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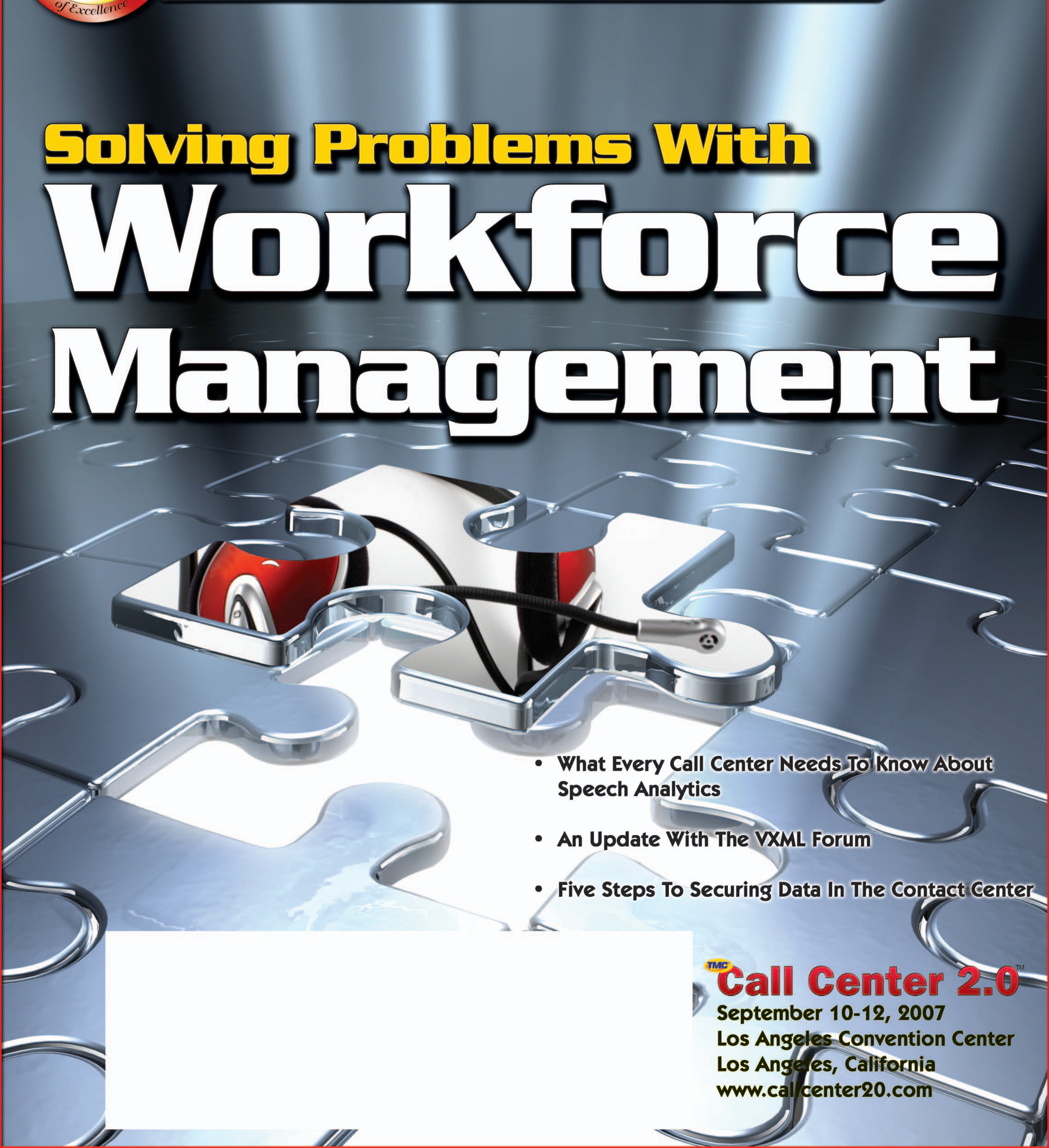

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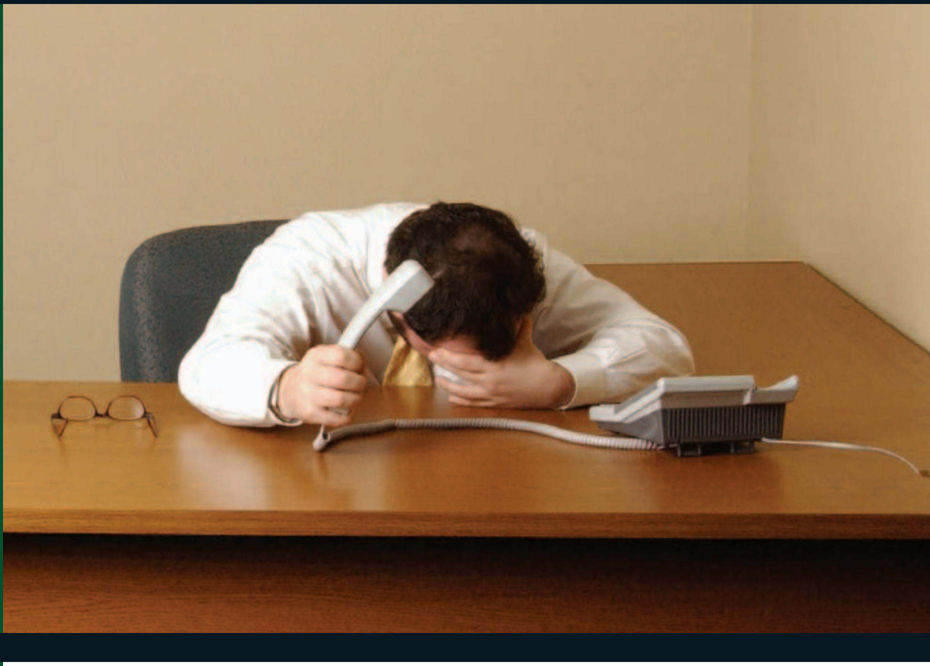

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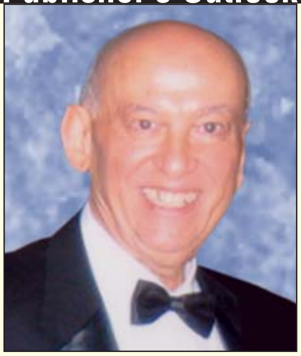

By: Nadji Tehrani,
Founder, Chairman & CEO, Editor-in-Chief,
Technology Marketing Corporation

THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA IN CONTACT CENTER MEDIA!!

As the contact center industry's pioneering and preeminent magazine since 1982, *Customer Interaction Solutions®* magazine has always been dedicated to providing its valued readers the finest and most cutting-edge information.

As we helped lay the foundation of the industry 26 years ago, we have always had our finger on the pulse of the marketplace and we have always adjusted our editorial focus to keep pace with the new industry trends.

TMC's world-class Web site, http://www.tmcnet.com, currently includes about 2,000,000 pages of high-quality content. This vast resource has enhanced *Customer Interaction Solutions®*'s global leadership, and reinforced its position as the world's leading source of reliable information on the state of the contact center, CRM and IP communications industries.

I have asked Tracey Schelmetic, Editorial Director, to share her perspective on this very important subject.

Beginning with the last few issues, valued readers will have noticed a different format for the editorial in *Customer Interaction Solutions* magazine. We're extremely proud of it and we know you'll find it sharper and more informative than ever before. Serving the fast-changing technology marketplace means being adaptable to the needs of and changes within the call center, CRM and teleservices industries, and this is something both *Customer Interaction Solutions* and TMC have excelled at since 1982.

Because *Customer Interaction Solutions* covers a broad range of call center and enterprise communications interests: workforce optimization, customer and employee analytics, CRM, training and e-learning, speech technology, IP contact center, call center management issues, teleservices and peripherals such as headsets, display technology and furniture, etc., we understand that not everyone needs or wants to read to a nitty-gritty level on each of these topics, as readers' goals and interests may vary widely, even within the same technology topics. We are fortunate to have the impressive resources of TMCnet behind us — a place where we can lead readers to more in-depth information about which subjects interest them should they wish to probe more profoundly on any one topic.

The TMC team has built TMCnet into a global, dominating b-to-b force for communications and technology information. With writers located all over the world, we are able to offer the most current and internationally relevant information available, from different perspectives, updated from minute-to-minute on TMCnet. There is no other telecommunications media outlet in the world with such global reach, such experienced contributing writers and editors and such broad appeal to the marketplace. Our readers are located in every country in the world, and our skills in cross-channel marketing — from our Web site to our popular blogs to our print magazines to our trade shows to our marketing vehicles — have created a synergy of interactive information that circles the world on a daily basis, gathers the most relevant news and opinions, disseminates them for our readership audience and presents them in a to-the-point, consolidated format, on the home page of TMCnet. We are proud to have built a network of resources so experienced and so vast that we can truly say that TMCnet never sleeps.

With such a global force behind us, *Customer Interaction Solutions* magazine is in the enviable position of being able to streamline our editorial coverage so it's relevant to busy executives with limited time to read and learn about today's issues facing the call center and the enterprise. To best meet these individuals' needs, we have taken steps to simultaneously raise both the profile and the interest level of the material we present in *Customer Interaction Solutions* while boosting the overall quality and appeal of the magazine. We've sharpened our features to carry the most important and pertinent information and included more staff-written articles. We have added new columnists, notably The Call Center School's Penny Reynolds and Maggie Klenke; plus new associate editor Patrick Barnard, who will be writing from his perspective as both a former call center agent and current call center market journalist. We've designed a more modern look for the magazine's artwork, presenting the material in a more vibrant and visually appealing way. We work in synergy with TMCnet to fully cover from all angles all the products and services we feel are deserving of industry awards. Readers will notice that we've added more features that highlight a variety of approaches and vendors on all manner of call center topics.

We know you'll find the new look and feel of *Customer Interaction Solutions* as compelling as we do, and we look forward to hearing your opinions and feedback.

As always, I welcome your comments. Please e-mail me at ntehrani@tmcnet.com.

During my twenty years in the contact center and teleservices industry, I have learned two important lessons pertaining to client expectations. First and foremost, the client expects and deserves superior call quality and contact center performance on behalf of their customers. Secondly, the client deserves an honest, open and straightforward relationship with their vendor. In other words, a no-excuses environment.

I consider these two items to be the cornerstone of a strong client/vendor relationship. I am proud of the fact that our very experienced management staff shares and expresses this belief through their everyday client interactions. This fact is further substantiated by their ability to utilize their former client relationships as references.

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Contents

22

DEPARTMENTS

1 **Publisher's Outlook**
By Nadji Tehrani, Executive Group Publisher, Technology Marketing Corp.

6 **High Priority!**
By Rich Tehrani, Group Editor-in-Chief, Technology Marketing Corp.

10 **Customer Inter@ction News™**

10 **CallCenterComics.com**
By Ozzie Fonesca

14 **In The Queue**
By Patrick Barnard, Associate Editor, Customer Interaction Solutions

34 **Last Call**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

35 **The Integrated Marketplace™**

35 **Identification Statement**

35 **Advertising Index**

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FROM THE EXPERTS

12 **Building The Perfect Customer Experience**
By InfoCision Management Corp.

13 **How Much Is Superior Customer Care Worth?**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

15 **Customer Interaction Solutions' Eighth Annual CRM Excellence Awards, Part Two**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

OUTSOURCING TELESERVICES

16 **Business Case For Bangalore: Pros And Cons Of Relocating A Contact Center To India**
By Doug Tanoury, Customer Interactions Consulting (CIC)

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FROM THE EXPERTS

20 **Call Centers Are The Communication Nucleus Of Any Business**
By Strategic Communication Systems

21 **For Today's Call Center, Flexibility Is Not Just "Nice To Have"**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

WORKFORCE OPTIMIZATION

22 **Ten Solutions To Common Problems With Workforce Management Implementations**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

IP CONTACT CENTER

26 **Five Steps To Securing Data In The Contact Center**
By Tom Aiello, Envision

SPEECH TECHNOLOGY

28 **An Update From The VoiceXML Forum**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

30 **What Every Call Center Needs To Know About Speech Analytics**
By Patrick Barnard, Associate Editor, Customer Interaction Solutions

ASK THE EXPERT

36 **Ask The Expert: Tim Passios, Director of Product Management, Interactive Intelligence**

TMCNET.COM ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

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CRM And CRM Software

By David Sims, TMCnet Contributing Editor

Here's the Generic CRM How To Column: Know what business problem you have, identify your CRM software choices and find a CRM software with enough ROI to enact that process to do the job that'll solve your problem. That's all the theory you need. Now don't read another "How To Do CRM" article until you've done that much, because the rest is just practicalities. Read the full article at http://www.tmcnet.com/736.1

Online Instant Messengers Be Warned: Your English Is In Danger

By Stefania Viscusi, Assisstant Editor, TMCnet

In today's "connected" world, where quick communications have become possible thanks to instant messaging, it's not difficult to begin seeing things like abbreviations, all lower case letters and other IM-speak style creeping its way into classrooms and business writing. Read the full article at http://www.tmcnet.com/737.1

Homeshoring For Contact Center Industry Expected To Produce Exponential Growth

By Susan J. Campbell, Contributing Editor, TMCnet

Although still an underused strategy in the contact center industry, more and more companies are looking to deploy home-based agents as a way to meet demand, keep costs under control and seek qualified individuals for employment outside of the company's physical geographic environment. Read the full article at http://www.tmcnet.com/738.1

Editor's Note: In the recent Top 50 Teleservices Agencies Ranking, the following two companies' results were inadvertently left out of the listings. *Customer Interaction Solutions* regrets the error.

