Improving the Service Quality of the Billing System for Water Suppliers. Case Study: Albania

MSc. Alesia NAZAJ¹

European University Of Tirana

Abstract

The Water Supply sector in the Republic of Albania uses billing systems to fulfill its main role, generating the monthly water bill. This study aims to empirically analyze the dynamics that the billing system has and the importance of adding a new module to this system on the most frequent questions that users usually have and seeking support directly from the system without having to make phone calls or send emails at limited times. This is because the system has many functionalities and based on experience, users do not use the user manual but seek direct assistance from the company with which they have a support contract. It is also worth mentioning the newest reform in the Water Supply Sector, where the structuring of all Water Supply will be done by joining certain units. This merger will cause new users to be added to these systems so the need for a new module in the system is necessary. For this reason, the questionnaire was conducted with the staff of fifteenth water companies where the company where I worked offered the service of the billing system and has an active

¹ Alesia Nazaj has successfully completed her Bachelor's degree in Business Informatics from the European University of Tirana. Subsequently, she pursued her Master's degree in Information Technology with a specialization in Business IT. Throughout her academic journey, Alesia has been recognized as a distinguished student of excellence at the European University of Tirana, actively participating in various extracurricular activities. During her master's studies, she demonstrated her commitment to professional development by gaining practical experience as a Business Analyst Quality Assurance at Kreatx, where she outperformed for over a year. Her role involved ensuring the quality and reliability of business processes and systems, showcasing her attention to detail and analytical skills. Presently, Alesia is employed as a Quality Assurance Engineer at B2Tech, where she continues to contribute her expertise in ensuring high standards of quality and performance in software development processes.

support contract. For privacy reasons, no images from the system will be presented in this paper. The results of the conducted study confirm the importance of adding a new module to the system, the customer care module for the billing system.

Keywords: Billing system, Water Supply Sector, Customer Care, Support.

Introduction

A billing system for water suppliers is software or a group of processes used to calculate and generate invoices for customer water usage. Water suppliers utilize billing systems to efficiently track customer payments, calculate and charge consumers for water consumption, and manage other billing-related operations. Tools for managing clients, creating bills, reading meters, and calculating tariffs are usually included. (Smith, 2022).

In addition to functions for rate control, online payment processing, billing dispute resolution, and reporting for financial and operational analysis, water suppliers may employ billing systems. In order to speed up procedures, some billing systems may additionally communicate with other systems like meter reading devices and accounting systems.

The target group for the billing system, or the system's users, is closely related to this article's objective. Due to having a complete understanding of the billing system and being in constant contact with clients, it has been found that helping with system use is highly important and regular. Additionally, it has been concluded that the combination of the Water Suppliers will result in an increase in system users. Therefore, assistance will be essential (Johnson, 2023).

The purpose of this paper is to enhance the billing system's customer service, which will be made possible by the addition of a new module for the support component. Despite the existence of certain generic academic articles on information systems, it has been observed from the review of all the literature that there is a dearth of genuine scientific publications that examine the billing and water supply systems in Albania.

Literature Review

In the context of this literature review, an information system is a collection of interconnected components, including hardware, software, data, people and processes, that work together to gather, store, manage, process, and distribute information within an organization. According to Miller and Turner (2018), some key features of a Water Billing System are:



Correct Meter Reading and Billing - The amount of water consumed by each customer should be precisely calculated by the water billing system. Meter readings should be able to be recorded, and the system should be able to compute use fees using tariffs and produce bills accordingly.

Flexible Tariff Management - A system for water billing should enable administrators to create variable rates depending on several criteria, including location, customer type, and water usage. Complex tariff structures like variable rates, tiered tariffs, and time-of-use tariffs should all be supported by the system.

Customer Management - An accurate view of client data, including contact information, billing history, and consumption patterns, should be available from a water billing system. Also, it should make it simple to update customer information and handle payments while managing accounts.

Analytics and Reporting - A water billing system must offer thorough reports on revenue and water usage patterns. The reports should be able to be modified and offer information on consumption trends, revenue forecasts, and revenue collection efficiency.

International Billing Systems

Below is a comparison of the two international billing systems, their features and importance, which are used by Water Utility Companies.

