



CLIENT CASE STUDY

Digitising the UK energy sector: How the proactive use of programme and technical assurance has brought continuous improvement to a major transformation programme



Energy & Utilities

Richard Hilton, Director of the Switching Programme at Smart DCC, explains the added value of real-time, independent assurance in this complex, digital upgrade for the UK energy sector. By treating assurance as a strategic tool, rather than a box-ticking exercise, Expleo has become a critical friend of the delivery team.



Introduction

The Smart Data Communications Company (DCC) are delivering the core systems required for the Ofgem-led Switching Programme, that will allow customers to change energy suppliers faster and more reliably. Consumers will be able to switch their energy supply within 24 hours, leading to increased market competition that will encourage savings for consumers. Expleo is supporting the Smart DCC in the design, build and test phase of the programme, as Core Systems Assurance partner, working with industry service providers

and Smart DCC's suppliers to ensure systems are functioning, changes are delivered according to timelines, and risks are identified and mitigated.

Richard Hilton has led the transformation programme for Smart DCC over the last two years, adding to his 15 years' experience in senior operational and programme management roles, including far-reaching change programmes at Vodafone, BT and M&S.

“This is the kind of high-profile transformation that you read about in the newspapers when they go wrong. We are determined that people are reading about us for the right reasons. In its simplest form, we are helping to digitise the current UK energy market, so that consumers can switch suppliers more easily and get the best deal possible.”

Richard Hilton, Switching Programme Director, Smart DCC



Expleo assures the programme for all of the parties under integration, including 27 Distribution Network Organisations (DNOs) as well as more than 20 central system providers for whom Smart DCC owns the delivery.

Expleo is also assuring over 160 energy supply companies through its management consultancy business, Moorhouse Consulting. The vast number of parties for integration is the greatest source of complexity on the programme, as each party must interface with a new national system that will process all the live data moving forward.



Why independent quality assurance matters

Throughout the COVID disruption, the programme has managed to maintain delivery targets. *“This is down to close collaboration and coordination,”* explained Richard. *“On the assurance service the transparency feeds the energy in the room. There are no unpleasant surprises, because any news in the update reports has already been discussed and actioned in the meetings.”*

Richard was quick to give credit to the regulator Ofgem, who pushed hard for an independent assurance partner from the start. *“They were spot on with their judgement. Bringing in Expleo was never about having a spy to report on possible problems. Rather, we anticipated fast, incremental changes. That decision encouraged a continuous improvement mentality in the programme. We are now quick to take a step back. Is this the right choice? Is everyone aligned?”*

Richard admits to having his head turned on assurance. *“When it becomes a box-ticking exercise, delivery partners can become guarded against sharing information, as they see the assurers as watchdogs, rather than colleagues. Assurance can even impede open conversation, and cause delays and confusion. With their end-to-end, integrated assurance, Expleo has brought a different level of expertise.*

They are actively involved in all meetings, where they are valued for their independent opinion. There can be no secret agenda, side conversations or rehearsed version of events. This programme is moving rapidly, so it makes a huge difference to gain insight as change happens, rather than responding to challenges later, when they are harder to fix.”

Edward Charlish, Expleo's energy and utilities lead consultant, repaid the compliment. *“Having full visibility and the backing of Smart DCC has really helped our team to work at their best. We're able to add so much more to the process. Part of the reason that assurance becomes a tick-box exercise is that assurers are held at arm's length and don't get access to the full detail of information.*

“For the Switching Programme, we have enjoyed the opportunity to work in a proactive, ‘shift-left’ way. That’s when clients get the most out of assurance.”

Edward Charlish
Energy and Utilities
Lead Consultant, Expleo

Real-time assurance is a source of valuable momentum

The programme is constantly seeking out opportunities to improve incrementally, and Expleo is on hand to provide assurance, feeding recommendations in real time. *“This means that any recommended actions are made pre-assured,”* said Richard. *“Working concurrently, without the usual back-and-forth, is a source of valuable momentum.”*

On occasion, Expleo has flagged up examples of misinterpretations by individual parties. By responding rapidly, these lose the momentum to domino into more serious problems. *“Any gaps in understanding might appear quite small, but they can have large ramifications, as they are a key input into the next activity,”* explained Ivan Ericsson, Expleo’s lead quality specialist. *“The repercussions might not show for six months. When the right relationships are in place, partners will take the guidance on board and then move forward. In my experience, clients that proactively procure assurance do so with a level of confidence. The approach of the Smart DCC delivery team speaks volumes about their self-belief in their own competence to succeed.”*

Expleo was also commissioned to deliver an additional testing health check for Smart DCC. The outputs were then shared with the whole programme, in full transparency. *“You don’t do things like this unless you have full trust in your assurance partner,”* added Richard. *“Expleo has challenged the milestones with the planning sessions. Is that a realistic time frame? Did you achieve it that quickly last time?”*