Synergy Solutions Inc.
(http://www.synergysolutionsinc.com)
U.S. Domestic Outbound: Tie for 14th place
U.S. Domestic Inbound: Tie for 28th place
Aggregate Global Ranking: Tie for 30th place

Cross Country Automotive Services
(http://www.crosscountry-auto.com)
U.S. Domestic Outbound: Tie for 17th place
U.S. Domestic Inbound: Tie for 12th place
Interactive Inbound: Tie for 12th place
Aggregate Global Ranking: Tie for 18th place

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Want to the learn more about call centers and CRM? Then be sure to check out TMCnet's White Paper Library, which provides a selection of in-depth information on relevant topics affecting the contact center industry. The library offers white papers, case studies and other documents which are free to registered users. The papers are authored by industry leaders who, in turn, receive qualified sales leads from interested parties. Visit http://www.tmcnet.com/tmc/whitepapers.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

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By: Rich Tehrani,
Group Publisher, Group Editor-in-Chief,
Technology Marketing Corporation

Spanlink Is On A Mission

As readers know, I'm fond of keeping up with the call center industry by speaking with its major players as often as possible so I'm never taken by surprise by cutting-edge announcements and upcoming events (and, let's face it, so I can be the first to post breaking news in my VoIP blog, http://www.tehrani.com). Following in that tradition, this month, I had a chance to speak to Brett Shockley, CEO, chairman and founder of Spanlink Communications (http://www.spanlink.com).

RT: What is the mission of Spanlink Communications? (news - alert)

BS: Spanlink's mission is to leverage unified communications to drive transformational business success for our customers. Customers need to understand that unified communications and IP telephony present an opportunity to make service improvements, realize operational savings and grow revenue. Our mission is to help our customers understand and achieve that.

RT: Does Spanlink focus on contact centers exclusively?

BS: Growing up in the contact center business, this has become Spanlink's core expertise. Contact center applications tend to be the most complex and are mission critical. They are ripe with real opportunity for business transformation, and we understand the business drivers intimately. That said, Spanlink also has very strong technical expertise in networking and general telephony. Many of our customers prefer to work with one vendor for their communications infrastructure as well as their contact center. Others appreciate the solution focus we bring even to general telephony deployments, the thoroughness of our service practices and the high-touch support options we provide.

RT: From a business perspective, what is the biggest mistake you see companies make when approaching a migration to IP telephony and unified communications?

BS: We see far too many companies who work with an integrator to swap out their phone system without thinking through the business opportunities that virtualization and unified communications present. When companies do this, they may have a shiny new phone system, but they've missed out on the opportunity to make business improvements. The difference between traditional voice and IP communications goes far beyond how voice is transported on what network. Because of this, we work hard every day to evangelize the business benefits in our communications with our customers and live them in our business practices. There's real opportunity to add revenue and improve the bottom line, but you have to think it through.

RT: From a technology perspective, what is the biggest mistake you see companies make when approaching a migration to IP telephony and unified communications?

BS: Often times companies don't realize the careful steps they must take when evaluating their network and their operations to support IP telephony. Many customers, and frankly too many other integrators, will discount the importance of testing the effects of adding voice traffic on an existing network. So, when voice is applied, it creates issues that are completely unnecessary. Operational readiness is another big area that companies need to under-

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stand before they make a change from traditional voice networks to VoIP. They often will have an operational process to support data and assume that the same processes will support voice on the network, but that is often not the case.

RT: How do you help companies take ownership and gain success early-on with new technology?

BS: Companies need to understand what they are buying. They should feel they've invested their business knowledge in the design, understand the business opportunity, know what the capabilities are and understand the potential. Mainly, it comes down to communicating and training throughout the project management process to ensure that there are no surprises. For example, Spanlink offers multi-level training so everyone, from the administrators to the users, understands the features and capabilities of their tools. In addition to having numerous resources on site during a cutover to make sure questions are answered, we also offer more thorough classroom training. Customers who take advantage of classroom training opportunities have the most success and are able to fully leverage the potential of their solution.

RT: What changes from a support standpoint?

BS: With unified communications, voice is now an application on the network, right? The quick answer is yes, but the reality is no. Voice applications require some different qualities that were not available in the day-to-day data networks. With things like QoS (quality of service) and CAC (call admission control), we began to see the voice applications on a data network start to conform to some of the voice network qualities we saw in TDM systems of the past, and now voice is accepted as a viable application on a data network. The problem we face today is that we fixed many of the issues of having voice on a data network with protocol enhancements and new switching technology, but the mainstay of voice applications still looks like an application on a data network. Companies often do not set high standards for application availability, but voice is critical. So how do you ensure availability of a voice application? TDM solutions planned to five 9s, but it was really a mythical standard because it accounted for only a device and not the entire network. The good news is that you can actually achieve higher availability with VoIP through a planned balance of redundancy and monitoring.

Data networks have had many types of monitoring devices ensuring uptime for years, but we are now faced with monitoring the voice application on data networks. Voice applications utilize clustering technology, pairs and redundant links, to name a few, but how do we know when something fails? Monitoring all devices and applications to pinpoint the specific source of an event within the complex VoIP structure allows for quick resolution of the issue.

We also find that customers want more options for administrative support — some want to do it all themselves, while others want more support. We try to offer an appropriate mix of options and the nature of VoIP makes it possible to deliver those services from any location.

RT: What is your vision for the company?

BS: Spanlink will continue to build from our core expertise in contact centers and apply our best practices and standards to other areas of business communications. We've found it thus far to be a successful model because many customers appreciate the highly skilled practices that contact centers demand and Spanlink delivers, including telephony, security and unified communications applications. Spanlink strives to be the quality and value standard for unified communications.

RT: Thanks for your time, Brett.

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Circulation Director, Shirley Russo (srusso@tmcnet.com)

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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION Solutions® magazine has been the voice of the industry since 1982. It is written by industry practitioners for industry practitioners and is regarded worldwide as the "Bible" of the industry. An annual Buyer's Guide is provided as a feature of the December issue.

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A Technology Marketing Publication

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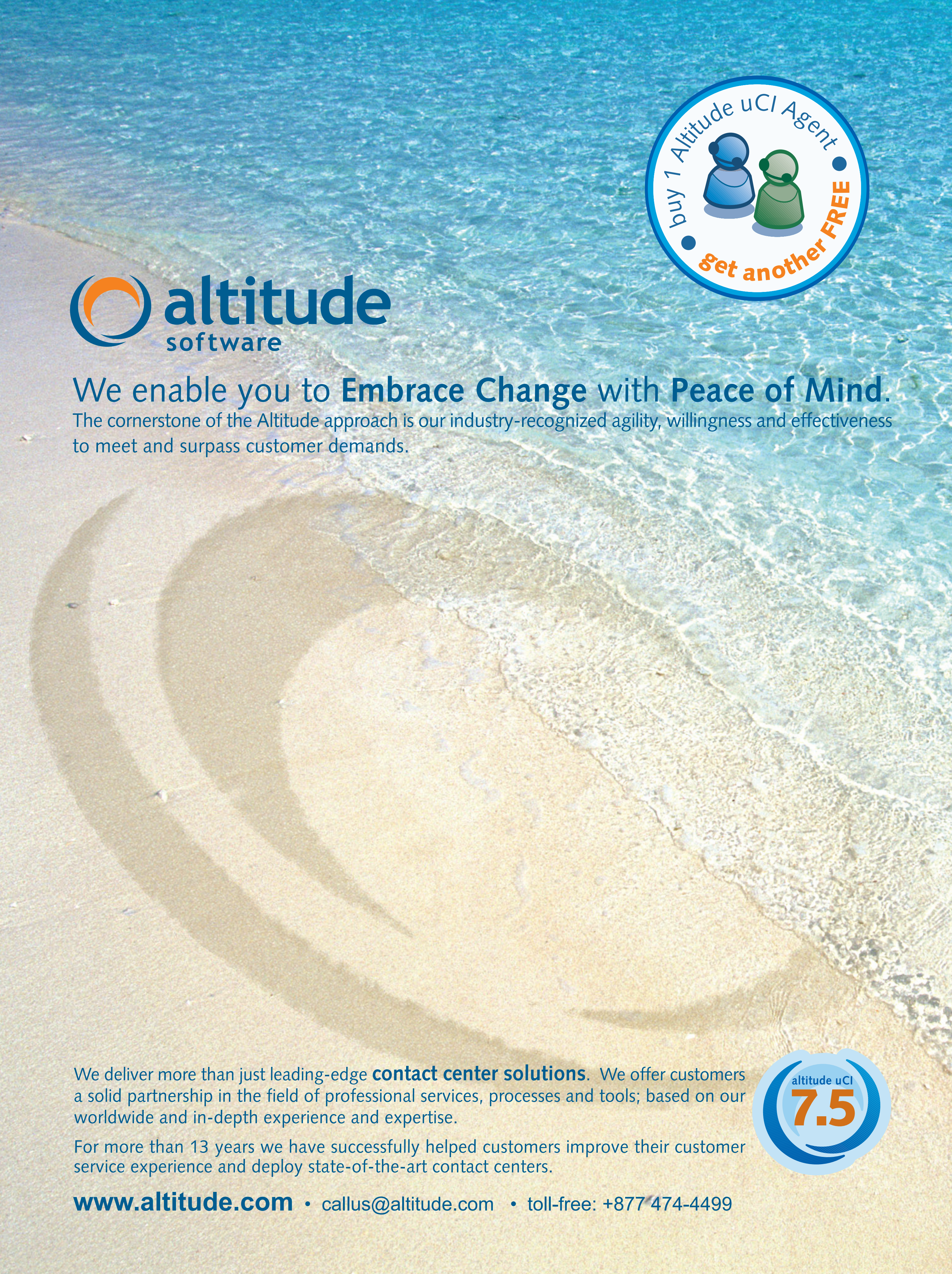

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Customer Inter@ction NEWS

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

Left Bank Solutions Introduces Multitenant Workforce Management

Workforce optimization solutions provider Left Bank Solutions, Inc. (news - alert) recently announced the release of Monet WFM Live, a multitenant, pure Web-based workforce management solution. Monet WFM Live was built largely on Left Bank Solutions' Monet WFM OnDemand suite, which enables access to Monet WFM's features from anywhere in the world and from nearly any operating system. The all new code base will introduce numerous new enhancements, including what the company calls "the industry's first WFM multitenant architecture platform."

http://www.leftbanksolutions.com

Aspect Makes eWFM 7.0.1 — Perform Available In New Languages

Aspect Software, Inc. (news - alert) recently announced that its Aspect eWorkforce Management 7.0.1 — Perform module is now available in French, German, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese. The latest version also provides localization of online support help for the core Aspect eWorkforce Management solution. The Aspect eWorkforce Management — Perform module helps contact centers understand how agents are performing, both historically and in real-time, to ensure agents are at peak productivity.

http://www.aspect.com

Telrex Announces Support For Cisco Smart Business Communications System

Telrex, (news - alert) developer of CallRex IP call recording and monitoring software for businesses using IP-PBXs or hosted VoIP services, has announced support for the Cisco Smart Business Communications System. Telrex's CallRex software integrates with the Cisco Unified Communications 500 small business IP telephony system to provide IP call recording and monitoring for Cisco IP phones. SMB customers can combine CallRex unlimited licenses and on-demand licenses to fit their specific business needs.

http://www.telrex.com

Citrix Online Enhances GoToAssist

Citrix Online (news - alert) has debuted a newly enhanced version of Citrix GoToAssist designed to allow frontline technicians and their colleagues to invisibly collaborate as a team to resolve customer issues. GoToAssist 8.0 allows the frontline support representative to own and resolve every issue from start to finish using the resources of the entire organization. A support representative can silently use his keyboard to invite more experienced experts into the session to view the customer's screen and evaluate the problem. The new collaboration capability allows the expert representatives to participate "invisibly" so callers can experience uninterrupted end-to-end contact with just one representative.

http://www.citrix.com

Five9 Announces Compatibility With Windows Vista

On-demand call center solutions provider Five9, Inc. (news - alert) has announced that its Five9 Virtual Call Center solutions are now fully compatible with Microsoft's Windows Vista operating system. The new Five9 capabilities were added to easily turn a Vista-based computer into a cost-effective call center communication platform that does not require installing additional phone equipment, and Five9 users need only a Windows-based PC, Internet connection and a headset to take advantage of the on-demand solution.

http://www.five9.com

Infusion Software Upgrades Its CRM

Infusion Software, (news - alert) a provider of on-demand "active CRM" and marketing automation software built for small businesses, has announced Version 5.0, the latest release of its flagship product, Infusion CRM. Version 5.0 includes benefits designed to allow small business users to take advantage of new features added to enhance Infusion CRM's versatility and efficiency while adding advanced capabilities in each of its CRM modules: Marketing Management, Usability, Affiliate Module, Order Management and Sales Force.

http://www.infusionsoft.com

Tigerpaw Releases Companion Products For CRM+

CRM and professional service automation provider Tigerpaw Software, Inc. (news - alert) recently released five new companion products designed to quicken tasks associated with sales, service and inventory functions of Tigerpaw CRM+. TP utilities, developed and sold by Computer Heroes, Inc., are available for purchase individually as stand-alone products. They include: Contract Custom Field Copy; Update Standard Cost; Copy Quote Notes; Quote Copy; and Copy Price Book Features. Each retails for $49 and requires Tigerpaw CRM+ version 10.5.

