



Democratising digital tools for smaller utilities

Chris Sosnowski, CEO of WaterClick

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Enabling digital tools
for utilities of all
sizes

Making digital work
for utilities of all
sizes

Enabling comprehensive
operational tools
for all sizes

With **WaterClick®**, **Waterly®** enables you to connect with partner data for an expanded look at your utility's performance. **WaterClick** is the easiest way to connect water data for water and wastewater utilities. You can expand your utility's water data capabilities via direct integrations with **WaterClick** fully vetted partners.





Making digital work for utilities of all sizes



We spoke to Chris Sosnowski, CEO at WaterClick, about the work they are doing to bring the benefits of digitization to utilities big and small.

You are a former public works employee, systems integrator, and consulting engineer. What inspired you to become an entrepreneur working at the intersection of water and data?

For about 20 years, I had worked at a systems integrator, installing relatively sophisticated SCADA systems across the Midwest. They did a great job, but time after time, I'd show up at the plants months after everything was installed and working and it never failed...there would be someone walking around the plant with a clipboard telling me that no matter how great the automation was, they still needed to trust a PERSON to run a plant. It impacted me; technology should be about the people, not about gadgets. So, at the "intersection of water and data"... we think you find...operators. So we asked over 100 of them (literally) how they wanted to work with their data. We were only somewhat surprised how they thought virtually everything on the market was overly complicated.

The words simple and reliable came up over and over, and became the bedrock for what became Waterly. Instead of building an app to "teach operators how to use technology," we built Waterly to serve operators where they are at today. Serving those stewards of water where they are today gets me out of bed every morning since.

What is the most significant water challenge today and how are you addressing this?

I think the biggest challenge is leadership. Funding comes through great leadership. Mentoring comes from great leadership. Better global stewardship also comes from leadership. We can improve almost every challenge (which entrepreneurs call opportunities) we have in water with better leadership. So I guess the problem we are solving is trying to make hard things simple for leaders in water. We take what's complex, such as cumbersome data collection and reporting, and we

make it simple so that more people feel comfortable with change. We simplify challenges for water leaders with accessible data, from the beginning of their digital journey, to the predictive future.

How are you working to accelerate the digitization of small and medium size utilities? What role do you see data play in these efforts?

We collaborate with water and wastewater utilities of all sizes as they start their digital transformation journeys. This onramp or first step often revolves around data, people and regulatory compliance at the core, as in the case when looking to move away from manual data collection (usually in the form of clipboards or endless spreadsheets). This is where we come in - Waterly is a practical, affordable and secure software built exclusively for the water sector to help collect and manage data. We aren't folks waving a magical proprietary solution to help modernize utilities, just here to help simplify operations and address operator headaches.

Can you give us an example of how a small community engages with Waterly?

The small town of Richmond, Illinois has a population of about 2,000, and is surrounded mostly by rural McHenry County. Richmond has a small oxidation ditch-based wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) and a couple of groundwater treatment plants, each with a bit of chemical treatment at them and a small (somewhat older) SCADA system at the WWTP. They had been using the same clipboards just like tens of thousands of other towns just like them across the US. They found us when they were attending the Illinois Section AWWA conference last year. Their staff thought for sure we were probably a better fit for larger towns (which was a nice way of telling us they thought we'd be too expensive). We showed them the app running on our iPhones at the booth



and explained how we charge according to a community's size and that we had a WaterClick partner that could connect to their 15 year old PLC and push data into Waterly. Their Public Works Director and Crew Leader were both there and were convinced they could make it work and they signed up the next day. We then interviewed them to learn how they operate, as they walked us through their clipboards and explained what type of data they report on. We got some technical information from their systems integrator, then built their app and turned them loose. Honestly, it took them a bit of time to warm up to ditching the paper (change is still hard for everyone), but now the guys there say it's "pretty slick" and "super-easy...even for us non-tech savvy guys." No more clipboards. No more spreadsheets. The crew leader saves hours of not having to "monkey around with the spreadsheets" each month.

With digitization and technology advancements often come concerns related to cybersecurity, affordability and continuity. How do you address these when working with both existing customers and during outreach efforts to new communities?

Many small to medium size communities don't

Continued on page 6 ►

realize what some of these concerns involve. We really work hard to make things simple for them from the very onset, even pre-onboarding. In this way, we take care of problems they don't even know that they have. In terms of affordability, we transparently charge according to utility flow rate, so we make it affordable for utilities of all sizes. On the continuity side, we maintain relationships with our communities through regular trainings that are core to our offering and commitment to water stewardship.

How do you collaborate with partners as part of WaterClick's model?

Waterly is the onramp towards digitization centered around software-based regulatory compliance, while WaterClick is the connecting bridge helping communities move beyond that initial step through simple, direct integrations between Waterly customers and fully vetted partners. This provides expanded data capabilities for water and wastewater utilities as they look to address pressing challenges related to SCADA connectivity, power data monitoring, lab data, hydraulic modeling, and beyond. We remain humble and know we can provide further value through these types of collaborations by carefully vetting partners for communities.

In fact, utilities have so much in common, but just don't know it. We help convince operators that they can use the same shared model of managing data and we make it simple for them. Whether they are collecting data by hand, getting it from a lab, or bringing it in from SCADA or a new IoT sensor, we bring it all together quickly and inexpensively using a shared data model.

We hear industry folks say that utilities are risk averse, slow to adopt technology, and lacking budgets to help them modernize their water operations. What's your point of view on this?

I often hear folks on stages repeat this over and over, but to me it honestly sounds like a lot of whining without a course of action. Companies that struggle to help people where they are often are the ones complaining that other people don't change. If people don't want to change, it's our job (as solution providers) to change for them, not shame them into submission. In my mind, adoption challenges are the result of a number of key issues, namely: (1) Overcomplicated technologies,

whether by design or how they are marketed; (2) Proprietary or expensive hardware/software that is not within the means of the mass US water utility market; (3) Long, if not super long onboarding times to deploy technology from the moment there is interest in your product; (4) Security of systems put in place; (5) Lack of adequate training to support technology deployment.

You have been scaling impressively, with Waterly active across 1,000 sites in the US. Putting this success on the side, what has gone a bit slower than expected?

We are fortunate to be able to work closely with both ultra-small systems with a few dozen connections to a number of very large communities across the US. Balancing the personal touch with the drive to standardize and digitize our own processes is extremely challenging. We will never lose touch with caring about the operators, and that means we need to grow our team (not just our technology) along with our customer base; hiring great help is hard. Additionally, while our WaterClick partner network is growing, it's been challenging finding companies that can scale down to serve the smaller systems with their existing business models. Everyone wants to do it, but the economics don't support it in many cases. It's been frustrating digging through the haystack to find the needles, but there's great joy in bringing all of these systems extremely high value solutions for an affordable price.

What's one book that inspired you as both a founder and self-proclaimed 'Chief Bottle Washer' and why?

What one book? So difficult, but the first that came to mind is *Servant Leadership* by Robert Greenleaf was pivotal in my career and inspirational as a founder. Some of the books I read are over 500 years old, so I can't quite call a book from the 70s an "old" book, but the principles in there are timeless. The Servant as Leader thinking by Greenleaf taught me the "first among equals" concept that helped to set my approach to how I lead in every aspect of life. Ask our employees, I work for them and not the other way around. As a father, a husband, and a leader, I will always strive to lead as a servant. ■

(Front cover image is Chris Sosnowski, CEO at WaterClick)

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