

Invoice Processing Automation at ista North America

Datacap Taskmaster Increases Productivity and Breaks into New Market Opportunities

With costs of energy and other utilities rising, many property owners are concerned about managing these expenses efficiently. One approach is to use a utility management company that conducts energy audits and manages billings. Ista North America (formerly USIEnergy) of Norcross, Georgia provides such services to residential and commercial property owners in the United States, as well as to branches of the U.S. military. Among the services provided include capturing and storing all water and energy use data, information essential for creating best energy management practices.

Ista North America consolidates bills from multiple utilities, simplifying management for property owners. Each invoice is individually audited to verify consumption, bill amount, due dates, and service period dates, a process that often reveals operating inefficiencies. Once an invoice is authenticated, it is processed for payment. All utility bills can be viewed online, giving customers the flexibility to view invoices 24 hours a day. Finally, after analyzing all the data captured, ista recommends ways to help landlords reduce cost and improve the overall performance of their properties.

The Challenge

Since hundreds of different utility bills arrive in paper form every day, ista needed a data capture solution that can handle variable and unstructured forms. The invoices take shape in many different layouts, so a system that relies on the location of each field is not effective. Traditional document imaging technology requires template-driven data analysis; consequently, these systems produce outstanding results with standard forms but are less reliable in a more dynamic environment. Ista elected instead to use Taskmaster for Invoices from Datacap which utilizes rules-based data analysis to locate and extract data from highly variable documents.

For example, to find an invoice date, rules within Taskmaster trigger a keyword search that looks for the words "invoice date" or a series of aliases. Once found, a rule prompts the system to look to the right or below for a date. A validation rule verifies that it fits the formatting for a date, and if it checks out, the system populates the field. Ista selected Taskmaster, with its rules-driven architecture, because it demonstrated that it could easily capture variable invoices and its "open code" enabled ista engineers to customize the system to meet their very demanding invoice processing requirements.

"Taskmaster is more efficient and effective in capturing the data," says David Richitelli, Vice President of Client Services. "We are able to capture about 25 percent more data on a daily basis than we were when we were manually keying it in."

The Solution

Taskmaster significantly expanded ista's ability to capture, process and manage data. The solution reduced the burden of invoice processing, improved turnaround significantly, and essentially eliminated data entry errors. According to Richitelli, however, the most important benefit is the company's ability take on additional work and expand into new markets. "We went from serving 820 utilities and processing about 4,000 invoices per day to 1,700 utilities and over 4,800 invoices per day, that's a 20 percent increase in volume."

Taskmaster enabled ista to process this additional workload without the need to increase headcount. "The automated system is much more efficient than manually keying the data, so we redeployed staff to handle work in new areas," explains Richitelli.

With Taskmaster, ista teams can do more work more quickly. Even with increased volumes, Richitelli reports turnaround has been trimmed by about day. "The entire process used to take three days and now it takes only two."

The quality of data captured has been improved with Taskmaster as well. "Errors went from about five percent down to less the one percent," notes Richitelli.

With these significant improvements, ista found that the return on their investment was quick. "ROI on the software was only a matter of months," Richitelli explains. "We had some other costs that we had to build in for developing the interfaces with our existing database, but even with these broader investments the payback on the project was only about a year and a half."

The Result

Taskmaster has worked so well that ista has been able to use it to reach new, previously untapped, market opportunities. Recently, the company began offering building mangers on-site scanners so that their invoices can be captured remotely and uploaded to ista via Taskmaster Web, a Datacap solution that uses a browser-based interface. This system saves time and postage costs, and reduces the likelihood of invoices being lost.

"We were previously focused exclusively on large property owners, but Taskmaster Web has allowed us to expand into a middle market of smaller apartment communities across the country," says Richitelli. "These customers are less interested in having us pay the bills, but wanted us to capture the data, audit it and report it. Taskmaster Web has given us a lot more flexibility to expand our service and take advantage of this market opportunity."

Ista provides scanners free of charge to customers as part of its SCANI!™ program. Using Taskmaster Web, property owners can now scan and electronically transfer all utility bills to ista for their Utility Expense Management services, rather than incurring the expense and delay of shipping.

"Ista North America selected Datacap because Taskmaster is a proven, powerful tool to better capture, process, and manage the information that is so important for our clients," says ista Founder and CEO Michael Anderson. "We invested in this technology because we saw a way to better serve our clients. Increased production, more accurate data capture, a more streamlined workflow - all of this means the people we work for will be able to save more money and make better energy management decisions."

Richitelli agrees. "We starting out with Datacap five years ago and we are very please to be working with them. They are always looking for ways to improve their product and for ways to help us be more efficient. It's really a partnership and the *SCANit* service was a direct outgrowth of that partnership. We capitalized on the opportunity to expand into new markets and new services that Datacap provided with their products. In less than a year we have made a huge impact. We are anticipating a 30 percent growth because we are now servicing an entire market that we have not previously tapped into."

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