http://www.tigerpawsoftware.com

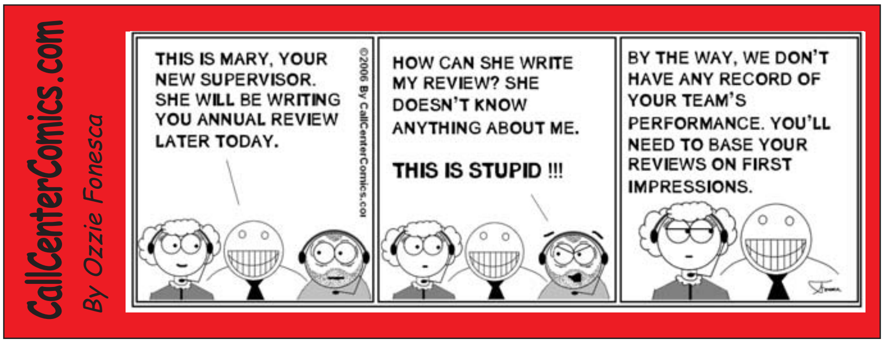
Interactive Intelligence Integrates IP-PBX With MS Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging

Interactive Intelligence (news - alert) recently completed integration of its IP-PBX platform with the recently released Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging solution. The integration enables the Interactive Intelligence IP telephony platform, which provides SIP-based VoIP switching, ACD, speech-enhanced IVR and additional communications applications for the contact center and enterprise, to work with Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging.

http://www.inin.com

IEX Debuts V3.12 Of TotalView Workforce Management

IEX Corporation, (news - alert) a NICE Systems company, has released version 3.12 of the IEX TotalView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Workforce Management system, which is part of the NICE SmartCenter family of solutions. NICE SmartCenter is a solution designed to enable organizations to manage their contact centers in an insightful proactive manner and take action at the right-time. Enhancements to TotalView in v3.12 include home-based scheduling, Express Messenger, intraday shrinkage management, overtime bidding and an Oracle database option.

http://www.iex.com

Enkata Partners With NTT America

Enkata, (news - alert) a provider of on-demand performance and talent management solutions, has announced a partnership with NTT America, a U.S. subsidiary of NTT Communications Corporation, to deliver IT infrastructure services for its best-of-breed solutions and customer data in a secure and scalable environment. In addition to providing the highest level of security to Enkata's service organization customers, the alliance is expected to benefit both companies by way of a joint marketing program designed to present each company's capabilities to a broader global market. Enkata's hosted customer deployments will reside at an NTT America facility in San Jose, California.

http://www.enkata.com

Thomas L. Cardella & Associates Launches In Iowa

Thomas L. Cardella & Associates (TLC&A) (news - alert) has announced that it will launch a new contact center company in Iowa, initially bringing over 250 jobs to the city of Cedar Rapids. Thomas L. Cardella serves as President and CEO of the initiative, which launched in May of 2007. Cardella founded Access Direct in the state of Iowa in 1995. That company quickly grew to 2,000 employees and was responsible for bringing over $160 million in payroll to the state of Iowa.

http://www.tlcassociates.com

Oracle Releases New Version Of Oracle's Siebel CRM On Demand

Oracle (quote - news - alert) recently announced the latest version of Oracle's Siebel CRM On Demand, which combines comprehensive CRM functionality with next-generation usability, advanced customization and comprehensive integration to increase end user productivity and deliver improved business results. Siebel CRM On Demand has been updated to simplify user tasks, reduce clicks and page refreshes, and provide page customization features to personalize work environments. The enhanced customization capabilities enable business users to tailor the application without IT intervention for optimal business process support and end user productivity.

http://www.oracle.com

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Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

Building The Perfect Customer Experience

By Steve Boyazis, InfoCision Management Corp.

The idea of incremental improvement, or Kaizen, was all the rage in manufacturing a few years ago. It was the perfect environment for making small, incremental changes to a repetitive process, monitoring the impact and institutionalizing change. As a result of the momentum and success of these approaches, the discipline was expanded into some of the softer management sciences, but the results and interest really waned and marketing was ignored. Even with the development of sophisticated customer relationship management tools and systems, it was difficult to apply Kaizen because the effects of advertising, branding and messaging on buyer preference are far less quantifiable than process improvements in manufacturing.

The one real exception is direct marketing. The beauty of the theory of direct marketing is that it is completely transparent. With every conversation or contact, you have an immediate answer. It's truly the perfect environment to test and model every aspect of building a client relationship. Those companies that look at the long-term value of their clients' experiences and actively seek to improve every aspect of each customer transaction are the ones that are going to be successful.

The amount of data that is available for customer care programs is often overwhelming. It ranges from typical information such as wait time and call lengths to more complex data such as first-call resolutions and post-call satisfaction surveys. However, what's often missing is the analysis of these data — identifying the relationships between the various factors, developing a return on investment (ROI) plan and pulling the various levers to achieve the goals of the program.

InfoCision recently had the chance to put direct marketing theory into practice on a save-and-retention customer care program. It was a perfect split test, in which half the calls were routed to us and the other half to a competitor for several months. What we found was remarkable. In short, very small improvements in several customer care performance indicators build upon each other and create a critical mass. If the lifetime value of the customer is significant, the returns are extraordinary.

We started by examining the plethora of opportunities to improve the satisfaction of the end customer. We focused on why they were calling, what they wanted, what would make them happy and how they defined a great call. Then, we looked at our client and defined what was important to them — cost to handle, conversion rate, customer satisfaction, etc. What we found was that customers were on hold for so long that the calls ended up being longer than necessary because our Communicators had to apologize for the delays. Furthermore, there was no opportunity for upselling because the Communicators had neither the time nor the resources to offer alternatives and saves were nearly impossible because the customer was angry and frustrated from being on hold.

To move past these roadblocks, we identified the key metrics that we thought would lead to success before we ever made the first call. Those metrics were: service level (answering 90 percent of the calls in 10 seconds or less), abandon rate (less than two percent), one-call resolution (85 percent of the time), follow-up calls to settle unresolved issues, length of call (under four minutes), cross-sell percentage (15 percent goal), and customer satisfaction (measured through a brief survey). Based on other successful programs, we knew this model would achieve such a high ROI that the cost of our services would be irrelevant — we could provide a better return for the client even if the competitor's services were free.

The next real challenge was making the investment necessary to ensure that we achieved those metrics. For instance, hitting the service level goal was just a matter of staffing, but it took 48 hours to bring a new Communicator up to speed, which was a very significant cost. Similarly, we had to build a system that put all the service alternatives at the Communicators' fingertips so they could quickly and easily offer alternatives or downgrades in order to save the customer. In addition, we had to create a database of possible questions and corresponding answers so that Communicators could offer an immediate and viable alter-

Table 1

Key Performance Indicators	**IMC Goal**	**IMC Actual**	**Competitor Actual**
Service Level (% answered in X seconds)	90/10	90/10	90/10
Abandon Rate	2%	2%	6%
One-Call Resolution	85%	85%	78%
Callbacks to Settle Unresolved Issues	75%	75%	30%
Length of Call	4 min	3.8 min	4.4 min
Cross-sell	15%	15%	6%
Customer Satisfaction	90%	92%	81%
Return on Investment (ROI)		**20 to 1**	**1 to 1**

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

native to customers who wanted to cancel their service. Finally, we developed a process for logging open issues that included both internal accountability and resolution with the customer.

The results were nothing short of remarkable, as Table 1 shows. No single key performance index overwhelmingly drove the success of the program, but together they built a significant case for the investment. The emphasis on quickly answering the call, efficiently responding to questions and offering alternatives during the conversation ultimately resulted in a 20 to 1 ROI over the competition. Of course, the lifetime value of the customer is very significant in this case.

When you're trying to build the perfect customer experience, it's often as simple as doing the obvious. Define success for the end customer, understand what makes your client happy and develop key performance indicators that will drive results. Most important, develop a tactical plan to achieve the programs' goals and be willing to make the investment necessary to succeed. Always remember, there are no shortcuts to customer satisfaction.

Steve Boyazis is Executive Vice President at InfoCision Management Corporation. (news - alert) Reach him at (330) 670-1400 or Steve.Boyazis@InfoCision.com. Founded in 1982, InfoCision Management Corporation (http://www.infocision.com) is the second largest privately held teleservices company and is a leading provider of inbound and outbound marketing for nonprofit, religious and political organizations. InfoCision is also a leader in customer care services, commercial sales and marketing for a variety of Fortune 500 companies and smaller businesses. InfoCision operates 28 call centers at 12 locations in Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. For the second consecutive year, InfoCision has been named one of the 10 best places to work in Ohio by the state chamber of commerce. The company is celebrating 25 years in business in 2007.

How Much Is Superior Customer Care Worth?

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

Research consultancy Bain & Company recently conducted a survey of several hundred customer-facing companies. The companies were asked if they provided a superior customer service experience to their customers. Eighty percent of the companies surveyed were confident they did. The research group then queried the customers of those organizations whether they were supplied with a superior customer experience. The result? Eight percent agreed that they had received excellent customer care. Though these statistics are enough to make you choke the first time you read them, it is sadly not an uncommon scenario.

Why such a great gap between the perception many companies have of the customer care they provide and the reality? First of all, it's easy to agree that other people are getting terrific customer care if you are the one ostensibly providing it, not the poor chump who stays on hold for 17 minutes only to be transferred nine times. Even if the customer's issue was resolved, chances are he or she left the call feeling dissatisfied, while the company the customer just hung up with counted it as a resounding success since, technically speaking, "first-call resolution" was achieved.

Second, measuring "customer satisfaction" and taking steps to fix problems based on these measurements is tricky, and most organizations lack the experience or the resources to do so without assistance.

The Listening Company, a London-based customer insight specialist organization, released the results of a study that queried 1,000 adults about their attitudes toward customer care. Sixty percent of all consumers interviewed stated that they would take business away from a company as a result of poor service from the call center. Can you imagine any company willing to undertake the risk that they'll have to replace fully 60 percent of their customer base once a quarter, once a year or even once a decade? Yet many companies continue to focus on costs only and blunder their way through customer care programs that do more harm than good. But ignorance is bliss: as long as it says at the top of the memo that the company provides great customer service, it must be so.

This short-sighed approach to customer care was what prompted many companies to flock to low-cost offshore destinations. For some services related to customer care, offshore locations work very well. Depending on the vertical market, the quality of the agent, whether telephone contact is part of the package and the complexity of the product or service supported, some offshoring programs work quite well. For direct customer-to-customer telephone contact and high-touch transactions, offshore outsourcing to places like Southeast Asia has not been so successful, and many companies, were they to lay their apparent cost savings out against softer or more long-term costs (think of that 60 percent of dissatisfied customers who would take their business elsewhere as the result of a bad transaction) would find that trying to squeeze more costs savings out of customer care program is a bit like spitting into the wind.

It sounds simplistic to say that policies to provide superior customer care pay for themselves, but it should be said anyway: policies to provide superior customer care pay for themselves, often a lot faster than many companies could imagine. The old corporate adage, "You can't manage it if you can't measure it" has never been truer. If you're guessing your way through your customer care, it's probable that you're among that 80 percent of organizations who think they are giving their customers great service — just do your best to pretend not to notice that your customers aren't calling you anymore.

The author may be contacted at tschelmetic@tmcnet.com.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

By Patrick Barnard
Associate Editor, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

I Was An Outbound Call Center Agent

There. I've said it. And let's face it…in the 1980s, the job of outbound call center agent ranked right up there with cleaner of public restrooms on the job appeal scale. But there is a bright side: little did I know then that it would end up becoming useful in my role as associate editor for this magazine.

During college, primarily to pay to pay for pizza binges, I took a job with a market research organization. The company was typical of the call centers of the early 1980s: rows of cubicles, each with a standard AT&T phone and not much else (what's a headset?). There were no computers or auto-dialers — to make a call, agents picked up the handset and dialed the numbers provided on dot-matrix print-outs. These numbers were generally purchased from list brokers. They were also unreliable, sometimes resulting in the following scenario:

Call recipient: "Joe's Pizza."
Agent: "You mean this isn't the DeCola residence?"
Call recipient: "Look, do you want to order a pizza or not?"
Agent: "I was hoping you'd like to tell me how much you love your new deluxe floor mats for your car."

Stalemate. You get the picture.

Political surveys were my favorite. It was fascinating to hear people express their views so freely — which was more common back in those days, since telemarketing was still relatively new. People were sometimes actually happy to take a call from a stranger and have the opportunity to express their views.

Computerized scripting? Not a chance. We used response sheets that included a series of multiple choice responses with check boxes. Sometimes we had to write the responses free-hand. If we couldn't write fast enough, we had to summarize as best we could after the caller hung up. ("Responder said, 'Walter Mondale is awesome!'"). The scripts we did have were typically posted on the walls of each cubicle in brightly colored paper — each color representing a different "canned" response we delivered in a friendly manner on the first call and in deadly monotone by the fortieth call.

After college, I took a call center job doing direct selling. Although doing direct sales has never been one of my strengths, I was making $9 an hour, which was respectable at the time. The project lasted only a few months, then suddenly and without explanation, the company let everybody go. It was my first and only experience with the dreaded "sudden call center closing" that has become all too common these days in poorly managed organizations.

My next step on the call center rung involved doing consumer satisfaction surveys mixed with some sales for a busy call center engaged in what was a fairly common practice of over-hiring agents and then "weeding out" the under-performing ones. I missed a shift or two in the first two weeks — a major no-no for anyone who wishes to continue a promising career in a call center — so the company simply stopped offering me shifts. It started to dawn on me that maybe call center jobs weren't so easy to land and retain after all.

Still, I took another part-time call center job for another market research organization. This company was the right fit: professional yet casual; the schedule was flexible; and the pay was good. They had put together a good team of representatives: smart, dedicated people who knew what they were doing. Quality blossomed as we overheard one another's calls and strove to compete after each successful resolution. By this time, I had developed my own personal style of handling calls and I had increased my comfort level with reaching out to strangers. Few people ever recognize the complexity of the skills possessed by top-notch outbound agents.

