. KCP&L has found that sooner or later, as a natural progression, eService users will decide for themselves that they no longer need the paper bill. Letting them choose when this happens avoids dissatisfaction and complaints.



## Daily Readings Enhance eServices

Nearly all of KCP&L's meters have been automated (96% of meters) with CellNet's wireless AMR technology. The remaining meters are located in rural areas that require a different technology solution. KCP&L is currently pursuing a drive-by solution for these. In addition to providing on-demand reads, KCP&L's wireless AMR network also provides key information when there's a problem or a disruption in service. Each meter is equipped with a "last gasp" alarm, which alerts customer representatives to outages at each location. This helps KCP&L's outage management system pinpoint the source of a problem very quickly.

KCP&L has observed that many of its AccountLink users log on daily to keep an eye on daily electricity usage, in addition to paying electronically. Vance reports that many customers also download electricity usage into spreadsheets.

Recognizing the interest in energy management and conservation, KCP&L is interested in adding tools and reports to the site to help customers track and see the impact of energy efficiency initiatives. This will most likely accompany other service offerings such as distributed generation, weatherproofing, and load control. KCP&L is working with its public service commissions to gain the approval to introduce these new services.

## New Options for Key Customers

In 2000, KCP&L introduced AccountLink Advantage (ALA) for its key customers. Primarily in response to a growing need for summary billing, ALA is geared to customers with many accounts and

provides key services to support energy management. ALA offers account management, more control over billing and payments, energy history and benchmarking (12 month), bill comparison, daily usage, summary billing, interval load data, and real-time pricing.

About 60 percent of eligible key accounts participate in ALA—30 percent are frequent users and 18 percent of key accounts are paid through ALA. KCP&L has designed ALA so that it can be user-customized to include a company logo and other related information in the account management module. Additionally, ALA users can create account categories, apply general ledger coding, select paperless billing options for some accounts or all, and define who should receive email notification alerts (issued bills, payment reminders, and payment confirmation).

ALA users can pay bills in one of four ways electronically—EasyPay, web pay, web approve, and ACH push. Users can also select which accounts should be paid and how much to pay. KCP&L's Business

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The screenshot shows the AccountLink Advantage web application. The top navigation bar includes links for Contact Us, Privacy Policy/Security, Help, and Log Out. The user is identified as Barbara Harrington. The main content area is titled "My Accounts" and includes a "Welcome back, Barbara Harrington" message dated Sunday Oct 17, 2004. There are sections for "Other View Options" (Accounts by Category, Accounts by Due Date, 12 Month Summary), "My Accounts--View All", and "Report Options". A table displays account details with columns for Account Number, Address, Account Desc, Bill Due Date, Current Bill, and Acct Balance. The table includes a "TOTAL" row and a note that the data is valid as of 27-Jul-04.

Account Number	Address	Account Desc	Bill Due Date	Current Bill	Acct Balance
20354596	9711 W 128th Ter,Lc	101330.8010.01	08/05/04	\$19.52	\$19.52
20402271	10505 Metcalf Ave,Lc	101330.8010.01	07/22/04	\$92.01	\$0.00
34552925	9498 Nall Ave,Sc	101330.8010.02	07/15/04	\$102.51	\$0.00
34651365	11002 Quivira Rd,Dp01 Sc	101330.8010.02	08/04/04	\$46.57	\$46.57
54459744	13840 Quivira Rd,Lc	101330.8010.01	08/05/04	\$119.74	\$119.74
<b>TOTAL:</b>				<b>\$380.35</b>	<b>\$185.83</b>



Customer Call Center provides day-to-day telephone and email support for key accounts as well as ALA users.

Just last year, KCP&L introduced its newest eService—ApartmentLink, a specialized website for property management companies. Apartments represent a lot of activity and turnover for utilities, customers, and property management companies. KCP&L created a web service to provide the information for which these customers frequently call, including the handling of automatic on/off orders. KCP&L has designed the web site to match how services are delivered offline. A speciality group of representatives in the call center have been designated to support these users, both online and offline.

