



## Thanks to technology, the award-winning Durham311 has one of the best call-wait times in Ontario

By Jennifer Foden

Four years ago, it may have seemed overwhelming to contact the Regional Municipality of Durham for anything from potholes to missed garbage pickups. “There were 64 phone numbers, 50 email addresses, 28 different contact centres that you could talk to,” says Junaid Sarwar, director of Service Durham at the Region. “First you had to figure out: what is the right department?... You would often be connected to the wrong department and have to repeat the story again and again.”

Today, Durham311, a centralized phone number and online customer service platform for Durham Region residents, has answered almost half a million interactions, has one of the best call-wait times in Ontario—just 28 seconds—and is winning awards for its service across North America.

Sure, consolidating those numbers and emails must have been challenging, but Junaid says the bigger task was knowledge consistency for the staff. “The staff coming into 311 were waste management experts, water billing experts,” says Junaid. “Now they have to answer almost 28 different lines of business. So, knowledge consistency was a problem that we had to solve.”

Technology came to the rescue. First, they introduced a centralized customer relationship management system, so a resident’s interaction history was recorded in one place. “We’ve integrated a comprehensive knowledge base directly into our customer relationship management system, containing detailed service guides, FAQs and workflow processes for each department,” says Junaid. “This allows staff to quickly reference accurate information while assisting customers, significantly reducing the learning curve for newer team members and providing seasoned staff with a reliable single source of truth.”





Additionally, Junaid's team is able to leverage analytics to identify knowledge gaps. "By tracking patterns in customer inquiries and service requests, we can swiftly address any inconsistencies or misunderstandings and update our knowledge base accordingly."

In the next six months, they'll also be deploying a natural language processing feature in their call centre. "You can speak in your natural language and our AI will understand who is the best person to help you," says Junaid. "That is also what we call intelligent routing. So, you call and say: 'I have called twice and I still have not got my waste pickup.' The system will understand there's a level of frustration." Then the call will be routed to an agent best trained to handle that situation. Junaid adds that the system will also be able to monitor every interaction to provide intelligence. "The system might tell us that right now there are seven customers talking about a water main break and that alarm goes directly to our maintenance team. Something that would take two to three hours now happens in minutes."

And the technology isn't just for the Durham311 team. Residents can submit service requests online. "You can access the customer service portal and submit a service request, such as 'missed waste pickup,'" Junaid explains. " We will receive all the necessary information and dispatch someone the next morning to pick it up."

All of this innovation has an even larger benefit: increased community engagement. "It sounds like we were a little bit late to the game with adopting 311," says Alison Burgess, director of communications and engagement at the Region. "But... what Junaid has done has kind of catapulted us from creating 311 to creating a system that is truly intelligent... We now have stronger connections to our community because of the excellent customer service that they get when they do call. So that's really valuable."

This is part of a 10-article series profiling the innovation happening in Durham Region. The region has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the world for the third year in a row. Learn more at [durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities](http://durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities) and [IntelligentCommunity.org](http://IntelligentCommunity.org).