By the late 1980s, call centers and telemarketing companies were starting to get a bum rap; probably for good reason. In those days — before caller I.D., you often caught people off-guard — sometimes extremely off-guard. I once spoke to a man who was in the process of a vicious breakup with his wife…during the call. Every so often, when the man would pause, I could hear the sound of cursing and breaking dishes in the background. To this day, I still wonder how he was able to express his opinions of the product I was calling him about while his wife was loudly detailing his origins, his mother's reputation and where she wished him to put the couple's marriage.

At other times, we found ourselves playing "counselor" to miserable souls who had no compunction about sharing their personal problems with call center agents. At other times, we played victim to pranksters whose only goal in life was to mess up your survey by providing fake and intentionally ridiculous responses. As outbound telemarketing's negative reputation was growing, it was becoming more challenging to obtain meaningful results.

Post-college, I ended my "career path" as an outbound call center agent. Determined to put my degree to good use, I approached journalism as a profession. Looking back, I believe that I took my lumps with dignity and learned a great deal. It's possible that there is no other profession in the world that teaches a person more about human nature than outbound telemarketing. In any case, I feel I've come full circle as I've now been able to link my second chosen profession with my first. *Customer Interaction Solutions* helped launch the early telemarketing industry in the 1980s, and while both the magazine and the industry have changed a great deal in the last few decades, one lesson remains: If you have high-performing outbound call center agents in your contact center, reward them. Cherish them. Unless you're an overworked air-traffic controller, an emergency medical technician or a kindergarten teacher, your outbound agents' jobs are more stressful than yours will ever be.

The author may be contacted at pbarnard@tmcnet.com.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

Customer Interaction Solutions' Eighth Annual CRM Excellence Awards, Part Two

For the eighth consecutive year, the editors of *Customer Interaction Solutions* dared readers to prove that their companies have what it takes to win the coveted CRM Excellence Award. Below is Part Two of the winners list — the companies that offer the best and the brightest customer relationship management products and services, all to the benefit of their clients. Winners were chosen on hard data: quantifiable results that convinced us, without a doubt, their clients were infinitely better off with these companies' products and services than without.

Congratulations to the Winners!

EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of the very large volume of award applications we received, the CRM Excellence Award winners have been presented in two parts; Part One appeared in the May 2007 issue of *Customer Interaction Solutions*. More information about winning companies and their products and services may be found at http://www.tmcnet.com.

AMC Technology, LLC
MultiChannel Integration Suite
http://www.amctechnology.com

Astute Solutions
ePowerCenter
http://www.astutesolutions.com

Cross Country Automotive Services
CRM Solution
http://www.crosscountry-auto.com

Enkata Technologies
Enkata Contact Center
Performance Management
http://www.enkata.com

Envox Worldwide
Envox CT Connect
http://www.envox.com

FrontRange Solutions
GoldMine Corporate Edition
http://www.goldmine.com

Gryphon Networks
Call Advisor
http://www.gryphonnetworks.com

Infusion Software
Infusion CRM
http://www.infusionsoftware.com

KANA Software
KANA IQ
http://www.kana.com

Numara Software, Inc.
Numara FootPrints
http://www.numarasoftware.com

OKS-Ameridial Worldwide
Blended on-shore/offshore
inbound and outbound call center
and BPO solution
http://www.oksameridial.com

Pegasystems
Pegasystems Customer
Process Manager
http://www.pega.com

SafeHarbor Technology Corp.
SmartSupport
http://www.safeharbor.com

SAS
SAS Customer Intelligence
http://www.sas.com

SER Solutions Inc.
SERTAINTY Speech
Analytics Solution
http://www.ser.com

Sitel
Sitel
http://www.sitel.com

Verizon Business
Verizon Business eBonding
http://www.verizonbusiness.com

Witness Systems
Impact 360 Workforce Optimization
http://www.witness.com

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

By Doug Tanoury, Customer Interactions Consulting (CIC)

Business Case for Bangalore: Pros and Cons of Relocating a Contact Center to India

Just as computers and the Internet revolutionized the business world in the 1990s, globalization will have an even greater impact on businesses in the first 10 years of this decade. In 2000 and beyond, globalization in politics, business and culture is having a profound effect on our work lives and on our personal lives. Since 2000, offshore relocation of front- and back-office functions from the U.S. to India has steadily increased (Kripalani, Lee, & Saminather, 2006).

Much of the movement offshore is driven by anecdotal data and the general trend to follow the crowd, which is especially enamored with the mode of offshore operations. What no one seems willing to do is show the actual business case and the results achieved. There is a great deal of hype, but we are a little short on substance. This discussion is focused on the competitive cost advantage that can be achieved by relocating a U.S.-based contact center to Bangalore. The intention of this report is to provide an “apples-to-apples” comparison using the same levels of service and available staff.

Rule of thumb says that payback in 12 months or less makes a good business case. The farther the payback point extends beyond 12 months, the weaker the business case becomes.

The objective of this exercise is to duplicate a U.S. operation as closely as possible in Bangalore in an effort to highlight cost differences and any significant impact to service levels and quality.

Business Advantages: Cost Savings, Cost Savings, Cost Savings

The most significant portion — about 70 percent — of contact center cost is payroll. The goal of any offshore relocation is to a reduction of at least 70 percent in contact center payroll costs and a payback of all relocation and launch expenses within a 12-month period. The 12-month payback period is the hallmark of a solid business case and rapid paybacks of this type are common in contact centers where work volumes are high and the service is labor-intensive. Rule of thumb says that payback in 12 months or less makes a good business case. The farther the payback point extends beyond 12 months, the weaker the business case becomes.

Beyond a rapid payback, the business benefits also involve placing a U.S.- based company in a position to expand front- and back-office operations in Asia while holding costs at a level that will afford competitive advantage. Increased staffing levels, with reduced absence and attrition rates, will provide increased accessibility and decreased wait times for callers, and this will improve customer satisfaction levels.

Risks: What If Customers Don’t Like Ending Up In Bangalore?

Five major risks can influence the success and viability of the business case that is driving offshore relocations.

The greatest risk is a backlash from our customer community in response to the Indian-English accent of the telephone agents. Levels of customer satisfaction can be reduced based on the perception that service levels delivered by Indian employees is inferior to service levels delivered in North America, as well as the concern regarding the impact of outsourcing on the U.S. economy.

In addition, Bangalore is GMT +5:30 while Eastern Standard Time in the U.S. is –5 GMT. This greater than 10-hour time difference may complicate management and communication.

There is a view that dispute between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir region may accelerate into a war, and that this war may escalate rapidly to a nuclear level given the capabilities of the countries.

There is a persistent risk of sectarian violence based on the religious differences of the Hindi majority and the Islamic minority. This has the potential to disrupt normal business operations.

The ever-increasing acceptance and growth of offshore outsourcing may create levels of demand in India that will continue to inflate payroll costs and erode the savings upon which this relocation’s justification is based (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 12).

Driving Business Factors

The most notable factors of the current operation driving this relocation are excessive labor costs, elevated staff turnover and the high cost of recruiting and training. In many applications, contact centers are not profit centers and generate no revenue. In most cases, contact centers are viewed as cost centers or a necessary expense of doing

Table 1. North American Staff Levels and Average Wages.

Staff Level	Avg US Hourly	Avg US Monthly	Avg US Annual*
CSR	$ 16.25	$ 2,881.13	$ 34,573.50
CSR II	$ 18.34	$ 3,251.68	$ 39,020.18
LCSR	$ 24.45	$ 4,334.99	$ 52,019.82
Tech. Support Analyst	$ 39.00	$ 6,914.70	$ 82,976.40
Supervisor	$ 30.56	$ 5,418.29	$ 65,019.46
Manager	$ 36.69	$ 6,505.14	$ 78,061.64

**30 percent cost for employee benefits has been included.*

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

Table 2. Indian Staff Levels and Average Wages.

Staff Level	Avg US Hourly	Avg US Monthly	Avg US Annual*
CSR	$ 3.37	$ 596.61	$ 7,159.37
CSR II	$ 3.79	$ 672.84	$ 8,074.07
LCSR	$ 5.07	$ 898.30	$ 10,779.62
Tech. Support Analyst	$ 6.33	$ 1,121.99	$ 13,463.88
Supervisor	$ 7.59	$ 1,345.68	$ 16,148.15
Manager	$ 8.07	$ 1,430.81	$ 17,169.73

**17 percent cost for employee benefits has been included.*

business. In short, they represent a cost that must be managed.

High labor costs. Table 1 delineates the typical tiered staffing levels found in many contact centers as well as hourly, monthly and annual costs for North American contact center staff.

Table 2 shows the same staffing levels along with hourly, monthly and annual costs for Indian employees. Indian wages and salary are approximately 77 percent lower than in the U.S. for the same level of skilled labor.

Staff turnover. Overall staff turnover rates of 60 percent annually will be decreased by 50 percent. This will reduce average handle time and training costs. A staff of 500 with an annual attrition rate of 60 percent loses 300 employees annually. A 50 percent reduction in the attrition rate would put it as 30 percent annually, or 150 people a year. That reduces the required payroll while in training from 24,000 hours to 12,000 hours, and this cuts training costs in half. Because the actual rate of attrition may change drastically year over year, it is not included in the payroll savings used to calculate this business case.

Quality issues. Based on a more seasoned and tenured staff, it is expected that quality and customer satisfaction will increase. For purposes of this discussion, it is assumed that the relocation of operations offshore will hold quality at current levels.

Initial training costs. Two weeks of initial training are required and this cost will equal two weeks of pay per staff member. The salary cost is staff based on the number of employees trained times 80 hours. So in our call center of 500 people, let us assume each person receives 80 hours of training. The salary for four instructors for a two-week period is also included in the cost. Training cost for staff will be $171,259 US dollars, and the eight instructors for two weeks will cost $5,122 USD.

Total Cost Savings

There is only one real reason to relocate North American operations in India and that is dramatic cost reduction. Customer contacts centers are comprised of four key operational elements: people, process, technology and facility. It can be assumed that real estate or facility costs as well as technology and processes will be the same in India as in North America. The majority of contact center-related cost is people, so this is the primary cost that all business cases to offshore are based on. The table below shows the comparative payroll costs between North America and India.

As illustrated in Table 3 below, the overall annual payroll savings because of this relocation is $24,565,000, and this includes benefits as well as salary. This is a reduction of about 82 percent of current payroll expenses for a U.S.-based contact center.

Table 3. Annual Payroll Cost Savings.

Staff Level	Total Staff Headcount	Total USA Payroll Cost **	Total IN Payroll Cost **	Annual Payroll Savings
CSR	250	$ 11,236,387.50	$ 2,094,116.90	$ 9,142,270.61
CSR II	110	$ 5,579,886.31	$ 1,039,133.31	$ 4,540,753.00
LCSR	35	$ 2,366,901.81	$ 441,425.27	$ 1,925,476.54
Tech. Support Analyst	75	$ 8,090,199.00	$ 1,181,455.63	$ 6,908,743.37
Supervisor	25	$ 2,113,132.32	$ 472,333.32	$ 1,640,799.00
Manager	5	$ 507,400.69	$ 100,442.93	$ 406,957.75
Totals	**500**	**$ 29,893,907.63**	**$ 5,328,907.36**	**$ 24,565,000.26**

**Includes benefits*

Scope Of The Business Case

This section will continue a cost focus, and discuss such areas as facility or real estate fees, technology infrastructure cost, labor and process related expenditures.

Facility. For the sake of simplicity of the business case, it is assumed that the cost of the facility will be identical in Bangalore versus North America. However, furniture will also need to be purchased, so $5,000 USD per staff member should be budgeted for a total outlay of $2,500,000 USD.

Technology. A new telephone system is required at a cost of $1,000 USD per staff member for a total expense of $500,000 USD.

Table 4. Total Expenditures.

Expense Item	Avg US Hourly
Furniture	$ 2,500,000.00
Technology	$ 1,000,000.00
Training	$ 176,381.00
Travel & Expenses	$ 500,000.00
Project Managers & Team	$ 500,000.00
Total Relocation Expenses	**$ 4,676,381.00**

Total expenditure related to the relocation is $4,676,381 USD. Total annual savings in payroll costs is $ 24,565,000 USD. First-year savings after costs are $19,888,619 USD. The payback period to recover all relocation related expenses is 2.3 months.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

All systems are Internet-based and can be accessed via the corporate Intranet. Computer workstations will need to be purchased and installed in India; we should allocate $1,000 USD per staff member for a total expense of $ 500,000 USD. Therefore, purchase and installation of telephone and computer workstations for a staff of 500 will cost approximately $1,000,000 USD.

People. The hiring profile should be easy to fill in most metropolitan areas in India. English language skills and good typing skills are the two primary requirements. Foreign accents remain a problem, but companies have taken some creative steps toward accent reduction in their staff, such as watching American television and movies.

Process. The relocation from a business process standpoint is assumed to be process-neutral, and no gains or losses in overall process efficiency is expected.

The Bottom Line

Relocation costs related to people, process, facility and technology are summarized in Table 4. The expenses in this table were assembled as part of a sample budget and are based on management estimates.

The annual North American payroll cost calculates to $29,893,908 for a 500-person call center operation, versus a $5,328,907.36 annual Indian payroll cost for a 500-person call center operation.

What Now?

The savings realized by relocating North American contact center operations to India is so significant that it represents a compelling competitive advantage. Although savings appear dramatic, a careful business case that includes an in-depth, business-specific analysis is required before projects of this nature are undertaken. More than ever before, globalization is speeding up the pace of change around the world and companies that do not take advantage of these changes are certainly likely to be overtaken by them.