1) Elster AMCO Water:

According to Elster AMCO Water (2023), it products contains a number of significant characteristics, including:

- AMI or advanced metering infrastructure: Smart water meters from Elster AMCO Water have AMI features, enabling remote meter reading and real-time data collecting. This makes it possible for utilities to more effectively monitor water use, find leaks, and optimize water management.
- Water flow may be measured accurately using Elster AMCO water meters, which also provide accurate data that can be used for billing, monitoring, and conservation efforts. They use a variety of methods, including positive displacement, ultrasonic, and electromagnetic, to provide precise measurement even in difficult settings.
- Tamper Detection and Prevention: "Elster AMCO Water meters have advanced meter security features, anti-magnetic tamper sensors, sealable enclosures, and other tamper detection and prevention features to guard against unauthorized entry, tampering, and meter fraud" (Elster AMCO Water, 2023).



- Elster AMCO Water meters are created from high-quality materials to ensure durability and long-term performance. They are also built to endure harsh climatic conditions. They are made to be resistant to external conditions including temperature changes and water intrusion, ensuring dependable functioning throughout an extended lifespan.
- Data collection, storage, analysis, and visualization are all made possible by Elster AMCO Water's comprehensive data management and analytics solutions, which are provided to utilities. Billing, demand forecasting, leak detection and general water resource management can all be done with the help of this data.

2) Sensus FlexNet Water:

According to Sensus (2023), Sensus FlexNet Water is an all-encompassing advanced metering infrastructure solution for water utilities that is created to offer effective and dependable water metering and data management capabilities. Sensus FlexNet Water has several important features, including:

- Two-Way Communication: This system has two-way communication capabilities, making it possible to collect data in real-time and read meters from a distance. This makes it possible for utilities to remotely monitor water usage, find leaks, and improve water management.
- Communication Network: FlexNet, a strong and dependable mesh network built on open standards, is the name of the dedicated, secure and scalable communication network used by Sensus FlexNet Water. This network provides two-way communication with water meters, data collectors, and other utility devices and guarantees dependable data delivery.
- "Sensus FlexNet Water uses smart water meters, which are outfitted with cutting-edge metering technologies like ultrasonic and electromagnetic, to precisely and consistently monitor water flow" (Sensus, 2023). These meters can record precise consumption information and offer perceptions into patterns and trends in water use.
- Data collection, storage, analysis, and visualization are all included in Sensus FlexNet Water's comprehensive data management and analytics capabilities. To aid in decision-making, utilities can use this data for billing, demand forecasts, leak detection, and other aspects of water management.
- Sensus FlexNet Water features built-in algorithms for leak detection that can identify unusual water usage patterns indicative of probable leaks. Having access to real-time alerts and notifications about suspected leaks allows utilities to respond quickly and save water.

3) Comparison of these two systems

Solutions for water metering and utility management are available from the brands Elster AMCO Water and Sensus FlexNet. But there are certain distinctions between the two that may be compared in terms of their primary characteristics, features and advantages.

- Elster AMCO Water provides precise water measurement and monitoring using a combination of mechanical, electronic, and smart metering technologies. Sensus FlexNet, on the other hand, is a wireless communication network that collects, transmits, and analyzes data using advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) technology.
- Sensus FlexNet is renowned for its scalability, which makes it ideal for utility providers controlling water meters across a large geographic area. It can manage large-scale deployments with thousands of endpoints. On the other hand, Elster AMCO Water might be more suited for smaller-scale deployments or places where wired communication infrastructure is already present.

To sum up, Sensus FlexNet Water is an all-encompassing AMI solution that offers cutting-edge capabilities for precise water metering, dependable data communication, effective data management, and efficient leak detection, assisting utilities in streamlining their water management operations and enhancing customer service.

Albanian Billing System

According to ERRU (2023), as it works to give its people access to clean, safe and dependable water services, the Republic of Albania's water supply sector has several opportunities and problems. The size of the property and the number of residents is used to calculate the monthly cost for residential clients in Albania. Business clients, on the other hand, have their bills calculated according to how much water they use. The Albanian Regulatory Authority of the Water Supply and Wastewater, which oversees overseeing the Albanian water industry, determines the tariff rates.

The following are some significant elements of Albania's water supply industry:

1. Infrastructure and Service Coverage: Albania's water supply infrastructure requires major investment and renovation due to its relative age. Many water delivery systems experience water losses, unpredictable service, and inadequate coverage in rural areas as a result of aged infrastructure, poor maintenance, and inefficient operations.



