

Taming the Complexities of Business

Learn the 11 Key Benefits of a Central Workflow Engine





Last we checked, the largest carriers in North America – Verizon, AT&T, Bell, and others – were strong and getting larger. Numerous mid-tier telcos and cablecos are competing to win on a national and regional basis as well. So where does that leave the regional carriers in the lower Tier 2 and Tier 3 market?

It leaves them awfully busy and constantly on their toes.

The on-demand nature of the internet and cloud providers like Amazon has made commercial customers very impatient these days. And, to be honest, those commercial customers no longer care that the services you offer are far more complex to provision than the previous generation, or that you – as a regional provider – simply can't throw the same money and resources at problems as large carriers.



Customers are focused on results, so in order to compete you need to be extremely adaptable, smart, and able to make do with less.

And yet the opportunities to grow a regional provider business are clearly exciting:

- Demand for fiber and Metro-Ethernet services is high for all kinds of regional businesses, government offices, and college campuses;
- Hospitals are expanding their need for ICT services, including data services, unified communications, and video;
- Running data centers and helping move commercial accounts to the cloud is another growing market;
- Regional players are lighting up shopping malls, stadiums, ballparks, and private commercial communities with a broad range of voice, data, and internet services.

This paper is all about how regional providers can capitalize on all these growth opportunities by improving their sales-to-order and order-to-cash processes.

If you think about it, being excellent in those areas almost guarantees you will succeed.

This paper was commissioned by Northflow Solutions, which sells SuiteSolution, a workflow engine discussed in this paper and a solution deployed as the central integrator of the sales-to-cash process at several regional providers in the United States and Canada.



When the ILEC Business Got Interesting

Let's first take a brief moment to review how the business of ILECs and regional telecom provider has evolved — and how that's affected the back office systems needed to support a smooth sales-to-order-to-cash process.

To do that, we're going to look at the real-world challenges faced by HickoryTech, the former Minnesota ILEC, as it transitioned its business to support the greater complexity of serving commercial customers.

Two decades ago, HickoryTech's ILEC business was 80% residential, 20% commercial. And back in those days, commercial customers were easy to acquire because the regulators would protect your territory.

Service orders were very straightforward, too: a customer calls in and the support system provisions a phone line and LD. Later on, internet and TV were added and the rep would click a button and orders flowed downstream to operations and engineering.



But deregulation and the shift to serving commercial accounts greatly complicated things for HickoryTech.

At first, commercial sales in the new era went well. Salespeople and engineers would meet with customers to get their IT and network requirements.

Unfortunately, what worked for sales was often a nightmare for operations, engineering, and billing/collection.

The issue was that every order was different and every commercial customer had different expectations.

When the sale was closed and engineers handed off the order for operations to build, the true costs would end up being much higher than expected. So when the customer got the quote and bawked at the price, a costly rework cycle was needed to push the order through. And to continue operating in that manner meant the business would never scale.



Boil it all down, the key problem HickoryTech faced was poor information sharing.

Often the data to deliver an accurate customer quote was available, but the data couldn't be accessed in a timely manner. And the typical root causes were three:

1. The customer's equipment inventory was not accurate
2. The proper network facilities were not available at the location
3. A dozen other details were not nailed down properly

Meanwhile, sales sold services for whatever price they could get with only a fuzzy understanding of what could actually be deployed at the customer premise.



This lack of coordination among the various back end systems utterly killed HickoryTech's efficiency in the sales-to-order-to-cash process – and that led to significant revenue loss and major cash flow concerns.



Building a Solution from the Ground Up

So what could be done? Well, if the key problem is integration, then one option for HickoryTech was to buy an integrated COTS system that combines billing, order management, fulfillment, CRM and other support functions.

However, the integrated COTS product option was rejected. Not only was spending \$5 to \$10 million on a system too high, precious flexibility would be lost: if HickoryTech needed to enhance its system in a hurry to move in a new direction, it would be at the mercy of a large supplier's slow delivery schedule.

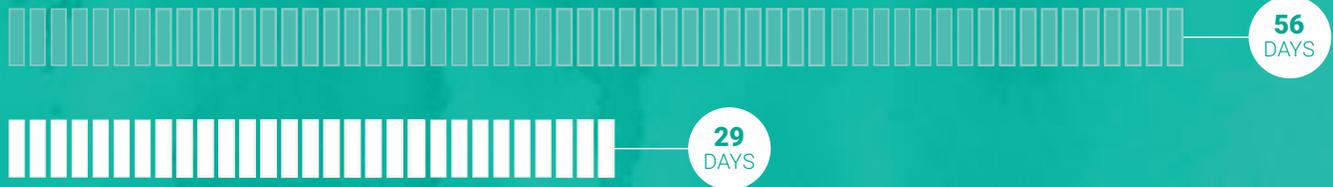
For these reasons, HickoryTech commissioned its internal IT team in 2001 to build out a new central workflow engine from scratch to deliver the necessary coordination among its many back office systems.