1. Kripalani, M., Lee, L., & Saminather, N. (2006, July 28). Call Center? That's So 2004. BusinessWeek Online.

2. India. (2006). Country Review. Retrieved October 20, 2006, from Country Watch database.

3. Bhattacharjee, A. (2003, October 29). India's Call Centers Face Struggle to Keep Staff as Economy Revives. Wall Street Journal, pg. n/.

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Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

Call Centers Are The Communication Nucleus Of Any Business

Create A Nimble, Reactive Call Center To Gain An Advantage

Fred manages an outbound call center. His primary responsibility is to ensure:	**Ann manages an inbound service center. She is concerned about:**
• Callers make qualified connections.	• First-call completion rates.
• He can control and monitor the performance of his representatives.	• Skills-based routing calls.
• FTC regulations are not violated.	• Doing more with the same or less personnel resources.
• His goals are achieved.	• Achieving her goals.

What do they have in common? Both Fred and Ann are trying to find a way to retain qualified staff while cost-effectively meeting internal and/or external customer demands. Ensuring high-quality performance while minimizing risks and balancing the budget is not a simple task even for a multi-talented professional. The basic element both managers face is they need to find a way to do more work with the same or less personnel each year.

Cost is always an issue when evaluating calling needs. Whether you operate a call center inside a major corporation, run an independent call center or have a small center inside your business, there is always pressure to achieve more. A call center helps maximize profits. The trick is to ensure management views the call center as a profit arm and not an expense to control. Efficient handling of inbound service calls translates to a good reputation and brand enhancement. Effective outbound calling stimulates revenue.

The call received or taken often sets the tone of the customer's lifelong relationship with a company. The impression left can create a positive energy or a lasting negative spin. Even small efficiency gains can produce large results in the right operation. A company will spend millions of dollars on branding that can be wiped out in minutes with a bad call.

Like most entities, a call center evolves over time. They developed a process that addressed their initial needs, but then needed to adapt to meet new customer demands, regulatory changes or other moving targets that were not in place when the initial solution was designed. The center can become challenged by regulatory or technical changes or changing business needs. There are several potential obstacles a call center can encounter:

Legacy investments. These are locations where so much has been invested in the existing system that making a change is unthinkable. This is a trap many companies fall into. Sustaining a legacy may be important in some areas, but in business, the legacy should be the perpetual drive to improve profits.

The current solution is not fully depreciated. Why hold onto a solution, even if it is not fully depreciated, if it is holding you back from achieving mission-critical goals? Writing an old system off may make better financial sense if the solution replacing it can bring the productivity needed to achieve today's financial metrics.
Acquisitions and mergers. How does an organization integrate two or more call centers that may exist when an acquisition or merger occurs? Is selecting one of the two existing solutions the right choice or can benefits be gained for both call centers by choosing a new application to unify the new operation? The cost of modifications to either legacy system may be more than the cost of one new integrated solution suite.

Capacity-strained centers. Moving from one physical space to another is an expensive and time-consuming task that in the end results in a higher fixed commitment to rent. When a business hits a perceived physical capacity limit, it should step back and look to see if it can realize a 25 to 50 percent productivity gain by revisiting the current solution driving the center. Moving or expanding may not be what is needed to fix the increased demand for space.

Emerging entities. These groups often do not even know they are a call center. Calling is critical to what they do, but if they use manual dialers or some form of customer relationship or contact management system, are they really allowing callers to do their job properly? Are they still experiencing operator intercepts, busy signals or other "dialing"-related obstacles? Are incoming calls being appropriately routed by using an IVR to the proper first-level response agent?

Calling, whether it is inbound or outbound, is a money management decision. Call efficiency goes deeper than surface labor dollars. There are at least three major intangible items that affect every call center:
Customer retention. Whether you operate an inbound response center or outbound group, the goal is to have an efficient, productive call. You may be the internal support group for a company or contracted to sell or support

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

another business's clients, but the target is to achieve a high satisfaction or sales rate. The call center solution can be the driver to make agents more productive, which can reduce employee turnover. Turnover increases hiring and training costs, affects employee morale and makes it harder to achieve goals. Every caller who leaves drains profits and creates emotional stress.

Caller effectiveness. Callers learn as they go. The more they are exposed to, the more potential they have to learn. In an outbound center, if an agent is experiencing 30 connects per hour and has the opportunity to make 60 connects per hour, that agent will exponentially refine his or her calling style, which should produce better results in a shorter time. Ideally, an outbound center would like to see the number of connections begin to drop in correlation with an increase in sales. Automation and tools create the proper setting to optimize calling results.

Risk. What is said, how it is said, the offer made, the words used and other factors all add to the potential risk in operating a call center. What level of call monitoring is conducted? Are calls being recorded to ensure employees are following procedures and to protect agents from being accused of something they did not say? Beyond FTC do-not-call concerns, there are other exposure areas that reside in a call center. In today's litigious society, the ability to monitor, train, record and intercept are good options to have and practices to deploy.

What is in place today is not as important as getting to where you need to be tomorrow. If you have an existing call center solution, it may seem difficult to consider replacing it, but you need to ask if you are getting the type and volume of responses needed? Look at the different types of call center challenges from above. Does a legacy system do what it needs to do today? The cost of personnel and client acquisition or satisfaction should far outweigh the decision to hold onto a solution that may not be achieving goals. Does the fact that an asset is not fully depreciated mean it should continue to be in use? In a merger, acquisition or space strained location will a new call center solution get you to the next level? Challenge the existing operation to see if better technology and fresh ideas can expand your resources.

To understand what benchmarking questions to ask related to your center, please call us. We find most call centers struggle to understand the alternative value points and ROI potential that exists because they are so deeply ingrained in their current applications. SCS is not the perfect fit for everyone, but we are always able to spend a few minutes helping anyone who calls us. You will talk with owners and key executives who live and breathe the issues of this industry and work with their sleeves rolled up alongside of their customers. Contact Mark Findahl, VP of Customer Support, to discuss your needs at 800-727-4155 or via e-mail at mfindahl@strategicinc.com.

For Today's Call Center, Flexibility Is Not Just "Nice To Have"

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

Let's face it. The call centers of 20 or even 10 years ago operated in one way only. Agents were hired and trained in the same way, the parameters for call recording had been set in stone years before, IVR menu trees were set up once and the call center was expected to bend to the IVR rather than the other way around. Dialers operated the same way every day and scripts were cumbersome to change. When it came to inbound calls, agents had one modus operandi, and making any changes to it involved circulating paper copies of memos that were doomed never to be read.

Change was about as welcome as a tax audit, and flexibility in day-to-day operations was an urban legend. "Blending" was something that was done for cocktails on Fridays in an attempt to forget the dismal week that had just passed. No matter how hard call center managers, supervisors and agents worked, they would never be anything but a cost liability to the company that contained them.

The good news is, these kinds of call centers cannot exist much longer. Newer and far more flexible technologies are increasingly being adopted to allow organizations to build contact centers (either literally or virtually) that move and blend to meet a company's needs, not the other way around.

Today, smarter ACDs can be configured quickly to work in the best interests of the contact center at any particular moment. Better IVR solutions (for both inbound AND outbound calls) can be changed quickly and work with the call center's scheduling software. Dialers can be easily customized to make the best possible use of available resources. Recording can be done exactly how a business needs it, when it needs it, and the results can be stored digitally for easy access. (Once upon a time, the terms "stored calls" and "easy access" could never be uttered in the same sentence unless there was a punch line.)

Best of all? Today's newer operating model of multiple, integrated call centers can be easily served by today's more flexible technologies. Multiple sites need not duplicate hardware and software and operate almost independently of one another, but can be tied together with a single solution to operate as a unified whole, invisible as separate sites by customers.

The goal is to give agents exactly what they need when they need it, and customers what they want when they want it simultaneously, a feat that is no longer an urban legend. Because as generations of earlier call centers have discovered, expecting customers and agents to change to suit the call center results in high turnover of both. Building a call center that can change to meet the needs of customers and the agents who serve them yields benefits at both ends: for the contact center that was formerly a black hole for capital but now generates revenue, and for the customers who just want to resolve their queries.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

Ten Solutions To Common Problems With Workforce Management Implementations

Over the years, you've probably read a lot of articles about the most important things to consider when buying workforce management. You probably know them by heart: get executive buy-in, form a task force to determine needs, be sure integration will be easy, don't buy features you don't need, etc. You're probably tired of hearing them. You also probably found that, last time around, even after due-diligence, you ended up with a solution that still didn't quite meet your needs.

Your problem: Last time you bought workforce management, the company you bought from forgot your name 20 minutes after they left the building and has now unlisted its phone number.

The solution: Consider the values of your future partner.

Consider your purchase of workforce management software as the beginning of a project instead of the end, and the start of a hopefully strong relationship with your WFM vendor. As soon as implementation begins, you're left not just with the software, but with the people who support it, and they'll make a huge difference in your success.

Selecting the right vendor is therefore critical.The most powerful software is useful only if it is properly installed, and users are well trained and continuously supported. Contact centers understand what customer service is all about, and you should expect the same attitude and spirit from your vendor. When selecting a vendor, ask the following:

- How long does it take for the vendor to answer requests?
- What are the vendor's policies around product evolution?
- Does the vendor have an established users' group, and how often does it meet?
- What do the vendor's current customers have to say?

Your problem: The solution looked great in the brochure, and at the scripted demo at the trade show, it seemed like it was made for your company. Strangely enough, once you've gotten it implemented in your call center, you've discovered that it was really designed for companies warehousing and shipping government surplus cheese in 1982.

The solution: When viewing vendor demos, make sure the vendor can demonstrate how their solution will meet your objectives, operational needs and specific future needs.

Armed with your prioritized business needs, you can approach software selection with confidence. All you really want to buy is software that satisfies the vital items and that meets specific future needs you have also labeled as vital. This kind of prioritization proves invaluable during the many vendor demos you are likely to be subjected to.

If you can obtain software for the same price that includes the vital items and a few desirables, that may be the best option. But if you have to pay more to obtain merely desirable functionality, why bother? Or worse, if a salesman puts on an Oscar-worthy performance extolling the virtues of features you have already labeled as unnecessary, you won't be swayed by the interest of the moment. (Ignore the IT guy gasping "That's soooo cool!" at the end of the conference table.)

But take things a stage further. Demand that each of the vendors on your short list actually demonstrate how their solution will meet your specific objectives and operational needs. This step should be visual, not oral — you want to see it with your own eyes, not hear yet another round of vendor promises. The one that can demonstrate the fulfillment of your vital needs at the best price will be the best candidate.

Your problem: The vendor's ROI calculations were achieved by no methods known to modern mathematics…or even astrology or tarot cards.

The solution: Compare vendors' estimated ROI to your own.

Factor in decreases in agent labor hours, operational hours to forecast and schedule across the entire contact center enterprise, and

an increase in calls handled and service levels. You will probably be handed ROI workouts by the various vendors and some may include some gifted statistical "adjustments." It's easy to be impressed by these, but safer to stick to numbers you can trust – your own. So have in hand your own numbers and see how the various tools and offerings work out under your own ROI model.

Keep in mind that the cost associated with a workforce management solution is more than just hardware and software. Therefore, it's important to understand all the initial costs and ongoing expenses upfront. For example, the company may need to add workforce planning staff or be required to upgrade the ACD as part of the project. Keeping things like this in mind will ensure everything has been budgeted, and the company is fully prepared for the associated expenses.

Your problem: The total cost of ownership (TCO) was calculated by someone who finds balancing his own checkbook tricky.

The solution: Factor all possible hidden costs into your TCO.
When estimating the total cost of a workforce management (WFM) solution, it is important to identify all of the costs, both upfront and ongoing, that feed into the overall TCO. These include the following:

Cost of software licenses. If the solution is not pre-integrated with the ACD, it is important to include the cost of any required "connectors" needed to interface the software with the ACD.

Cost of additional hardware. Are additional servers required? Additional database licenses? Additional hardware also implies addition maintenance costs.

Cost of services (this can often be more than the software). Best practices consulting should not be skimped on, and the amount of training required for resource managers, supervisors and agents will, in part, depend on whether the WFM solution is part of the applications they are already using on a daily basis, or if it requires becoming familiar with an entirely new set of user interfaces.

Cost of integrating the WFM package into the ACD solution. This can be quite high, and take a significant amount of time unless the solution is pre-integrated. Also this is a recurring cost as the integration may need to be redone whenever either vendor releases a new version of its software.

Cost of maintaining data. With a third-party product, dual maintenance is required for data gathered across users, queues, skills, workgroup memberships, etc.

Cost of service. A multi-vendor solution can lead to delays in service while it is determined whose piece of the solution is causing the problem. It also requires maintaining and paying for multiple service contracts.

Your problem: The workforce management solution was designed to operate well only in a perfect world, complete with unicorns, leprechauns, agents with perfect schedule adherence and other fairy tale creatures.

The solution: Pay attention to schedule adherence issues.
Schedule adherence and conformity are critical concepts to consider when selecting WFM software. These concepts can be seen as the point in the process where schedules come to life. Agents are human beings, and behaviours, practices and other activities will fluctuate now and then. Effective WFM software will consider agent adherence over a period of time — not only in real-time.

WFM software vendors should be able to provide historical adherence and conformity data (ratios and details). Such data will ensure fairness and effective agent management and help avoid simply creating a "police" climate. Truly effective WFM software will provide reliable facts that enable fair and accurate agent evaluations.

