

Technological Transformation

NEW TECHNOLOGIES ARE REVOLUTIONIZING CONTACT CENTERS AND THE WAY WE DO BUSINESS.

The good news is that you can leverage your existing knowledge to maximize the use of these new technologies. The most successful Contact Centers will recognize that the effective deployment of these technologies will transform their business and their customer's experience.

The Contact Center Experts at Align provide solutions to achieve business results and exceed customer expectations.

INTRODUCTION TO CONTACT CENTERS

Contact Centers are the natural progression beyond the stereotypical Call Centers containing hundreds or thousands of agents plugged into phone lines and servicing customer calls. They are hubs of customer-centric activity handling phone calls, emails, faxes, text messages and instant messaging. Intimately tied with the company's CRM systems and business rules, when implemented correctly, the contact center can result in significant contributions to the company's bottom-line.

To optimize the time spent on each contact and serve customers more efficiently, as well as to justify the ROI, Contact Centers are aggressively adopting newer technologies and strategies. Let's take a look at the different ways an inbound communication can be addressed.

SKILLS-BASED ROUTING

Skills-Based Routing, embedded in a vast majority of Contact Centers today, enables the distribution of incoming calls to the agent most capable of servicing it. The requirements

of the customer may range from language fluency to product-specific inquiries. Technologies such as Interactive Voice Response (IVR) are used to identify the customer and gauge their requirements, before routing the call.

The advent of Skills-Based Routing signaled a paradigm

shift in the industry – a move from a blind priority to empty incoming queues as fast as possible to a more customer-

centric approach. Prior to this revolutionary technology, centers relied on Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) to distribute calls among operators based on static configured parameters.

Many centers have leveraged Skills-Based Routing to sustain and enable their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems. Companies are able to implement practices such as Customer Segmentation, where most customers are categorized based on their profitability to the company, and treatment plans are devised for each category. For example, the most profitable customers may receive the highest priority, and the least profitable ones may be encouraged to use the self-service system.

On the agent side, Skills-Based Routing allows agents to be trained incrementally, acquiring new skills based on an additive ladder of capabilities, and giving them a clear career path. This in turn, results in higher customer satisfaction levels.

Skills-Based Routing has also introduced the concept of a "Virtual queue". This feature ensures that the same routing logic and business rules are applied to all incoming contacts irrespective of their origin – email, phone, or the web. This practice coincided with the evolution of traditional Call Centers into Contact Centers. It is important to understand that while the technology has matured, most Call Centers still have not yet deployed this multi-channel contact approach.

COMPUTER TELEPHONY INTEGRATION (CTI)

CTI represents the marriage of the computer and the telephone. Most often, the technology is applied to result in what is referred to as "screen pop". When an incoming call is routed to an agent; the CRM screen with the customer's history pops up on the agent's desktop, giving

A formative practice in contact center technological evolution, Skills-Based Routing's future lies in it's ability to extend to business processes outside of the contact center.



the agent a complete picture of the customer's prior interactions and transactions with the company. The agent is better informed about the customer, and is able to leverage the history to improve customer service and to influence additional sales.

Difficult to deploy in the past, CTI's usefulness will increase due to simpler SIP integrations to enterprise business applications.

The latest instance of CTI may be found in the so-called "Click to Dial" application. When a user clicks on a "Click to Dial" number through a CRM package or an email vCard such as Outlook, the call is initiated while it rings the agent's telephone.

This application is designed to save agent time, minimize misdials, and allow tracking of calls by automatically updating CRM records.

As useful as CTI appears to be, some of the benefits touted by CTI vendors are debatable. For instance, does a 3 second gain in screen pop really result in a solid ROI? That is a question Call-Center management must ask before making the buying decision. It should be noted that CTI implementations have been plagued by several issues -- integration being the major one. Another issue is the lack of a standard CTI connector, which further exacerbates the difficulty with integration.