- 2. *Regulatory Framework:* The Water Law and other pertinent laws serve as the cornerstone for the management of water resources, water supply, and wastewater. Albania has a legislative and regulatory framework in place for the water supply industry. Yet, there are still issues with governance, enforcement, and the development of regulatory organizations' ability (ERRU, 2023).
- 3. *Tariffs and Financing:* The comparatively low cost of water supply services in Albania makes it difficult to sustainably finance the industry. Several water supply businesses experience financial instability, poor revenue collection, and a lack of funding for infrastructure maintenance and improvement projects.
- 4. *Water Quality and Safety:* The Albanian water supply industry places a high premium on maintaining the safety and quality of drinking water. While improvements in water treatment and monitoring have been made, there are still issues with testing for water quality, meeting drinking water requirements, and dealing with water pollution and contamination (AKUM, 2022).
- 5. *Access to Water Supply:* In some rural and distant areas of Albania, access to a safe and consistent water supply is still a problem. Water supply services are being extended to underserved areas to expand service coverage, resolve access disparities, and protect vulnerable people.
- 6. *Institutional Capacity and Governance:* Albania's water delivery sector confronts difficulties with institutional capacity, governance, and stakeholder cooperation. To improve the overall performance and sustainability of the sector, water supply corporations, regulatory organizations, and other pertinent bodies must be strengthened.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, there are chances for Albania's water supply sector to develop and flourish. This includes "making investments in infrastructure upgrades, stepping up regulatory enforcement, enhancing service providers' governance and financial sustainability, fostering public-private partnerships, improving water quality and safety and guaranteeing that everyone, especially in underserved areas, has access to a reliable water supply" (ERRU, 2023).

Customer support module

A feature that helps customers with their billing-related questions, problems, and concerns is called a customer support module in billing systems (Cassandra, Hartono and Karsen, 2019).

It is intended to simplify the billing procedure and provide effective communication between the billing department and clients. The business must



be reliable and have sound policies in place if it is to offer all consumers the best professional service possible. The most crucial step in becoming sustainable is developing a company vision that includes customer service. The company's vision must be informed by an understanding of client needs.

In its simplest form, Customer Care can consist of a phone number and a person who can resolve customer issues in real-time. According to Peterson (2019), this approach does not scale well, so more advanced customer care involves a customer support module on a billing system that performs some or all the following functions:

- *Ticket creation:* The customer uses the Customer Care module to create tickets for a specific issue and in this way, the issue is tracked until it is resolved by the support team.
- *Answer:* Staff answer customer questions submitted in Customer Care tickets and solve their problems.
- *Escalation:* When a support member cannot resolve a request, the next step is to direct the ticket to another team member or escalate it to another level. Escalation of a ticket should occur only after the first responding Customer Care personnel have verified their resources for resolving a customer problem.
- *Knowledge base:* Customer Care staff use a knowledge base to find out if a customer problem has been analyzed and if so then what the corresponding solution is. Staff must be able to add and update content to the knowledge base as they discover new customer requirements.

In larger companies, Customer Care may consist of a customer service team. This is a set of experts that Customer Care uses to track the status of tickets created (Peterson, 2019).

Any company or organization that engages in consumer interaction should have a customer support module. It is the first line of defense for responding to consumer questions, resolving problems, and offering support and it is crucial to ensuring client satisfaction and loyalty. According to Cassandra, Hartono and Karsen (2019), these are some major justifications for the significance of the customer support module:

Fixing Consumer Problems: The customer support module oversees resolving client problems, which might include everything from technical issues to product questions to financial concerns. A favorable relationship with consumers may be maintained and possible customer complaints can be avoided with prompt and efficient handling of client issues.



- *Increasing Customer Experience:* Increasing the entire customer experience can be done by offering good customer assistance. Customers are more likely to feel valued and happy with their encounters with the company or organization when they receive timely and courteous assistance. Increased consumer loyalty and repeat business may arise from this.
- *Developing Customer Trust:* A responsive and dependable customer care module can aid in increasing client trust in a company or organization. Consumers must have faith that their issues will be handled quickly and effectively. Trust is an essential component of customer relationships and can help with longterm client loyalty and retention.
- *Managing Reputation:* The customer support module is crucial to managing a company's or organization's reputation. Good customer experiences with the customer care module may result in favorable reviews and recommendations, which may improve the company's standing and draw in new clients. On the other side, inadequate customer service can result in unfavorable evaluations and bad word of mouth, which can harm the company's reputation.
- *Receiving Customer Feedback:* The customer support module provides a method of receiving beneficial client feedback. Customer comments and grievances might reveal ways to improve a business's products, services, or processes. This information can be used to make the necessary modifications and improvements, which will lead to the company's growth and overall success (Cassandra, Hartono and Karsen, 2019).
- *Handling Emergency Situations:* The customer assistance module is essential for handling client questions, concerns, and complaints in emergency situations. Rapid and effective response to crisis situations can assist in reducing possible harm and preserve client trust in the company or organization.