Many vendors claim real-time adherence, but not all solutions are equal. Any significant lag-time between an agent going out of adherence and the notification and display of that event will drastically reduce the value being provided.

It is also important to consider the quality of information being provided on adherence. Does it indicate only that an agent was in or out of adherence, or does it provide details as to whether or not he or she was early or late transitioning from one activity to another, and what the agent was actually doing while out of adherence?

Additionally, the solution should be able to recognize adherence events that were out of the agent's control, such as a meeting running long. Look closely at the mechanism used to do this. If it involves editing the schedule, then critical information is being lost. Instead, look for an easy-to-use interface to mark adherence events as excused, and why.

Your problem: You actually believe all your agents are going to come to work every day.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

The solution: Build in absence management.
OK, so you've got a good forecast, you've created schedules for the week and you're good to go. Each and every agent shows up for their appointed shift at their appointed time, right? Not usually. Unexpected absences, for whatever reason, can quickly transform the best planned schedule into unmitigated chaos. Further complicating the absence equation is that schedules are often created taking into account agent skills, work preferences, proficiencies and other factors. Having a method of automatically recommending replacement agents of a similar profile as the one(s) who are absent helps retain the integrity of the original schedule with minimal disruptions to service levels and customer service.

Your problem: Just because the executive layer wants the system up and running, with all applicable personnel trained, by next Tuesday doesn't make it so.

The solution: Develop a realistic implementation timeline.
Building a realistic implementation schedule can be a challenging feat. The project manager must calculate lead-time for procurement, data collection, training, process changes, validation testing, cutover and phased implementation. As a rule of thumb, six to twelve weeks is realistic for most organizations.

Your problem: I can't clone my agents so they are all identical. It must be a hiccup in my recombinant DNA sequencing process!

The solution: Schedule by proficiency.
All agents are not created equal, though some scheduling programs seem to think so. In reality, agents who have the same skill sets may have wildly divergent proficiencies in those skills. An agent fresh out of training is not likely to be as proficient as a veteran agent with 10 years' experience, for example. Accounting for these proficiency differences when creating schedules increases the probability that the schedule will be adequate to handle the expected workload.

Your problem: Integration is 10 times the headache you predicted it would be, and you were ridiculed for being the pessimist on the panel.

The solution: Move integration much, much higher on your list of priorities.
A robust contact center solution has a comprehensive set of complementary applications, such as recording, quality monitoring, IVR, ACD, presence management and others. Many of these applications produce data that are valuable sources of agent KPIs (key performance indicators). If the data reside in multiple databases, then it is much more difficult to pull the information together into an overall agent scorecard.

In addition, integrations that require translating and transferring data from one application to another, such as transferring ACD data to the forecasting module, or agent status information to the RTA module, tend to have delays, breakdowns and other complications. They also force the data into a lowest-common-denominator definition of what the data are, causing a definite loss of specific information.

In general, any point of integration is also a potential point of failure, a potential point of delay and a potential point of data loss.

Your problem: Is the new solution working? Does anyone know?

The solution: Foster an environment for ongoing improvement.
Once the workforce management system is in place, be a champion for excellence. Strive for a culture of continuous improvement by setting goals and measuring them. Compare those results to industry benchmarks. Do an annual review of results either with the vendor or another industry expert. This will help the center justify "improvement" monies in each year's budget.

Don't be satisfied with the initial payback and success. Use the "what if" analysis capabilities to investigate how added product features and functions can further enhance operational efficiency. Seek better ways to use the existing infrastructure to fine-tune current practices.

A wise person once stated that it's not the problems you expect that will be your undoing, but the ones that sneak up on you and pounce before you even know they existed. Your vendor, whoever you choose, will never know your organization, your processes, your contact center and your agents as well as you do. It's their job to offer you the best possible solution, but the onus must be on you to make the final decision about whether what the vendor is offering will suit your needs. Many a fine company and a fine solution have tried to succeed together and failed without it being the fault of either party. Take steps to make sure you're not stuck for the next five years with a solution that "has a nice personality" but in reality has little in common with where your organization's goals lie.

The author may be contacted at tschelmetic@tmcnet.com.

The following companies contributed to this article:

Calabrio Software
www.calabrio.com

GMT
www.gmt.com

IEX
www.iex.com

Interactive Intelligence
www.inin.com

Left Bank Solutions
www.leftbank.com

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

By Tom Aiello, Envision

Five Steps To Securing Data In The Contact Center

Recent high-profile security breaches have underlined the importance of safeguarding sensitive customer information from the contact center to the enterprise. Failure to protect customer data has resulted in damaged reputations, costly penalties and dissatisfied customers.

Contact centers can take proactive steps to safeguard customer data by protecting information stored in millions of agent-customer recorded interactions. Demand to share the voice of the customer with enterprise decision-makers and increasingly high agent attrition rates have made this a necessity. Companies interested in becoming more proactive with guarding their customer data across and throughout the contact center and the extended enterprise can take the following steps.

1. Perform A Risk Assessment

The first step to protecting your customers' data in the contact center is to perform an assessment of your current data management processes and policies. A detailed assessment will help you uncover your current risk exposure and identify whether you have security gaps that need to be addressed. In order to perform a risk assessment you will need to create a checklist to establish a baseline of information regarding your current security level. For example:

- Who currently manages sensitive customer data in your center and how are you currently sharing that information?
- What types of sensitive customer data do you process?
- Where are those data processed within your contact center? Is the information processed in a safe and secure environment?
- What is your level of staff turnover annually? With agent attrition rates as high as 40 or 50 percent annually, turnover may expose you to additional risk.
- Are you complying with industry guidelines or regulations? HIPAA, PCI and other industry regulations require you to protect sensitive customer information.
- Are you currently outsourcing your customer service? Your outsourcer may not have the same protection you expect or require within your organization.

2. Analyze And Perform Root Cause Analysis

By performing root cause analysis, you will be able to understand where you have data protection gaps. By analyzing your root cause analysis results, you will have the information you need to take action to better protect your data. Prioritize your security risks from lowest to highest and compare your findings with your ability to address each area.

3. Evaluate Your Options

Selecting the plan of attack to address your security issues requires strategic analysis of the costs and benefits of each solution. Addressing security concerns within your contact center requires a complex approach of understanding how people, processes and technology work together to protect customer data. For example, reducing agent attrition rates in your contact center or securing the location where customer data are being managed may reduce corporate risk.

4. Create And Communicate Your Security Plan

The assessment provides you with a baseline for measuring your current security practices and to perform root cause analysis to gain insight into how you can safeguard sensitive data in the future. Based on your current workflow, you can realign how people and processes work together to safeguard data. Write a plan and communicate it across your organization to ensure that your people and processes are aligned to protect customer data as they move through your organization. Today, technology is available to help you protect sensitive customer data as soon as the information is being collected and then shared across your organization. Technology makes it possible to protect financial and personal data as they are processed and then stored in millions of recorded customer-agents interactions each day. Whether you're interested in minimizing your risk with data collected on CRM screens and/or recorded calls, technology is available.

5. Measure And Optimize

Your security plan should be evaluated regularly and be flexible to identify new vulnerabilities that may emerge as your business grows and to ensure that your current plan is working effectively.

Tom Aiello is Vice President of Worldwide Sales and Marketing at Envision (news - alert) (http://www.envisioninc.com). He has more than two decades of experience in the contact center industry in sales management, marketing and business development.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

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By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Interaction Solutions

An Update From The VoiceXML Forum

If your goal is to find out what's on the horizon for the speech technology industry, a good place to start is finding out what's current and upcoming with the VXML Forum, considered to be the most prominent proponents and educators of speech standards worldwide. I recently got a moment to speak with Mark Randolph, Chairman of the VoiceXML Forum (http://www.voicexml.org).

TS: In a nutshell, what exactly does the VoiceXML Forum do? What are you responsible for overseeing?

MR: The VoiceXML Forum is an industry organization whose mission is to promote and to accelerate the worldwide adoption of VoiceXML and VoiceXML-based applications. Since the Forum submitted VoiceXML 1.0 to the W3C's Voice Browser Working Group and adopted it as the basis for development of a W3C dialog markup language, the W3C has led the technical development and evolution of VoiceXML, while the Forum has served as an educational and technical resource, a certification authority and a contributor and liaison to standards organizations such as the W3C, IETF, ANSI and ISO.

As these voice-driven phone applications mature, there is a critical need for companies deploying these applications to understand how their customers are actually using these systems

The Forum sponsors a wide range of activities that are designed to help promote the adoption of VoiceXML-based applications and solutions. Earlier this year, the Forum launched the VoiceXML Solutions Directory, a comprehensive directory of VoiceXML-related products and services. Our technical committees are each active with activities appropriate to their teams' charters, including speaker biometrics, VoiceXML platform certification, tools and accessibility. Our education committee established a developer certification exam and sponsors Webinars, tutorials and workshops.

TS: OK, so what happened to SALT?!

MR: There is unanimous support in the industry for a single standard for developing voice-driven applications — VoiceXML. Every major software vendor supports VoiceXML, including IBM, Microsoft, Oracle and SAP. Plus, there are countless other industry leaders and innovators all building upon and refining this one standard. To date, the VoiceXML Forum has certified 22 platforms through the Platform Certification Program including, recently, Microsoft Speech Server 2007.

A few of the themes and concepts in SALT and other industry proposals such as X+V, particularly as related to multimodal, may influence the features and design of the next generation of VoiceXML, version 3.0.

TS: Can you tell me more about the recently announced VoiceXML Solutions Directory?

MR: The VoiceXML Solutions Directory is designed to help companies interested in deploying VoiceXML-based business solutions to find the products and services they need quickly and efficiently. It currently includes nearly 200 products and services offered by the Forum's member companies. Product categories include VoiceXML platforms, application development tools and pre-built dialog modules and applications. Service categories include VUI (voice user interface) design and development, systems integration and solution deployment, and hosted services and solutions.

The VoiceXML Solutions Directory can be found at http://www.vxmldirectory.com.

TS: How many vendors do you count as members at the moment? What kinds of companies are these? Are they only speech platform providers?

MR: The VoiceXML Forum has more than 150 members worldwide, and these members span the industry value chain. Our membership is comprised of a diverse community of IT, telecom and speech industry leaders, including platform vendors, hosted solutions and service providers, application developers and tools vendors. Information about becoming a member is available on the Forum's Web site at http://www.voicexml.org.

TS: How are partnerships between vendors and the VoiceXML Forum forged? What's the typical process?

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

MR: The VoiceXML Forum is open to any company committed to supporting the development and promotion of VoiceXML and related technologies. We don't enter into partnerships with companies and organizations in the legal sense. Companies can become either Promoter or Supporter members and actively participate in the committees. We have liaison relationships with standards organizations such as the W3C, IETF, ANSI and ISO that enable us to contribute requirements, best practices and other technical work.

TS: Speech analytics are the fastest growing and most adopted technology in contact centers right now. Do you think that with analytics, speech has finally found its enterprise "killer app" to drop an overused term?

MR: The use of speech technology is becoming more and more pervasive. I think of speech, for example, in the enterprise, simply as a complement and extension of traditional customer interfaces like the Web. Today, we are seeing speech being used to extend enterprise applications and data to the phone, which is really exciting. As these voice-driven phone applications mature, there is a critical need for companies deploying these applications to understand how their customers are actually using these systems. To that end, speech analytics will become critical for enterprises — the same way business intelligence and reporting has become for traditional IT — and is an indication of how mainstream use of speech technology has become.

TS: Has speech become more affordable and flexible for SMBs as of late? What do you credit with bringing this about?

MR: I think standardization is the key reason that speech technologies have become more affordable and attractive to SMBs and we're seeing more adoption in this market segment. Standards, as has been their role in other industries, allows players across the value chain to specialize and to gain, for example, economies of scale. For instance, because of VoiceXML being a standard, solutions providers, even for packaged applications targeted for SMBs, can assume that their applications are more portable and flexible. SMBs know the risks of their investments are minimized. In addition, with the Web orientation of VoiceXML, SMBs even have the opportunity to offload the hosting of their applications with the possibility of lowering their costs even further.

TS: What kinds of strides in terms of confidence factors and success rates have been made with speech technology lately?

MR: For a long time, speech vendors and customers were very focused on recognition accuracy. Though accuracy is important, today, it's probably more useful to observe what is happening in terms of end-consumer acceptance. As more and more companies deploy speech applications across a broad range of industries, we're seeing consumers (and customers) become increasingly comfortable using these applications, even to the point where they are performing transactions by telephone.

TS: What do you say to a company that wants to deploy speech in either their call center or across the enterprise yet has minimal IT resources to maintain it?

MR: I would tell them to look to hosting companies and packaged application vendors for support.

TS: What sort of developments is the VoiceXML Forum looking forward to in the near future?

MR: The opportunities to help shape the future of phone-based applications and services are expanding beyond VoiceXML into adjacent technologies. Accordingly, the Forum's work is broadening. Today, we have technical committees dedicated to speaker biometrics, CCXML, MRCP and VoIP.

I think standardization is the key reason that speech technologies have become more affordable and attractive to SMBs and we're seeing more adoption in this market segment

As VoiceXML 2.1 nears completion (the W3C expects to release it as a W3C recommendation shortly), the Forum will launch a VoiceXML 2.1 platform certification program.

I think that multimodal is also a very significant opportunity for the VoiceXML Forum. By multimodal, I refer to the coordination of the voice user interface and the graphical or visual user interface. This will allow voice technology to play an even greater role in consumer devices such as mobile phones and television set-top boxes.

TS: Thank you for your time, Mark.