VIRTUAL CONTACT CENTER

Currently Contact Centers are trending towards the concept of a "Virtual Contact Center". Instead of agents staffing phones and computers in a fixed physical location, the agents in Virtual Contact Centers may be based in distant places or

in smaller locations, even working from their own homes.

Adoption of Virtual Contact Centers may lie more with cultural resistance than with technological integration issues.

This advance is made possible by factors such as IP Telephony and broadband being readily available in many countries across the globe.

As companies are also being forced to cut costs, the savings in real estate and physical infrastructure provided by the Virtual Contact Centers can be tremendous. The company is also better able to tap into wider, more geographically dispersed pools of experienced

and qualified candidates, including stay-at-home parents, physically disabled or older people. With this population base, attrition tends to be lower, and agents are more willing to work split-shifts.

Virtualization has still not been fully deployed in a majority of Contact Centers. This is less of an issue with technology and more of an issue with the corporate culture of the company. In many cases, management fears a loss of control when agents are not physically located in their offices. They are also apprehensive of IT and voice quality issues and security breaches when agents work out of several remote locations. Training and establishing appropriate processes to manage these remote agents is also more challenging.

Industry analysts recommend more technological investments in performance monitoring, regular communication between agents and supervisors and e-learning to mitigate these issues in both the virtual agent and outsourcing models.

HOSTED ENVIRONMENTS

Small and Medium Businesses (SMBs) -- as well as businesses undergoing flux (Merger and Acquisition activity, or rapid expansion) who are looking to develop Contact Centers rapidly can move towards Hosted Virtual Contact Centers. In this model, a service provider owns and operates the Contact Center technology platform and leases out lines to companies and/or operators for a monthly or usage-based fee.

The Hosted or SaaS model is getting a fresh look as a means of reducing capital expenses while increasing functionality.

Initial deployments of Hosted Solutions were "cloud based" IVRs back in the 1980s. The trend was to bring this application back into the customer premises (CPE). Today, the cost of CPE equipment, as well as the management and maintenance of these systems, is growing while the cost of network based solutions is shrinking.

Therefore, businesses are looking at moving this CPE equipment and additional Contact Center functionality back to the "cloud". Additional benefits for these types of solutions are the lack of capacity constraints, the lack of capital expenditures, and the inherent disaster recovery capability within the network data centers. The Software as

a Service (SaaS) model has grown rapidly in many business application areas, including the Contact Center.

SESSION INITIATION PROTOCOL (SIP)

Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) is a technological advancement that signals the increasing convergence of telephony and the internet. SIP-enabled devices allow participants to create, modify and terminate sessions that may include

internet telephone calls, multimedia distribution and multimedia conferences.

Today SIP is often thought of from a device-based perspective, where SIP is used to connect to disparate PBX systems to realize a basic fea-

Approaching science fiction-like capability, the SIP model provides an enterprise with a consilience previously unattainable.

ture set regardless of Telephony System manufacturer. The concept is that of an IP telephone operating as an analog telephone which has little value to the Contact Center. The device-centric paradigm in vogue today will shift towards a more user-centric one – where users can control how calls are handled, where they are routed and by which communication channel they access the center.

The Application-based perspective however, allows for the next paradigm shift in Contact Centers. Presence servers in a SIP network maintain up-to-date status of all the users within the network; thus ensuring that the user’s availability is known before contact is initiated, rather than after. For instance, Joe, a third-level tech support person, may set his status to “Busy” while attending to an important customer call, so that a second-level tech support person, Jane, knows not to disturb him with a call. Jane may then approach any other third-level tech on the network whose status is set to “Available”. In the meanwhile Joe leaves for lunch with his IP-enabled cell phone. His status is set to “Available for low-level calls” so that only calls that do not need the assistance of a computer are routed to his cell phone while he is at lunch.