For these reasons, the customer support module is crucial for businesses and organizations since it has a direct impact on client happiness, brand loyalty, and general success. Offering first-rate customer service can result in improved customer satisfaction, boosted customer confidence, a good reputation, and priceless consumer feedback. In order to achieve customer happiness and corporate success, it is a crucial element of customer relationship management and should receive the proper attention and resources (Cassandra, Hartono and Karsen, 2019).

According to Anderson (2020), billing system can also be integrated with other systems such as:

• *Integration with the fiscalization system:* After the closing of the billing period, i.e., after the monthly invoice is generated, the fiscalization process is performed. This process means that these invoices go in real time to the tax



system thus ensuring transparency. After the completion of the fiscalization process, several distinguishing elements are activated on the invoice: NIVF code, NSLF and QR code (Fiscal Service, 2023). Only after the invoices have a successful fiscalization status, subscribers can make the payments of the invoices at the cash desks of the Waterworks or at third parties.

- *Third-party payment integration:* The billing system can be integrated with third-party systems such as Western Union, MoneyGram, second-tier banks, etc. These payments are automatically entered into the system and are reflected in the cash register module as well as in the corresponding reports.
- *Installment Payment Agreements:* The system provides the possibility for a subscriber's debit to be restructured to create opportunities for repayment in installments. A subscriber is called a debtor if he has unpaid bills. For this, the Agreements concluded between the subscriber and the Water Company for making payments in installments can be registered in the system.
- *Creation of discount invoices:* In cases where a subscriber has been billed incorrectly, discount invoices or return invoices can be made in the system. If a discount invoice is made in the invoicing system, then this action must be accompanied by a corrective invoice in the fiscalization system (Fiscal Service, 2023).

Methodology

The purpose of the survey utilized in this study was to find out how customers felt about the value of customer service in a billing system. To guarantee its clarity and usefulness, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a small sample of clients. In order to learn more about how consumers feel about the value of the customer support module in the billing system, the survey responses were statistically examined. For the realization of this study, two types of primary and secondary data were used. The primary data consists of the construction and data analysis of a questionnaire which will be carried out with the employees of the different Water Departments in Albania, as these are the users of the billing system.

The questionnaire was answered by 100 users, employees of the following Water Supplies:

- Bulqizë Water Supply
- Delvina Water Supply
- Devoll Water Supply
- Dibër Water Supply
- Durrës Water Supply



- Elbasan Water Supply
- Kamëz Water Supply
- Kavajë Water Supply
- Krujë Water Supply
- Mallakastër Water Supply
- Patos Water Supply
- Tropoja Water Supply
- Vlora Water Supply
- Vora Water Supply
- Gjirokastër Water Supply

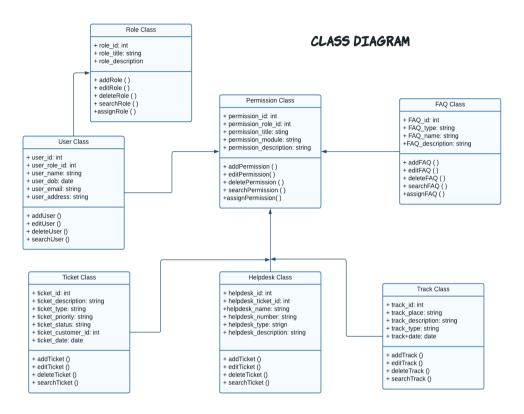
The secondary data is related to the review of the literature that consists of various sources such as books related to the field of research, publications in scientific journals, reports of various institutions, Water Suppliers Sectors and relevant Entities which present facts and statistics on the issues addressed, etc. An important place will also be occupied by the data published by the National Agency of Water Supply (AKUM). Based on this reform, there will be a restructuring of the water supply in certain directorates. A concrete example is the Durres Regional Water and Sewer Society (AKUM, 2022).

This directory will have these units: Durres Unit, Kavajë Unit, Krujë Unit and Rrogozhinë Unit. Therefore, from the current four different Water Suppliers Sectors, there will be one single directorate. According to AKUM, at the end of 2023, it is expected that directorates from the above list will be created throughout Albania. During the research done for the reference sources of this study, an obvious lack of literature about this topic in Albania was observed.