Dr. Mark A. Randolph is Fellow of the Technical Staff and Director of Engineering and Technology at Motorola (quote - news - alert) and is responsible for technology strategy in the area of mobile applications, content and services. Prior to joining Motorola, he was Member of Technical Staff at AT&T Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey. He currently serves as Chairman of the VoiceXML Forum.

By Patrick Barnard, Associate Editor, Customer Interaction Solutions

What Every Call Center Needs To Know About Speech Analytics

Speech analytics is one of the fastest growing market segments in the call center industry. Thanks to major advancements in the algorithms used to interpret speech, these automated systems now enable organizations to "mine" their recorded calls to learn details about both their customers and their agents.

Unlike the speech analytics solutions of a few years ago, which were mainly used to perform simple "word spotting" in recorded conversations, today's solutions can identify the context of what is being said, giving organizations the ability to more accurately categorize calls and gain new insights into customer and agent behavior. In fact, these systems can now actually detect emotions, giving organizations a powerful new way to gauge calls while they are in progress.

Once the province of large enterprises only, speech analytics are increasingly starting to travel downstream in terms of the size of the organizations that can benefit from it.

Today's speech analytics solutions have uses beyond just improving agent performance. It can be argued that they now have greater value outside of the contact center than inside. That's mainly because today's solutions are capable of mining all of the call data, as opposed to just a small percentage of it, which enables organizations to see a more accurate view of the "big picture." As a result, speech analytics are increasingly being used by executives in sales, marketing and operations to increase revenue, reduce costs, increase customer retention and improve the overall performance of the call center. As organizations come to adopt these solutions, the role of the call center is being redefined into that of a "business intelligence center" — the central hub of intelligence for the organization.

Once the province of large enterprises only, speech analytics are increasingly starting to travel downstream in terms of the size of the organizations that can benefit from it. "Interaction analytics can help any size of a contact center," said Barak Eilam, vice president and general manager, interaction analytics, at NICE. "Obviously, large centers face greater management challenges and as such can benefit from the technology significantly. However, we have also been working with small call centers that are experiencing fast-paced growth. Implanting interaction analytics early in the development cycle of such centers helps them to improve significantly the management of such rapid growth and to meet the associated challenges. Any contact center with more than 50 seats can benefit from the technology and see a very good ROI."

Don't Confuse It With IVR Technology

There is a misconception that speech analytics solutions have to be as accurate as IVR solutions, in terms of speech recognition, to be of real value. The erroneous conclusion is that because today's speech-enabled IVR systems are not entirely accurate that, similarly, speech analytics aren't entirely accurate either. It's important to consider that IVR is an application that comes into play at the front end of an interaction, whereas speech analytics are applied during and after the call.

"When people hear the word 'speech,' they tend to think 'speech recognition' — they think of IVR and desktop dictation systems, which speech analytics is not," said Jeff Gallino, president and CEO of CallMiner, a speech analytics company. "Even with speech recognition systems, they have ridiculously high accuracy, and people still aren't satisfied with them. That's because it is a transactional based accuracy problem - they're interested in the accuracy at the moment, not 'is it accurate enough that I can run my business on the results?' When we talk about speech analytics, we talk about the 'business accuracy' — how accurate is it to run your business — and that's a major distinction."

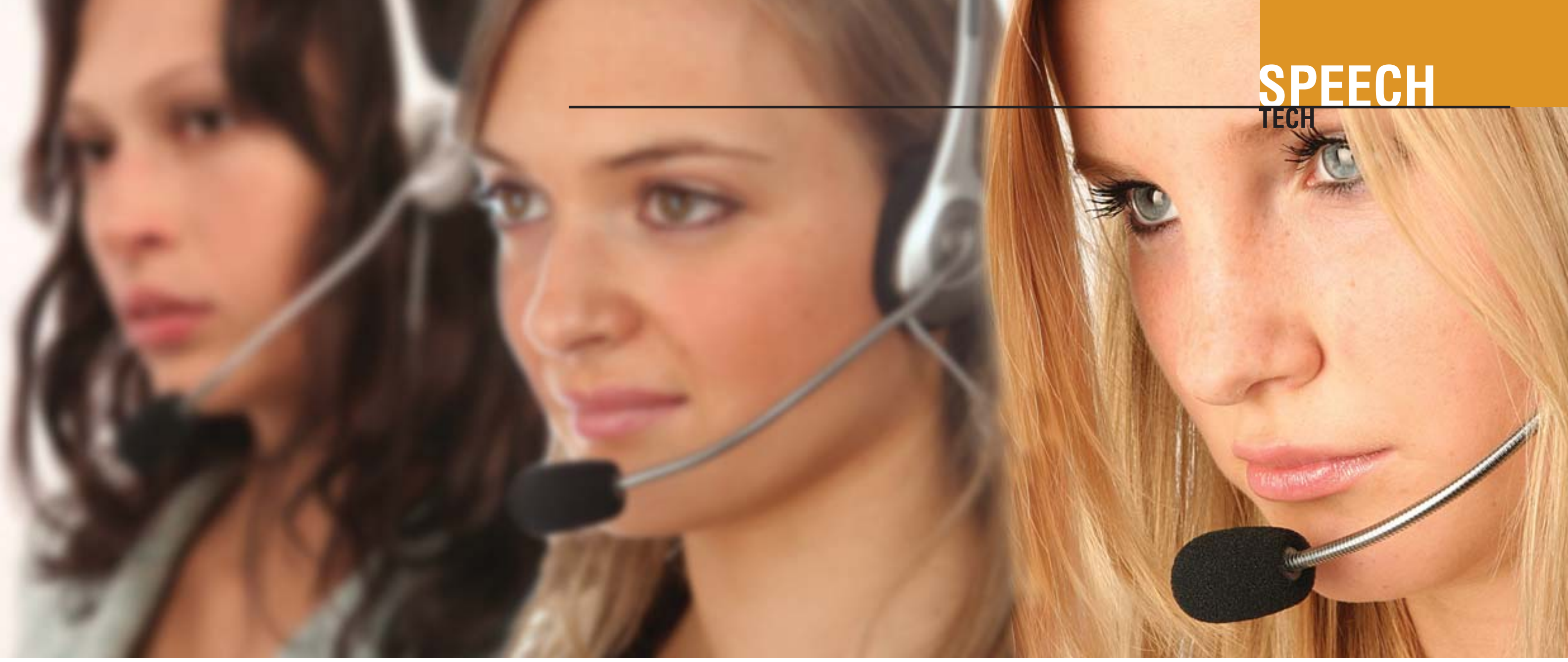
Dan Bodner, CEO and president of Verint, said, "It's not about trying to measure people's responses accurately, it's about being able to analyze overall trends and getting the big picture — but getting the big picture in an accurate way. Customers using our solutions are finding that the accuracy in terms of categorization is very good now — we're about 90 percent accurate — depending on the type of issue and the type of company. That's enough to really drive insight. You have to realize that even incomplete information is better than no information. If you have no idea why people are leaving and you can find five reasons why that's happening, you can do something about it."

Not Just A Call Center Application

In addition to improving traditional efficiency metrics such as first-call resolution, script compliance, agent performance and cross-sell/upsell rates, companies can also gain valuable insights into what their customers want by mining the data retrieved from their recorded calls.

"The great value of speech analytics is that it opens up near limitless opportunities to gain a better understanding of the customer intent or attitude," said Roger Woolley, Senior Vice President of Marketing at Autonomy/etalk. "At the

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index



most basic level, speech analytics simplifies access to recorded calls so that the call center can quickly, and without manual resources, find specific conversations, types of conversations or conversation trends for use in identifying at-risk customers, agent issues, training opportunities or process improvement initiatives. By providing an easy approach to finding relevant calls, speech analytics helps to bridge the gap between the call center and the rest of the organization so that the entire organization can analyze customer interactions for valuable insight into buying behaviors, product and competitive issues, as well as trends, opportunities and risks."

Anna Convery, senior vice president of product management and marketing for Nexidia Inc., (news - alert) said what's really exciting about today's solutions is that many opportunities for improving the customer experience are uncovered. "This 'voice of the customer' insight can be shared outside the call center with other areas of the business, such as product management and marketing, enabling the customer-centricity that many companies aspire to but often fail to realize," said Convery.

Not All Solutions Are Created Equal

Although most of today's speech analytics solutions use a blend of phonetics and linguistics, some are more "bare bones" and do only word spotting (these are phonetic, or "speech-to-text" solutions), while others use a "whole vocabulary" approach (these are the linguistic, or large vocabulary continuous speech recognition (LVCSR) solutions). This latter type can determine the context of what is being said, providing deeper insights into the interactions.

"When you go through a speech recognition process, everyone starts out the same, whether they are large vocabulary or phonetic," CallMiner's Gallino explained. "They start comparing the voice signal to a model of what the voice might be saying … and everybody starts with phonemes. They slice the audio into very tiny slices, and then they guess, and say, 'this sounds most like ah or duh or eh or one of the other phonemes.'"

What comes after the "speech-to-text" stage is where things get really interesting: This is where vendors take those tiny slices of sound and create words out of them to build a vocabulary. They then build sets or groups of words that make up common phrases. This enables the speech engine to interpret not only the words, but whole phrases, so that it can understand the context of what is being said.

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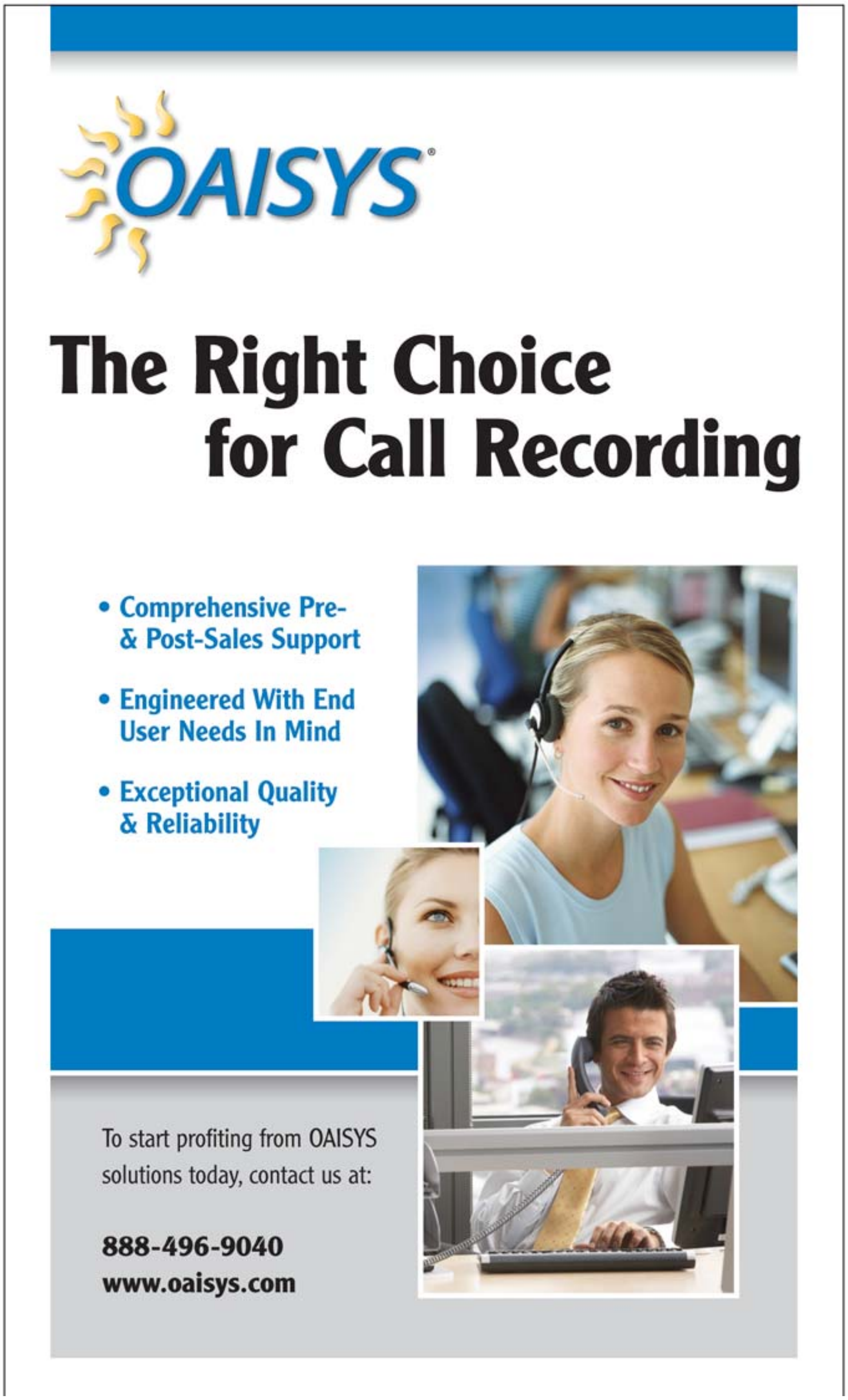
Some vendors have seen great success with deploying speech analytics as a managed service. With a managed service, the vendor hosts the call data and mines the information using its own preset methodologies. There are differences in architecture, as well, with some systems taking a completely centralized approach and others utilizing a hybrid, distributed/centralized approach. Which one is right depends on what type of call center operation you are running and what type of architecture you are using.

Do You Want To Mine In Real Time?
Thanks to faster processors and the advanced new algorithms being employed, today's speech analytics are capable of mining calls in real time — using analytics to trigger screen prompts that "intervene" and tell the agent what to do during or call, or alert a manager that he or she may need to take action — though not all companies require this real-time response. Some call centers see negative unintended consequences in such real-time action triggering.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"Even though the engines can do analysis very quickly, and could be used to send up screen prompts to agents to help them react immediately, this is not recommended as you are shaping agent behavior in a negative way," said Verint's Bodner. "Furthermore, there's no point in have it do analysis of what just one caller is saying when the agent is already trained to do that for you. The reality is that at this point during the call, they probably have better judgment than the system does."