Today that same system is called SuiteSolution.

It's used by several operators, and continues to be enhanced and maintained by Northflow Solutions, an independent software company created in 2015 when HickoryTech was acquired by a private owner.



In the end, HickoryTech’s order-to-cash cycle time improved from an average of 56 days to **only 29 days**, delivering a boost to the company’s bottom line.



When HickoryTech started down the development path, it faced two key issues:

1. Too many variations of the same product were spiking up the cost of engineering and maintenance.
2. The starting point for too many orders was a piece of paper between the salesperson and a customer, leading to all sorts of billing errors.

SuiteSolution solved these issues by distributing operational data and workflow tasks to the various departments responsible for performing their part of the order flow.

The solution also let HickoryTech mix and match products and services to simulate the delivery of tailored solutions for customers.

What’s more, the system was designed to capture best practice processes so they could be repeated the next time a similar product was ordered. And in that way, ordering is done in a consistent and operationally efficient manner.



Workflow Engine in Action

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ow that you know the business problems that led to the importance of a central workflow engine, it's time to hear commentary from the expert champions of the product.

To set these dialogues up, Northflow connected the author to a half-dozen clients, each of whom were interviewed about their business and sales-to-cash challenges.

In the next few pages, you'll hear peers explain the 11 key benefits of a central workflow engine and how they used workflow to grow their revenues and improve their sales-to-cash processes.



1 Guide Sales to Deliver “Custom” Services

The key challenge in serving any commercial account is that each customer expects to get a customized offering, even though a telco can never make money operating that way.

The beauty of the Northflow system, however, is that it manages all the product components of an order.

Customers think they are getting custom services, but in reality the services they get are Lego block creations from standard products in your catalog. What’s more, the workflow engine simplifies the management of many regulatory and market-specific product variations to make it look like one product for the customer.



Workflow is also key to create guided selling for each service, thereby ensuring the accuracy of orders and dramatically shortening sales-to-bill cycles.

One operator explained their program this way:



Guided selling helps us because integrated access can be sold probably a hundred different ways, but if the right item codes are entered into billing, it's accurate and efficient. It helps us get things fulfilled quicker. **The big payoff is that the customer is much happier.** They know what they ordered, and if the first bill arrives and it's close to exactly what they signed, that's a relief."



2 Share Data to Speed Order-to-Cash

Though different systems are used by different departments and people, information is shared so that every person involved in the order/follow up process has definite time lines assigned.

At one operator, this greatly helped organize their work:

By having everything go through the order process, we can track orders continuously. **Everybody now knows what they have to do and when they have to do it.** We also improved the accuracy and completeness of our records – and that’s huge.”

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3 Intelligently Cross Sell & Enable User Control

Having access to accurate and timely data is a big enabler to cross-selling and pushing products that fit the “lifecycle” of individual customers. Workflow helps in a couple ways. First, it advises salespeople on what products clients have so they can recommend the next logical product to pitch. And second, workflow delivers a rich self-service capability.

Here’s one operator’s experience:



A strong self-serve capability is crucial for our consumer customers: we want to give them the ability to make changes to their services whenever they want, and in that way truly control their services.”



4 Arm Salespeople with Accurate Data

Good salespeople constantly push the limits of what can be delivered to customers, and in that way they move a telecom organization forward. But these days, if salespeople don't have an accurate inventory of products and services available in each market, they're at a big disadvantage.

Here's one operator's perspective:

Knowing what products are available by geography is **really helping our salespeople succeed**. While a dedicated Ethernet service is available in a region, a switched Ethernet capability may not be available because the equipment is not deployed there yet, so not having that level of detail hurt our sales-to-order process.”

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5 Improve & Monitor Processes via Reports/Dashboard

Mature users of the Northflow system are adept at creating their own reports and dashboards. Average time-to-complete metrics are calculated and bottlenecks are identified to fine tune processes.

Here's what one manager had to say:

“

We're probably one of the more sophisticated users of the SuiteSolution system. We've produced over one hundred different reports and dashboards. For instance, we created order-pipeline and quoting-sales dashboards. **These are beautiful for catching things that enter the danger zone.”**



6 Better Customer Engagement

By steadily automating and improving processes, a workflow engine enables the vital business shift from “order processing firm” to “customer service firm”. The goal today is to simplify front-end ordering tasks so care reps are free to talk to live customers and in that way serve them better.

Here’s one operator’s perspective:

We’ve done everything we could to take away the heavy documentation burden.
... It not only saves time, it also simplifies later analysis of the customer behavior and call center activity.”

