Ask E Source

From Alaskan wilderness guide to utility innovator: Three questions for Marianne McElroy

An interview with Marianne McElroy, VP of E Source Customer Engagement Solutions
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Fresh off a 10-year journey leading numerous customer experience, customer engagement, and utility modernization efforts at Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB), Marianne McElroy has joined E Source to run the Customer Engagement Solutions research team.

I caught up with Marianne to talk about her history, her approach to utility innovation, and the role she sees E Source continuing to play in the utility industry. Here's what I learned.

Sannie Sieper. Marianne, welcome to E Source! Tell us a little about yourself.

Marianne McElroy. Thank you! I'm very excited to be joining E Source at this pivotal time in the evolution of the modern utility. While I want to point to the great work my team accomplished at EWEB, I think some of the clues to who I am predate that engagement.

Yes, I'm a people person, but more precisely I like to understand them—what makes them work, what motivates their behavior. Looking back on my college days and early jobs, I see that people-focused pursuit of knowledge as a common thread.

"I don't want to say I'm fearless, but I don't mind taking an educated leap, knowing that I know how to adapt and land on my feet." —Marianne McElroy, E Source

I majored in Latin American studies and architecture in college—shout out to all you liberal arts majors!—and both were fields of study that helped me learn how to think, to understand how other people think, and how they occupy their space in the world. I took these interests forward into the

working world, doing stints in retail, customer service, and even as a wilderness guide in Alaska.

I don't want to say I'm fearless, but I don't mind taking an educated leap, knowing that I know how to adapt and land on my feet. Again, I think that mindset and skill set is incredibly helpful in engaging with people and being open to the possibilities of how, what, and why they think and do what they do.

Then, in a more concrete step toward my customer engagement and customer experience roles in the utility space, I worked for a community action program in the Pacific Northwest—structural social work, if you will—that helped residents save money on energy and live more securely and comfortably in their homes.

Working up close with real people on energy issues hooked me on this business and led to my lengthy engagement at EWEB.

SS. Tell us a bit about your work at EWEB.

MM. It might be easier for you to ask me what I *didn't* do! I researched and developed energy load resource models to promote grid resiliency. I delved into behavioral strategy to coordinate integrated resource planning efforts. I ran point on time-based pricing pilots and demand response initiatives to help modernize our operations, while always working hard to keep the customer at the center of our value proposition. Most recently, I spearheaded advanced metering and billing initiatives that helped us facilitate customer interaction while growing and securing revenue.

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While that provides a thumbnail sketch of my last 10 years at a utility working hard to modernize its processes and products, I'd like to reframe this period a little differently. I think many of the folks reading this can relate when I say I was led to believe joining a utility was a safe (if somewhat conservative) career path. But the last 10 years weren't like the hundred-plus years before them. Nor are the next 10 years going to be like these past 10.

That's because utilities are changing. And while historically slow to change, utilities are now feeling the pressure to prove their value, meet the existential and regulatory changes of climate change, and not only offer customers better, more-tailored solutions to meet their needs, but also get those customers to use them.

So, rewinding the tape, none of this translated to a safe, routine, "don't rock the boat" existence at my utility. EWEB faced challenges like all other utilities and had to do unthinkable things at times, like laying off staff. I soon realized I needed to get in front of change and make sure that everything I touched could deliver measurable valuable to my utility and its customers, or I'd be out of a job.

So, I innovated. I opened myself up to change and to becoming a change agent myself. Every two years, I looked for the next challenge, found one, and delivered on it.

SS. How did this lead you to E Source?

MM. Great question. After a decade of helping EWEB solve problems that increased customer

engagement and adoption of new programs—while also strengthening the grid and making it cleaner—I "looked up." And by that, I mean not only across EWEB, but across the industry.

Having worked with E Source as a client, I began to put two and two together that:

- Many utilities need help with their clean energy transformations and other modernization efforts
- My hands-on work at EWEB provided me the insights, experience, and confidence to apply these learnings—and the openness and skill to learn new things—to a broader audience on a bigger stage

I've come to love two things about E Source that really help me know this is where I belong. First is the idea of E Source, through its research and industry expertise, looking around the bend for utilities and bringing back what they see to help utilities develop and implement more-impactful programs.

"Data is key to utilities taking decisive, effective action." —Marianne McElroy, E Source

The second is data. Utilities, whether public or private, are in the business of managing risk. The services they provide are so essential to the way people live and how companies operate that they can't make mistakes. But we also live in a time where regulators and the public are demanding action to solve the biggest issues in the industry's history: climate change, grid resiliency, energy affordability and equity.

Data is key to utilities taking decisive, effective action. E Source—through its research and advisory practice, its data science capabilities, and its software systems—provides utilities not only the data they need to develop better programs and services, but also the data of a community actively pursuing solutions to the same challenges.

There's a time and a place for everything. My time and place are here at E Source, helping our utility clients get on with the business of delivering safe, reliable power and providing value to every customer along the way.

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