## Consolidation of Portfolio Improves Performance

About 2 or 3 years ago, KCP&L realized that management of various customer payment options was scattered among different departments. Additionally, customer research revealed that KCP&L payment options were not receiving good customer recognition.

As a result, all payment options were pulled together and managed as a portfolio of services. "Once we did that, we were able to organize and prioritize services, eliminating those that didn't make sense. Then, we were able to start promoting our electronic options and communicating with customers in a much better way," adds Vance. As a result, electronic payments have grown to 28 percent of retail revenue, up from 12 percent in 2002.

KCP&L is now able to manage and track usage of each payment service and demonstrate growth in certain services. "We

concentrate more on making them aware of these options, letting them decide what makes sense for them," states Vance.

It also helped KCP&L better understand the services that customers want, such as credit card payments. KCP&L is now working with its commissions to introduce a cost-effective credit card payment option for customers.

## Good Planning Pays Off

Vance recommends that companies pursuing eServices take the time to plan each service introduction, getting the right people together to organize the effort. This will make sure that the right processes are supported and that the new service doesn't cause a flood of calls to the call center.

Listening to your customers also increases acceptance and usage, and Vance recommends a structured approach. KCP&L conducts extensive customer research with every major product release. For instance, prior to the introduction of AccountLink Advantage, KCP&L conducted one-on-one interviews with its top 200 accounts, in conjunction with a service review initiative. The interviews identified the types of transactions that key customers would be interested in doing on the Internet. The feedback was used extensively in the design of ALA. KCP&L has followed-up over the

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performance in best performing companies is measured and reported clearly and concisely—employees have a clear idea of job expectations and performance.

In order to improve, meter reading performance must be measured and tracked. This includes individual measures of performance as well as group or departmental measures. Employees must understand the importance of their role in customer satisfaction—through accurate readings and bills, good company relations, and efficiently read routes. This importance should be communicated clearly and reinforced through performance metrics and rewards and incentives.

Make sure your meter reading processes, both the people and technology-driven processes are effective and efficient. Review work tasks, route standards, and systems periodically to identify opportunities for improvement.

Benchmarking performance is an effective technique to understand your meter reading department's level of performance and opportunities. Be sure to compare cost and service for a balanced view of performance (like the metrics in this study).

*You can purchase the results from this benchmarking study, **Meter Reading Profiles and Best Practices**, at our web site [www.ascentgroup.com](http://www.ascentgroup.com). Results are available in a printed and bound format, on CD-Rom, and online (downloadable pdfs). Contact Christine Kozlosky at the Ascent Group for more information 478-469-3950. *


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last two years with user group reviews of its heaviest users to identify enhancements to the web site.

In conjunction with a recent upgrade of AccountLink, KCP&L asked groups of users to test prototypes of the proposed changes. Additionally, small focus groups were convened to discuss the new features and to gather feedback.

Aside from customer feedback, KCP&L looks to web reporting and analysis to track usage. Although KCP&L has access to web log files and standard web traffic reports, Vance would like a more systematic way to analyze web usage, to really see how customers are using the system.

One design feature has proved very helpful in understanding how customers use the system. KCP&L attaches pertinent customer information to any emails generated within an AccountLink session. When an email is sent to a representative, it is flagged with the customer's account number as well as the module and webpages that have been accessed in AccountLink. This helps agents understand the context of the message, making it much easier to be responsive to inquiries and requests. Vance also receives any of the "hard questions" from users, as these usually indicate opportunities for improvement or clarification.

KCP&L's portfolio management approach to payment and billing options has helped the company be more responsive to customers. Future eService enhancements will provide online thermostat control, outage notification, service tracking, and payment arrangements. 

*...AMR implementation remains the top plan for the future, whether it's a partial or complete implementation, or just investigating the technology's potential.*