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The Buyer's Guide to Utility Data Services

How to get actual and complete data for energy, water and waste services. For use in expense management and Scope 2 and 3 emissions reporting.

"You can't manage what you don't measure."

Utilities play a critical role in business, providing electricity, natural gas, water and waste services. Today there is an increasing need to capture data on this consumption, arising from our greater focus on reducing costs and reporting emissions.

The challenge is to get the data. Every utility has a different bill format, and governmental regulations often dictate the use of terms and phrases that are opaque and confusing.

The numbers tell the story. In the U.S. alone there are over 2,000 electric utilities with over 52,000 different rates. Each rate schedule has different charges and metrics, leading to a different bill format. And, there are over 148,000 water utilities and 16,000 wastewater utilities in the U.S. Each of these will have 3 to 10 rate schedules.[1]

While the U.S. is clearly a fragmented market, there are over 7,000 electric utilities globally and hundreds of thousands of water utilities. The huge variation in utility bills that prevents easy automation is a global challenge.

And finally, about 15% of all utility bills presented to businesses are summary bills e.g. bills that cover multiple service locations, multiple service periods, and/or multiple energy suppliers. Summary bills must be unpacked, with usage tracked back to the point of use. It takes deep expertise to untangle this complex bill format.

So, for a business looking to prepare data for emissions reporting or expense management, the key challenge is invoice variation. It is quite difficult to automate such incredible variety, or to accurately capture this data by hand. Utility bill complexity defeats DIY-type efforts.

[1] *CISA*, *OpenEI*, *EIA*

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Businesses today are getting some of the data they need from utility bills – after all they are paying the invoice. Here is a quick look at how they are capturing data, and the limitations of each for energy and water management and emissions reporting.

Standard Accounts Payable (AP) Systems

Whether in-house or outsourced, AP teams may use an automated invoice data capture solution, but in practice only 30% of invoices are processed without a human intervention, and nearly all utility bills are thrown into an exceptions pile for manual data entry.[2] The utility bill format is simply too different from an ordinary invoice to be easily automated. AP systems typically capture just enough data to pay the bill, not the usage and cost data needed for expense management and investor-ready reporting.

Specialized AP Providers

Because utility bills often have a short grace period between statement date and due date, many businesses have arranged for the bill to be sent directly to a specialized AP provider who will process the bill and prepare a file for payment. With a focus on quick turnaround, very little data is captured from the bill. In almost all cases, the data is processed again by a second provider for use in expense management and investor-ready reporting.

Direct Data from the Utility via EDI

Large utilities offer an Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) file to large customers. However, this data transmission is brittle, and needs full-time staff to monitor and support at the customer side, and the data is sparse and error-prone. This is not a universal solution.

Direct Data from the Utility via API

This service may be available from some utilities, but in the U.S. it remains fragmented, slow and poorly supported. There is no national standard, so each utility has a bespoke API, significantly increasing costs. Outside the U.S. use of utility APIs is more reliable and standardized.

Energy Management Services Provider

Many businesses have two work streams for utility bills: an AP provider and an energy management services provider. The energy management company reduces energy expense and, as a byproduct, captures data. The customer does not have an independent source of data, it relies on the provider to reduce costs and track savings.

In Sum

This complex landscape makes it difficult for a business gather utility bills and prepared investor-grade sustainability data. The vendor processing the bill may not have an audit-ready workstream. Nor is it likely to capture the granular data needed to operationalize energy and water reductions. The complicated format for waste data in ESG and sustainability disclosures requires a specialized method.

Businesses are looking for a focused, purpose-built solution that will simply take the utility invoices, process them appropriately, and deliver a report-ready data file from an audit-ready system.

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The Checklist

FEATURE	NOTES
PRIMARY DATA CAPTURE • Direct Utility Connector • Automated Enterprise Connector • SFTP • API	Look for a service that can do all of these methods. Even within one business, multiple approaches may be needed to capture all of the Primary Data (e.g. original data) sources.
DATA FORMATS • Native PDFs • Scans • Photos • CSV, XLS • JSON	Again, look for a service that can do all of these formats. No business wants to run two systems – one for PDFs, and one for other formats!
INVOICE TYPES • Utility Bills • Business Invoices • Landlord Invoices • Data Center Invoices • Non-English Languages • Non-Latin Characters	Utility data can be provided by the utility, by the landlord, or others. You'll need a service that can take in all types and handle your global footprint, too.
TYPES OF PRIMARY DATA • Electricity • Water • Waste • Energy from non-utility suppliers • IoT sensor data • Sub-metering data	A single solution for all incoming data keeps it simple for you. And if you add IOT monitoring or sub-metering later to help with energy and water reductions, you'll want a system that can handle this data type.
CUSTOMIZATION • Prepare customized data formats • Add site codes, GL codes and so on • Add other business data to integrate with business systems	Your data must flow into other systems to be truly useful. Look for customized formatting for seamless integrations. Plan on using sustainability data broadly across the business as it often provides additional operational efficiencies.

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FEATURE	NOTES
TECHNOLOGY • Automated data pipeline • Machine learning (e.g. AI) • Semantic analysis • Data customization • Data governance & compliance	Look for a service provider who uses a modern suite of technologies in a highly automated system that can provide documentation on compliance. Too often, a utility data service is nothing more than manual data entry in a semi-automated system, leading to delays and errors.
ONBOARDING • How long to first data? • How long to completion? • Does onboarding lay the foundation for data health and auditable data?	Look for a service with a documented onboarding procedure, so you always get the best practices from their previous customer experiences. Expect a clear project plan and completion within one business quarter.
SUPPORT & SLAS • Data turnaround • Data quality concerns • Data fixes	Look for an SLA with data turnaround in days and a rapid response cycle for any data quality issues. Look for clear communication on these matters, don't be in waiting and chasing mode.

Ready to Talk with GLYNT about Utility Data Services?

Please contact us at info@glynt.ai.
We'd love to hear your data story.

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The Sustainability Data Company

GLYNT is The Sustainability Data Company, producing investor-grade data for businesses around the world. Our audit-ready sustainability data enables accurate reporting, operational efficiencies and access to financial capital. With a purpose-built machine learning system, GLYNT is the automated solution for all types of water, waste, energy and emissions data. Speed work, lower costs, and power ESG, carbon accounting and other business systems with accurate, actual data from GLYNT. Learn more at glynt.ai