It's important to consider that IVR is an application that comes into play at the front end of an interaction, whereas speech analytics are applied during and after the call.

Still, many companies are developing solutions that can assist agents in making the "right" decision should a call happen to go awry. As Autonomy etalk's Woolley said, "This can allow both for 'save-the-customer' alerts and, in the case of using speech tools for information delivery, processing the conversation to offer information to the agent for more effective responses."

Today's Speech Analytics Solutions Can Be Easily Integrated With Existing Systems
It's true that solutions that come pre-integrated with recording and quality monitoring solutions tend to be easier to implement. The challenge is not so much the actual integration, but in putting together a system that works smoothly and accurately.

"Technically integrating speech analytics applications into contact center workflow and processes is not difficult," said Patrick Botz, global director of marketing for Voice Print International. "Most speech analytics

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

vendors can easily analyze the majority of recorded call audio and offer canned reports so that organizations can quickly identify valuable business intelligence. Most systems include notification or escalation mechanisms to ensure the insights gleaned and related call recordings reach managers who have the power to make decisions."

Fast ROI

Although they can be pricey, today's speech analytics solutions can achieve a very fast return on investment (usually in three to six months). This is, however, highly dependent on the organization knowing its business inside and out, and therefore knowing exactly what to look for when mining calls.

With speech analytics, the ROI comes in many forms — for example, in the call center itself, you can use it to reduce agent call handle time, identify additional opportunities to cross-sell and upsell to customers and improve call resolution. Furthermore, call centers reduce the need for supervisors or managers to do manual call monitoring to uncover problems.

"With speech analytics, you can reduce manual listening by classifying calls into buckets by topics and subtopics, so that only relevant calls are monitored," said VPI's Botz. "Since most contact centers listen to over twice as many calls as necessary, implementing speech analytics can immediately reduce the time required to review calls by an average of 50 percent."

In the early days of enterprise speech solutions, we saw a technology standing alone in the corner, looking for an invitation to join the call center party. It was widely assumed, at that time, that call routing (speech-enabled IVRs) would be speech's call center "killer app." Though speech has vastly improved the humble IVR, recent studies have shown speech analytics to be the number one growth technology for call centers. It seems the conventional wisdom was wrong, and speech has found a very comfortable — and profitable — niche in the call center while most of the rest of us were busy watching the IVR.

The author may be contacted at pbarnard@tmcnet.com.

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Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

By Tracey E. Schelmetic
Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

Fun Things To Do With Your IVR

Today, many people are in the enviable position of having to figure out what to do with their legacy IVRs. Some suggestions include door stops, booster chairs for small children and boat anchors.

Increasingly, IVRs (define - news - alert) are more of a service than a "thing." Hosted IVR service providers can turn a company's IVR on and configure it to
match an organization's needs almost in an instant. (Making changes to traditional IVRs menus used to be a task that ranked below "getting a root canal without anesthesia" on the "things I'd like to do this afternoon" task list.)

Some of today's hosted IVR solutions are actually more like toolkits — they allow companies to build their own IVRs using point-and-click, and make changes in the same way. Who would have thought that building IVR menu trees could almost be — dare one say it — fun?

Because of this flexibility, the humble IVR, once used by large companies to get customers off the phone quickly regardless of the ultimate ramifications ("Welcome to Acme Airlines. Press one to be cut off, two to be put on hold for hours and three to leave a message in a mailbox that was last checked in 1992"), has organically sprouted a host of new capabilities and applications.

"IVR" and "call routing" used to be synonymous. That's all the IVR did: take a call and do a little pre-qualification so the system knew where to send it. The information input by the customer was never carried with the call, which is why the annoying need arose to repeat your account number to an agent even after you'd spent 10 minutes punching your 57-digit account number into your phone's key pad.

Scientific Research

Imagine you're conducting a study on blood pressure. You have 5,000 patients enrolled. Every day, each of those patients measures his or her blood pressure and reports the stats to you. Using live agents took too much time: in addition to reporting the numbers, your patients were chatty: "Well, the blood pressure is high today, but my grandchildren came over yesterday and we ate ice cream so maybe the pressure would be lower if…" After taking 500 of these calls, your agents are ready for disability. Voice mail would be equally ineffective; leaving an "open forum" for patients to ramble would require that someone listen to those messages. IVR can force the patients into entering only pertinent information: "Using your phone's key pad, please enter your patient number now. Please enter your systolic number now. Please enter your diastolic number now. Thank you. Good-bye." Additionally, rather than rely on patients to call in every day, the IVR can initiate the outbound calls, resulting in a higher rate of compliance.

Outbound Alerting

Remember when IVR was only inbound? No more. Your package has arrived. Your flight is delayed. Your doctor's appointment is tomorrow at 2:00 pm. Your kid didn't show up to school today and was instead found spray painting the words "Calculus Sucks" on the principal's yacht. Hosted IVR solutions can be easily configured to deliver these
alerts to your home phone, your cell phone via voice or text and even your e-mail.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys

Once upon a time, customer satisfaction surveys were conducted (when they were conducted at all) so far after the interaction that the information gleaned was nearly meaningless. It also needed to be processed and analyzed by humans. The results didn't tell a company what they were doing wrong — only what they'd done wrong.

Sure, companies were able to do customer surveys with traditional, premise-based IVR. But making changes on-the-fly to the system was so cumbersome that surveying in this way likely cost more than it gained. Today's hosted IVR services can be altered, added to or swapped out completely as a company's needs change.

IVR-based surveys can either be inbound (the system asks an inbound customer if he or she is willing to take a survey; if the answer is yes, the customer is transferred into the survey) or outbound (the customer is contacted by the IVR the next day to complete a survey). Today's systems are also smart enough to be preconfigured to offer a survey under pre-set criteria: if the customer was on hold for a long time, was transferred more than once or mentioned a competitor's name during the call.

Earlier customer feedback surveys done by legacy IVR relied on the agent to manually transfer the call into the survey system. Since few agents would transfer a call that had not gone well into a survey, the results gained from such manual agent transfer were based in reality about as much as "Baywatch" plots.

Cyclical Changes

How big did your premise-based IVR system need to be in the olden days? As big as it was ever going to get, of course. Such systems could only "scale down" and leave unused capacity on the shelf for when it was needed. You bought the maximum capacity you thought you would ever use (don't even THINK about what would have happened if you'd suddenly needed more), and 99 percent of the time, that excess capacity gathered virtual and literal dust. Hosted IVRs can scale quickly as needs change: companies pay for only what they use.

Host Your IVR On Your Web Site

How about this for the pièce de résistance? Hosted IVR solutions allow you to put a button on your Web site that lets customers make IVR-type choices and initiate calls to you — through your Web site.

Many people turned to hosted IVR solutions because they needed the technology but didn't have the capital to lay out upfront. What they ended up getting was many times more capabilities and value for a fraction of the cost.

The only downside? You'll have to go out and buy a real boat anchor.

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

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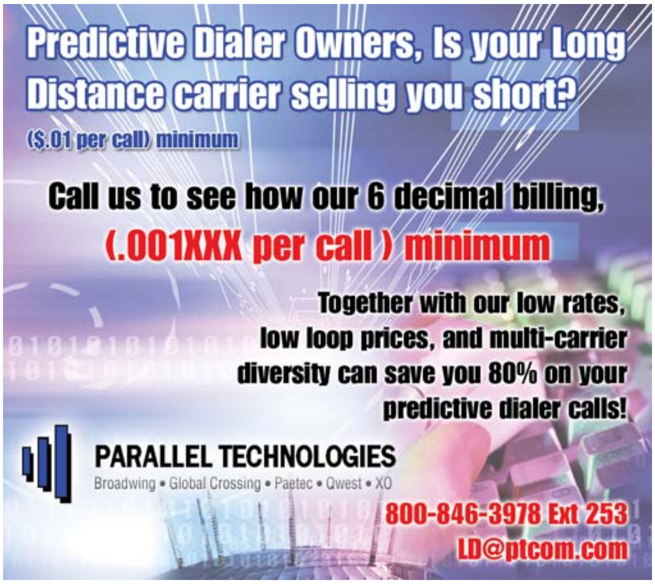

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Advertiser/ Web Address	Page Number
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Call Center 2.0 *http://www.callcenter20.com*	27
Envision *http://www.envisioninc.com*	33
IEX, A NICE Company. *http://www.iex.com*	19
InfoCision Management Corp. *http://www.infocision.com*	cover 2
Interactive Intelligence *http://www.inin.com*	5
Invest in Bogota *http://www.investinbogota.org*	18
Jabra *http://www.whatsyourjabra.com/cis*	cover 3
NICE Systems *http://www.nice.com*	7
Oaisys *http://www.oaisys.com*	32
Plantronics Inc. *http://www.plantronics.com*	3
SCS *http://www.strategicinc.com*	11
Stratasoft *http://www.stratasoft.com*	31
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Thomas L. Cardella Associates *http://www.tlcassociates.com*	2

Go to Table of Contents | Go to Ad Index

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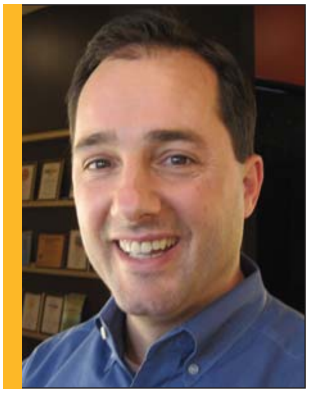

With Tim Passios,
Director of Product Management, Interactive Intelligence

Q: We're hearing more about software as a service (SaaS) lately, and see it as a good option for our company. But we're curious: What's the difference between a SaaS provider and an application service provider (ASP), and what should we be aware of in selecting a SaaS vendor?

A: A little history to begin with. The concept of software as a service — applications developed and delivered by a hosted provider, as opposed to licensed, on-premise software solutions — essentially took shape in the late 1990s when some of the first "SaaS" firms were launched. But it wasn't until 2005 that SaaS became a truly recognized business solution, not coincidentally about the same time Microsoft put the "coming services wave" of SaaS at the top of its priorities list. Since then, SaaS ecosystems have continued to emerge, and hosted SaaS offerings have become an attractive option on the business communications landscape.

As for the "difference" between application service providers and SaaS providers, there's a core difference in the fact that most ASPs don't own the product/intellectual property they're hosting. They typically license it from the developer. A SaaS provider, on the other hand, is often the developer, which leaves them in a better position to respond to customer requests for software enhancements and customization.

From ASP To SaaS

Technology-wise, the ASP-to-SaaS shift comes down to how application services are developed and delivered. In the old ASP environment, providers offered a set menu of traditional client-server applications, usually hosted by third-party vendors who only managed servers and who extended little or no application development capability to enhance the applications being offered. (HTML front-ends were added almost as an afterthought.) Worse, ASP application performance was generally poor, since the apps weren't written as net-native ones, and updates were often no better.

By comparison, vendors utilizing the SaaS application delivery model develop and host Web-native applications specific to their customers, who easily access them via the Internet and pay only for using them, not owning them. And unlike ASP-based applications, net-native SaaS applications, or at least independent portions of them, are updated regularly.

Also, according to analysts at IDC, SaaS offerings include centralized feature updating that averts the need for downloadable patches and upgrades, along with pricing on a per-user basis, sometimes with a relatively small minimum number of users.

Which SaaS Vendor To Choose?

Of course no one knows your enterprise or contact center requirements (or both?) better than you. So put those at the top of your list when looking at SaaS vendors — but also keep in mind these key aspects of SaaS technologies:

Standardized applications. E-mail, accounting packages, CRM packages, audio and video conferencing, notifications, calendaring over the Web, etc. Take an inventory of everything a SaaS provider offers, including what can be developed if not already offered.

Advanced applications. These let you take another step, say for a contact center, and can range from ACD and IVR to outbound predictive dialing, quality monitoring, multimedia recording, disaster recovery, workforce management, e-mail response management, etc.

Parametric applications. Make sure your SaaS provider can customize new Web-based applications within a basic set of functions, in turn allowing your organization to create different kinds of business logic when needed — atop a common platform.

Application development. Two questions to ask: What is the level of engineering experience and expertise the SaaS provider offers? And is the development rapid?

Security. A data site should be sufficiently secure and transparent at the same time. One designated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and SAS-70 certified is even better, especially when SSL makes it less complex to access your applications.

Enablement technology. Some SaaS companies are still "in the process" of engineering enablement tools. But others are already using innovations like all-in-one platforms and software suites that let them offer virtually unlimited customization. Follow the innovators.

SIP, VoIP and network bandwidth. IP technologies have improved network quality of service (QoS) dramatically. Be sure you can access SaaS applications with low latencies and acceptable speeds.

Shift from an SaaS to an on-premise solution. It seems counter to the whole idea of SaaS reducing costs and administration headaches, but at some point, your business just might decide to purchase the software you've been using. Make sure a SaaS provider gives you that option if it's in your long-term communications plan.

As Eric Knorr wrote in his March 20, 2006 column on InfoWorld.com ("Software As A Service: The Next Big Thing"), "Some IT managers see SaaS as a godsend, with time-to-market and low maintenance core to the appeal."

He's right. **CIS**

Tim Passios has more than 16 years' experience in the contact center industry and is the Director of Product Management for Interactive Intelligence, Inc., (news - alert) a leading provider of business communications software for the contact center and enterprise with over 2,500 installations in more than 60 countries. For more information, contact info@inin.com or 317-872-3000.

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