For the description of the structure of the system on the added functionalities, a class diagram has been realized below, modeling the classes, attributes, operations and the relationship between the objects.

This diagram shows all the classes that will make up the new customer care module, as well as the functions that each of these classes will have. A user in the system has a certain role, in addition to that role, the user also has certain rights. Based on these rights, they operate in the system. The Ticket, Helpdesk, and Track classes relate to entitlements. While FAQ (frequently asked questions) is a separate class which is not directly related to Helpdesk because it is foreseen that it can only be processed by support users. Each class has the basic functions of adding, editing, deleting and searching as well as other functions based on the role they will have in the system.





The Billing system is accessed by all Water Suppliers' employees and by persons authorized by the company that provides this service and has an active support contract. Each user in the system has a defined role and each role has corresponding rights.

The admin user will have full rights in the new module, i.e., they can access and perform all actions in the customer care module. Also, another user is the support user who has more specified rights in this module. Specifically, the support user has the following rights: Helpdesk management, ticket management, ticket updating, FAQ updating, accessing the FAQ page, and accessing the status of the ticket in its follow-up. As for the client, it is the other user who has limited rights to this module. When he accesses the module the first thing, I can do is look at the FAQ and look there for the question he has in case it has been reviewed before by others and has an answer. If the customer looks in the FAQ and does not find the question, he has then he has the right to create, edit or delete a ticket. Also, after creating a ticket, the customer has the right to monitor the progress of the milestones, i.e., to see if he is being seen by a support specialist, if the answer has been given, etc.



Empirical analysis

Below will be shown how the new module that will be added to the system for customer support will work. The customer care module will be organized into two interfaces, FAQ and Help Desk.

If you click on FAQ, then the most frequent questions that users of the billing system may have will be displayed with the corresponding answers. The customer care module will operate on a milestone basis. Therefore, if you click on Help Desk, you will be given the opportunity to create issues through milestones.

When a user in the case of a customer will click on the customer care module the FAQ interface is initially generated so that before I create a ticket I see if the question he must ask will be part of the page. In this interface, the client has the right to search by setting a word in order to find a specific question. On the other hand, users in the case of admin or support specialist, in addition to viewing or searching for questions, will be able to do the following actions:

- FAQ editing: In case a milestone has the completed status, then support specialists can add it to the FAQ interface.
- Deleting the FAQ: Deleting the FAQ in case the interface is structured.
- Misassignment: In the case of a support specialist following the issue but at a certain moment he will delegate it to a colleague of his, then there is the possibility of assigning another user.

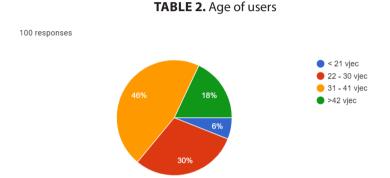
A customer has the right to create, edit or delete a ticket in the Help Desk interface. In the created checkpoint I will be able to fill in the following data:

- Milestone number: this number will be unique and through each one the milestones will be identified.
- Milestone description: in this field, the client's request for support or his problem can be described concretely.
- Milestone priority: consists of a dropdown menu where the priority of the milestone is selected if it is high, medium or low priority.
- Milestone status: indicates for the milestone if it is being reviewed by a support representative and the status is in progress, if the issue has been assigned to another support specialist or if a response has been returned to the customer and the milestone is complete.
- Date of creation consists of the date of creation of the milestone by the client.
 - Prioritization of questions: Through this functionality, it will be possible to prioritize questions based on their importance, specifically high, medium and low priority.



- Monitoring the status of milestones: After creating a milestone, the customer has the right to monitor its progress, i.e., to see if the issue raised by a support specialist is being investigated, if the answer has been given, etc.

Below are presented the questions contained in the questionnaire and the corresponding analysis based on the answers given.

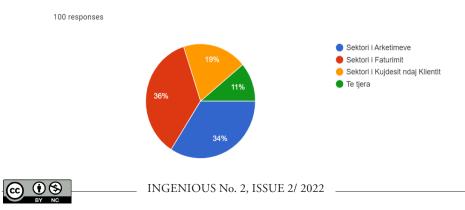


First question: How old are you?