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7 Maintain Data Integrity Across Departments

A central workflow system can only deliver its full benefit when there's highly accurate and complete data behind it. When the workflow system is first deployed, legacy data often passes through conversion filters dozens of times to ensure its integrity is rock solid. Then, as new data is entered in, controls are inserted to ensure departments maintain the accuracy of the data they're responsible for.

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8 Consolidate Systems & Reduce Skunkworks

When the information in transactions systems is incomplete or can't be delivered in a timely fashion, people find their own way of getting things done — and they do that by inventing their own spreadsheets, email tracking methods, etc. But if you let these skunkworks proliferate, you lose efficiency and the business can't grow. Consolidating on fewer and more integrated systems is key.

According to one manager we spoke to:

We selected a central workflow engine because we were gearing up to greatly ramp up the business. And by putting the tool in the middle, it helped us get there. We not only got rid of the ad hoc systems, **we also converted six or seven systems into just one.**

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9 Promote Team Collaboration

A key secondary benefit of having good workflow and information sharing is that the departmental teams start thinking and acting in a more collaborative way.

Here's what occurred at one organization:

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Pushing data out to the departments has really helped people collaborate on projects **so we're not behind the eight-ball so much.** Rather than waiting for one team to finish before the other begins, they're working in tandem. People have gained a greater appreciation for the impact of their decisions on the other stakeholder's mission.”



10 Optimize Use of Engineering Talent

The wise deployment of network engineers and support people allows you to compete for enterprise business with Tier 1 carriers. For example, you can become a high-end Cisco reseller and install/deploy VoIP services for large hospitals or build tailored solutions for SMBs.

One operator manager explained it this way:

Our size has allowed us to employ some exceptional engineering talent. **And we used those technical skill sets in every corner of our business:** IT, our equipment business, transport capabilities, and fiber network.

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11 Consolidate Billing Systems

While central workflow is the key capability operators buy from Northflow, the company's billing system is often used to consolidate the multiple billing systems that have mushroomed in many organizations.

The chief benefit is reduced system maintenance costs and an improved ability to do cross-product discounts. You can send a unified invoice, for example, across wireless, wireline, internet, and flavors of IPTV or digital TV.



Here's what one exec had to say about consolidation through Northflow's SuiteSolution:

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Telcos have a very hard time consolidating billing systems. We started out with four, and I think we are one of only a few carriers offering a variety of service types who has been able to get down to one system. **Today when a customer joins us, we create the service with one bill.** It gives us a really good view of what the customer has and an ability to offer them bundled discounts.”



About SuiteSolution

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rowing a regional communications provider business is a big challenge. Indeed, success requires a highly skilled team and systems that enable efficient data sharing and task coordination.

But as we've seen, a solid workflow engine is useful to taming the complexities of the business. And the expert commentators we interviewed gave many fine examples of how a workflow platform can be put to profitable use.

Indeed at each of their organizations, Northflow's SuiteSolution is the central workflow system that optimizes and glues together their sales-to-order-to-cash processes.



So to sum up, then, here are the main benefits of SuiteSolution:

Increased efficiency & customer satisfaction

- Arm salespeople with accurate information about the facilities available at the customer premise.
- Deliver services both tailored to your customer's requirements and synchronized with your operational processes.
- Get your highly-skilled people working more efficiently and acting as a team.
- Improve your cash flow by 10% or more.

An optimized and accelerated sales-to-order-to-cash process

- Deliver operational data immediately — throughout your organization — so each member of your team is working with the most up-to-date information.
- Enforce best practice workflows for complex orders.
- Reduce your order fulfillment time by up to 50 percent.

Consolidated billing and CRM systems

- Manage wireline, wireless, data and IPTV services from a single platform.
- Achieve a 360 degree view of your customers.
- Generate operational metrics and KPIs.
- Eliminate the cost and overhead of multiple systems.



SuiteSolution is by no means a standalone system. In fact, the system was designed with multi-vendor support systems in mind.

Northflow's product focus is primarily on order processing and workflow, while billing and customer service functionality are available if the operator needs it.

A number of leading Tier 2 and 3 operator software tools are already pre-integrated with SuiteSolution in areas like facilities/workforce management, network design, point-of-sale, service activation, assurance, and trouble ticketing.

Partners today include CircuitVision, SaskTel, ClickSoftware, Kadence, Master Merchant Systems, and CHR Oasis.



Outfox Your Competitors

The fox is a cunning creature, known for its agility, resilience and cleverness. A company needs those same attributes in order to succeed in the competitive world of business. At Northflow Solutions, we provide the necessary tools for you to become more agile, more resilient, and more clever.

Ultimately, we'll help you navigate the wilderness of customer service technology.

To learn more about how SuiteSolution can tame the complexities of business, please contact us at **inquiry@northflowsolutions.com**.



About the Author of this White Paper:

[Technology Research Institute](#) is an analyst firm that has followed developments in telecom software and services since 1994.



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