The quilt for a better tomorrow: A metaphor for the Sustainable Utility

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Key takeaways

- Like the art of quilting, the Sustainable Utility requires the input, talents, and cooperation of a group of unique people.
- Utilities should approach their vision for a sustainable energy future like a group of quilters would.
- The most important parts of your plan should be the people in your community; a stellar customer experience; environmental, social, and governance (ESG) pillars; and diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI). Without these, your quilt is just a flimsy blanket.
- Only through the interaction of these parts can everyone share in the benefits of a sustainable energy future.

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As you're developing your utility's plans and goals for the future, consider the art of quilting. A quilt requires the work of many hands, and each person participating in its creation brings a special, vital talent to the group. Much like a quilting circle, a utility must pull in help and input from various sources, especially people in the communities they serve.

By keeping your community, the customer experience, ESG pillars, and DEI as central to your plans, you can give your utility a greater chance of success and enable the greatest number of people to share in the benefits.

What do utilities and quilts have in common?

We were honored to have Jennifer Montague, senior vice president and chief customer officer at NiSource, deliver the opening keynote address at the E Source Forum 2022 (**figure 1**). NiSource delivers electricity and natural gas service to about 4 million customers across six states. In her address, Montague used the metaphor of a quilt to paint a mental picture of how utilities should best approach their strategies for becoming the Sustainable Utility—one that's environmentally responsible, equitably delivers safe and reliable energy, and is financially stable.

Figure 1: What it means to be a Sustainable Utility

Jennifer Montague delivered the opening keynote at the E Source Forum 2022, using quilting as a metaphor for how utilities should approach planning for a sustainable energy future.



Quilting is a communal project

Throughout her address, Montague recalled lessons and observations about quilting from her grandmother. Quilting is more than it seems. It isn't a simple hobby. Rather, quilting is a communal project conducted with friends and neighbors. Montague remembered her grandmother being a member of a quilting circle. Each member of the group was unique, but everyone came together to play their role in completing a quilt.

Quilting itself is a demonstration of sustainability. Quilters save scraps of fabric—outdated clothing, rags, and various bits of discarded cloth headed for the trash—for their creations.

Quilting itself is a demonstration of sustainability. Quilters save scraps of fabric—outdated clothing, rags, and various bits of discarded cloth headed for the trash—for their creations. Quilters give new life and purpose to these materials, and they become part of something bigger.

Montague's grandmother's group enjoyed this process of working side by side to turn something old into something new and useful. And the group took pride in what they accomplished together.

Four key elements of a quilt

A quilt has four main components.

Anchor design. This is the central focus of a quilt. It's what gives the quilt its beauty. Without an anchor design, the pattern of the quilt doesn't make sense.

Batting. Batting is the soft, fluffy filling inside a quilt. Batting is what makes a quilt warm and useful.

Foundational stitching. Foundational stitching holds all the separate parts together. Without foundational stitching, a quilt is no different from a simple blanket.

Border. The border of a quilt is meant to be eye-catching. The border ties all other parts of the quilt together with the anchor design. It creates much needed unity.

NiSource's view of sustainability

NiSource's definition of sustainability places the people in the communities it serves at the center. Montague spoke about the need for NiSource and other utilities to always keep in mind that their decisions will have lasting effects far into the future.

In her interview for What it means to be a Sustainable Utility: Forum 2022 keynote speaker spotlight, Montague summed up NiSource's definition of sustainability:

> Sustainability is a broad category that encompasses more than just protecting our environment. At NiSource, we've been interpreting sustainability as putting people at the center of everything we do: our customers, our employees, our business partners, and the communities we serve. The decisions that we make have a lasting impact on people's lives, and we're committed to sustainability that comes in many forms.

> Sustainability includes a big focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. We often consider, 'How do we ensure our workforces reflect the communities that we serve?' And, 'Are we being intentional about working with diverse suppliers?' Sustainability is also about a positive experience for our customers, making sure that we're providing beneficial programs, multiple billing options, and other services that meet the needs of our diverse population.

NiSource has committed to serving people in its communities with clean, stable, sustainable, and safe energy infrastructure. NiSource emphasizes philanthropy, enhanced communication, customer engagement, education efforts, consideration of diverse perspectives, and employee training and safety.

What are the components of a successful utility quilt?

What do quilts and utilities have in common? In Montague's metaphor, she paired each of the four main parts of a quilt with an element of NiSource's sustainability plan.

People as the anchor design

As Montague stressed, an essential part of any quilt is the anchor design. Without it, a quilt is chaotic and lacks its defining beauty.

If your utility's plan is missing its anchor design—people—it should redesign its plans.

The same applies to people in any proper sustainability plan. Without a focus on people, a utility risks a hollow sustainability plan that's missing the foundation from which all those repurposed scraps need to grow.

A quilt without an anchor design and a sustainability plan without people from the community at its center don't make sense. If your utility's plan is missing its anchor design—people—it should redesign its plans.

Customer experience improvements as the batting

Since people are central to your plan, it makes sense to support them in any way you can. Customer experience is comparable to quilt batting. Batting provides warmth, making a quilt useful. In the same way, delivering excellent customer experience makes a utility useful.

As part of its sustainability plan, NiSource invested heavily in improving the customer experience. These improvements included:

- Developing a mobile app
- Automating workflows
- Improving contact centers
- Rolling out automated billing programs
- Reducing the time it takes reps to help customers (also called average handle time)
- Designing campaigns to guide customers to billing options and energy-saving programs

These improvements have created a better experience for customers and NiSource employees alike. We

honored NiSource with a 2022 Achievement in Customer Experience award because of the utility's focus on providing streamlined services and increased digital options for customers. To learn more about NiSource's achievement and find out which other utilities we recognized, read Achievements in Customer and Employee Experience: 2022 honorees.

ESG pillars as the foundational stitching

Foundational stitching is a defining characteristic of a quilt. It's the most time-consuming step in quilting and involves connecting small pieces. At times, someone especially skilled in foundational stitching performs this delicate task. In Montague's metaphor, ESG pillars serve as the foundational stitching.

For NiSource, these pillars include:

- Reducing greenhouse gases
- Improving emergency response
- Devoting time and money to the community
- Improving equity
- Aiming for more diversity
- Streamlining leadership positions
- Supporting customer satisfaction and safety

While small on their own, no utility wishing to build a plan for sustainability can afford to overlook the importance of these individual pieces to the larger plan.

According to Michael Carter, president of Research and Advisory at E Source, "ESG pillars are made up of granular concerns and practices that support all the work utilities are striving to do. Like in Jennifer's quilting analogy, they take time to develop, but in the end they hold everything together."

Everyone, regardless of race, gender, and economic status, should benefit from the financial, environmental, economic, and social benefits provided by sustainable energy models.

DEI as the border

Montague spoke about the importance of utilities leaving no one behind during the move into the future of energy. Everyone, regardless of race, gender, and economic status, should benefit from the financial, environmental, economic, and social benefits provided by sustainable energy models.

NiSource worked hard to create its Your Energy, Your Future campaign. The utility designed the program to gather and act on feedback from customers and stakeholders. Utility teams use this feedback during planning stages, giving a voice to the community.

A quilt for the future

Like a quilt, the Sustainable Utility needs the skills and ingenuity of a group of people. Create your own quilt for the future based on your utility's customers and employees, customer experience improvements, ESG pillars, and DEI.

Put the people and communities you serve at the core of your sustainability plans. Only by doing so can

we look forward to a future energy quilt everyone can benefit from and be proud of.

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