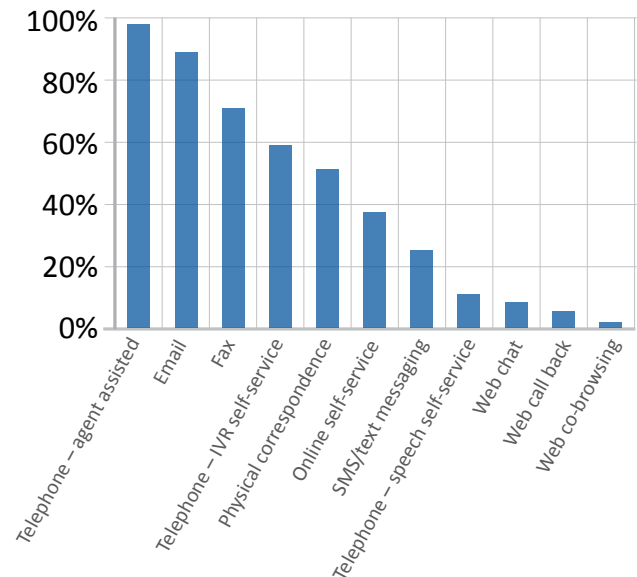
Presence technologies of the future are almost the stuff of science fiction – speech-enabled “virtual assistants” may be deployed that intelligently set the user’s status depending on their availability, proximity to SIP-enabled devices and any user-set rules and specifications.

This open standard has gained tremendous acceptance in a broad group of industries in the recent past, and is set to become the technology of future Contact Centers. As more and more Call Centers transform into IP-based Contact Centers, a direct impact is being felt on the bottom line of adopters due to this convergence:

- Contact Center applications are unified by the protocol.
- The complexities of CTI are mitigated by offering a single protocol that binds all devices.
- Disparate systems such as computers, cell phones and text messaging systems from various vendors are connected to the network.
- Presence takes Skills-Based Routing to a whole new level by adding the attribute to “availability” in addition to the skill of the agent.
- SIP/Presence offers organizations the possibility of deploying Contact Center practices such as Skills-Based Routing throughout their enterprise, not just the Contact Center, and reaping the benefits.

ADOPTION OF CONTACT CENTER TECHNOLOGIES

Other than Skills-Based Routing, most of the technologies previously described have had limited deployments in Contact Centers. Consider Dimension Data’s Global Contact Center benchmarking report:



403 Contact Centers from 42 countries took part in the survey. 15% of the participants are outsourcing centers and 13.8% are IT or other helpdesks. About 25% of Call Centers are currently implementing CTI.

With so many technologies that have been developed but not deployed into the Contact Center, what is the likelihood of SIP succeeding? Many believe that SIP will be the next revolutionary technology that will succeed in this space. In addition, SIP will be deployed outside the traditional Contact Center and into the business as a whole, being tied into a company's business processes and CRM system.

The challenging in deploying SIP will be to ensure that the requisite internal and customer-centric processes and procedures are in place to enable the technology to achieve the desired business objectives

SUMMARY

Skills-Based Routing encompasses a host of practices, technologies and people that places customer satisfaction at the center. This solution has enabled the transformation of Call Centers into Contact Centers.

CTI allows the agent to be better-informed about the customer's past history with the company, resulting in better ROI. However, CTI implementations are plagued by integration issues.

Virtual Contact Centers leverage the advantages of broadband internet and improved phone services and allow agents to be based remotely. However, adoption of this practice has been slow due to management apprehensions about control and security.

SIP is clearly the technology of the future, and will be the next transformational technology in the Contact Center. It allows the seamless convergence of heterogenous applications and devices across the Contact Center. It is clear that presence technology will also enhance Skills-Based Routing.

To summarize, there are many technologies available to enhance the experience of your customer and to improve internal operations. Regardless of whether you take the

on-premise approach, or the virtualization approach, it is imperative that you understand what you are trying to achieve with technology, your internal and customer readiness to adopt it, and the ability of your IT department to support it. Careful planning is the key to adopting new technologies.

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