



Automation Where It Matters

Streamlining Fleet Operations Through Practical Innovation

By AMEREN ILLINOIS VICE PRESIDENT ERIC KOZAK

When people talk about innovation in the utility industry, the conversation usually focuses on grid modernization, advanced analytics, distributed energy resources, or artificial intelligence. Those technologies are certainly important. But some of the most impactful improvements in utility operations happen in places that rarely get attention – the everyday processes that support the crews and equipment keeping the lights on.

One example is fleet operations. At Ameren Illinois, fleet is a critical but often invisible part of our organization. We serve roughly one million electric customers and about 800,000 natural gas customers across a service territory covering approximately 44,000 square miles – an area larger than the state of Indiana.

Supporting that territory requires thousands of pieces of equipment, including nearly 1,800 vehicles that crews drive every day, hundreds of pieces of construction equipment such as backhoes and trenchers, and roughly 1,000 trailers to move equipment around the system.

Keeping that fleet running safely

and reliably is a significant operational undertaking. What many people may not realize is that behind every repair, replacement part, and vendor service is a transaction that must be processed, documented, and tied back to the specific vehicle or piece of equipment. Those transactions add up quickly.

The Challenge Behind the Scenes

Across our service territory, we rely on both internal mechanics and external vendors to maintain fleet equipment. With dozens of operating centers spread across Illinois, not every location has a dedicated fleet garage, which means outside vendors often support maintenance activities.

Each time a vendor performs work, they submit an invoice. That invoice

must be paid and also entered into our fleet management system so we can track maintenance histories and ensure accurate records for each vehicle.

The volume is significant – nearly 25,000 invoices each year. Historically, those invoices were processed manually. Employees entered invoice information into our financial systems and then manually entered the same information into our fleet database so the maintenance history for each piece of equipment remained accurate.

It was a necessary process, but it was also time-consuming and repetitive. For employees performing the work, it meant hours of manual data entry every day.

Innovation from the Front Lines

An Ameren team of employees responsible for processing those invoices every day recognized that robotic process automation – commonly known as RPA – might be able to handle much of the repetitive work. RPA software can read

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digital documents, extract key information, and enter data into systems automatically, replicating the actions a person would normally perform.

It's important to note that the push to innovate and automate the process did not originate in an executive strategy meeting or a corporate technology initiative. Instead, it came from the people performing the work who recognized that there had to be a better way.

Rather than waiting for a formal project to begin, the team worked directly with colleagues in our digital organization to explore the concept. Within about six months, they had built a pilot program that could read vendor invoices and process them automatically.

By the time they presented the project to senior leadership, the system had already processed more than half of our annual invoice volume – nearly 12,000 invoices. That kind of initiative and ownership is something every leader hopes to see in their organization.

Real Results from Practical Automation

The operational impact was clear almost immediately. Automating invoice processing saved roughly 2,000 labor hours in its inception, the equivalent of about one full-time employee's workload. Those hours did not disappear; instead, they were redirected to work that provides more value to the organization.

Accuracy improved as well. Because the automation system reads invoices directly and enters the information into our systems, we significantly reduced the potential for errors that can occur during manual data entry.

Processing time also improved. Vendors receive payment more quickly,

and maintenance records are updated faster, giving fleet managers a clearer view of equipment status. But the most important impact was on the people doing the work.

Instead of spending their time entering data, employees are now analyzing spend, improving fleet processes, and supporting other operational needs. That shift has created a greater sense of ownership and engagement within the team.

Automation Without Fear

One of the lessons I take from this project is that automation does not have to

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be something employees fear. In fact, the success of this initiative depended on employees embracing automation rather than resisting it. The team understood that removing repetitive work would allow them to focus on higher-value responsibilities.

That mindset is critical as our industry continues to evolve. Utilities across the country are facing a growing workload – modernizing infrastructure, integrating new technologies, and managing increasing expectations around reliability and affordability.

Automation will play an important role in meeting those challenges, but it should be viewed as a tool that enhances the workforce, not replaces it.

The Value of Starting Simple

A key takeaway is the value of starting small. Today, it seems every conversation in technology eventually leads to

artificial intelligence. AI will certainly play a major role in the future of utilities. But sometimes the most effective solution is the simplest one.

Robotic process automation is not AI. It does not require massive new systems or complex enterprise deployments. Instead, it provides a targeted way to improve specific processes.

By focusing on a clearly defined operational problem – fleet invoice processing – we were able to implement automation quickly and demonstrate measurable results.

A Model for Continuous Improvement

The success of this effort has already sparked conversations about where similar automation might be applied

elsewhere in the organization. Any process that involves repetitive data entry or standardized transactions could potentially benefit from the same approach.

This project highlights how innovation can emerge from any level of the organization. In my experience, the people closest to the work often have the clearest understanding of what needs to change. When organizations create space for those ideas to surface – and support employees who want to pursue them – innovation becomes part of the culture.

That is ultimately the biggest lesson from this project. Sometimes modernization is not about the next big technology deployment. Sometimes it is about empowering people to rethink the everyday processes that keep our operations running – and giving them the tools to make those processes better. 