From the results of the survey, it is noticeable that most employees who participated in the survey belong to the age group of 31 to 41 years, which is expressed in percentage of 46% of them. Following then 30% of the age group is 22 to 30 years, 18% older than 42 years and 6% of them are younger than 21 years. Based on work experience, that is, from communication with customers or meetings held with different representatives from Water and Sewerage, it has been noticed that most of the employees, especially in the Billing Sector or the Data Processing Sector, are of average age.

The second question: In which sector of Water Supply do you work?

TABLE 3. User employment sector



The conducted survey shows that the sectors with the most users are the Billing Sector and the Collection Sector with respective values of 36% and 34%. Also, 19% of users are employed in the Customer Care Sector, while the rest belong to other sectors in the amount of 11%.

Third question: How necessary is the addition of a new module to the system for support?

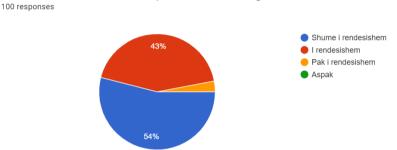
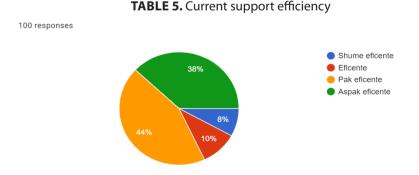


TABLE 4. Importance of adding a new module

In relation to the third question, it is clearly observed that 54% of users vote that the addition of the new module to the system for support is very important, 43% vote that it is very important, and 3% vote that it is a little important. In contrast to the other questions here it is noticeable that there is no answer "Not at all" Important for adding the new module to the system indicating that all the complaining users find the new development necessary.

Fourth question: How efficient is it to ask for support and get answers only through emails and phone calls?



Currently, Water Supply Companies request support by phone or by sending an e-mail to the company with which they have an active support contract. Regarding

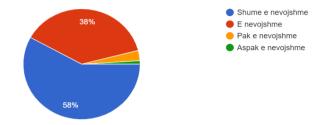


the question of how efficient this way of seeking support is, the answers are 44% a little efficient, 38% not at all efficient, 10% efficient, and 8% very efficient.

The fifth question: How necessary would a support module be in the system after the reform of the Waterworks union?

TABLE 6. The importance of the module after the merger of Water Supply Sectors

 100 responses



In the question of how necessary it would be to add a support module after the merger of Waterworks, the following results are observed: 58% the voted "Very necessary", 38% voted "Necessary", 3% voted that it is "A little necessary" and only 1% "Not at all necessary". From the conducted questionnaire it is concluded that:

- 64% of users are older than 31 years. Older people are less inclined to adapt to new systems. For this reason, most respondents (97% of them) state that they consider it necessary to create a new module in the system on customer care.
- The way of providing support used so far does not seem to meet the needs of the respondents, where 82% of them say that this does not seem to them to be an efficient way of providing support.
- Following the implementation of the Water Supply Union Reform, users see more challenges in obtaining support, therefore the number of respondents who estimate that a new module would be necessary is increasing from 82% to 96% of respondents.

Conclusions and recommendations

At the end of this paper, the conclusions that will be shown below have been reached. The hypothesis has also been proven and all the research questions raised at the beginning of this paper have been answered. It is first necessary to upgrade the billing system's customer care module. The users' needs are not being met by the current method of assistance delivery; thus, a new module would be more useful and in line with those needs.



Second, the customer service module would make it easier for users to do their tasks. By submitting a support ticket directly through the system, you can avoid accessing email and any potential phone call problems. Also, the work is made easier by recording the queries and responses in the system, giving users the option to refer to them if they are asked again.

Thirdly, there is a growing requirement to use the customer care module as a result of the Water Supply Union Reform. This is because the merger of the Water Supply Sectors will result in more system users (AKUM, 2022).

Recommendations

- 1. A new customer care module should be added to the Water Supply billing system, according to the study's findings. In order to be as user-interactive and straightforward as feasible, this module ought to include some of the following features:
 - FAQ: An interface that lists all the users' most asked inquiries.
 - Help Desk: Users create milestones in the Help Desk interface to specify the problem or query they have for system support experts.
 - Prioritization of milestones: To provide the option of ranking all queries in order of importance.

Monitoring the status of the inquiries till the billing system experts have responded to them is information about the milestone status.

- 2. Include certain system users in the planning and development of the module so they can provide real-time input on the functionality and style of its display.
 - building use cases for the module's fundamental functionality is aided by user interaction.
 - modifying the module to make it as user-friendly as possible.

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