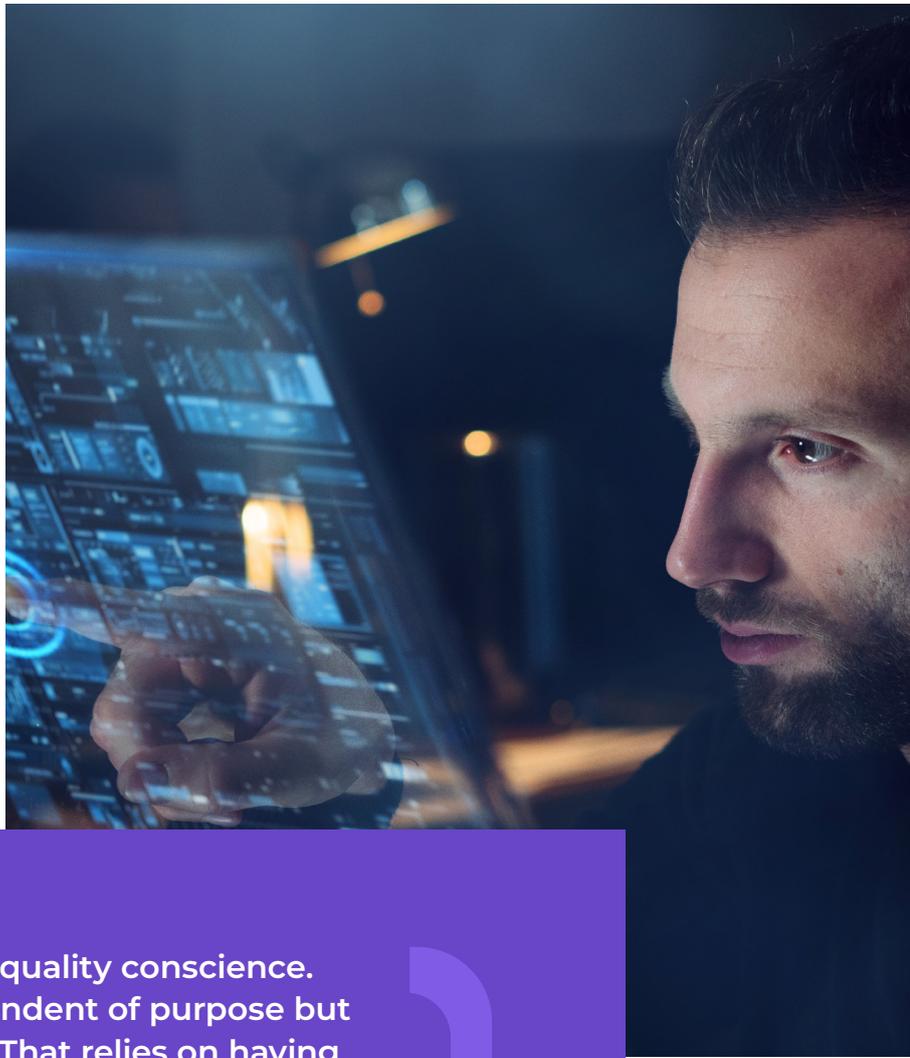
“Optimism bias can creep into major transformation programmes, so it’s important to have an independent adjudicator who will hold your feet to the fire. All of this impartial advice helps me too, as director, as I can then be more persuasive with customers or partners.”

Richard Hilton, Switching Programme Director, Smart DCC

Quality conscience with impartial analysis

Expleo provides more than error reports. *“As a critical friend, they have identified genuine areas for improvement,”* said Richard. *“However, it’s not all negative feedback. They’ll say: this has worked well here, so why don’t you do it over there too? Expleo also provides a second pair of eyes. For example, they mobilised their in-house code scanner following our request, which revealed several important software glitches that we could then iron out. If we found those gremlins later on, the costs could have proved severe.”*

Ivan stressed the need for assurers to ask difficult questions from a testing and quality perspective:



“We aim to provide a quality conscience. Our goal is to be independent of purpose but not isolated of activity. That relies on having the freedom to offer impartial advice, but also the scope to talk to the full range of suppliers. We want to provide solutions, not just flag problems. This might not be optimal... but have you thought about this? That’s where we gain maximum job satisfaction.”

Ivan Ericsson, UK Head of Quality Assurance, Expleo

Expleo also brings in-depth understanding of big transformation programmes in the energy and utilities sector. The team also share lessons and ideas from other sectors, while drawing on delivery programmes that stretch beyond just assurance.

“That adds technical depth and expertise,” said Richard. *“Expleo has brought real seniority and experience within the team. I genuinely expected more junior team members than there are. Having the right person in the right role is always essential.”*

“We believe clients gain a better risk coverage from what we call a *top down* and *bottom up* approach to assurance. That means providing senior strategic insight to help guide progress in line with client needs, alongside the technical ability to make a practical difference day-to-day. We pride our service on its continuous, digital approach. Independence is critical for the value we add, bringing true findings that lead to actionable guidance, rather than compromised feedback.”

Rachel Eyres, Business Unit Director - Energy and Utilities, Expleo



As the programme moves forward towards user testing, Richard predicts more of the same. *“I would expect Smart DCC to adopt this model on other programmes too, as we have experienced first-hand the importance of what assurance brings to the table. Building transparency and trust encourages open and honest discussions. I whole-heartedly recommend fully integrating an assurance partner into a major transformation programme, and using that assurance team as a strategic partner to deliver value, rather than a tick box exercise.”*

The legacy of the Switching Programme will be felt in the household budgets of millions of families across the UK over the next generation. As the country shifts to a greener energy mix, in line with carbon reduction targets, this transformation will encourage citizens to prioritise sustainable energy suppliers.

Getting the user experience right will play a critical role in helping the programme to realise its massive potential for positive change. Proactive programme and technical assurance is central to that success.

For further information, or if you have any other questions, please write an email to info@expleogroup.com

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