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April 2011 • Vol. 29/No. 11
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Noble Systems Launches Noble Messenger EC

Outbound broadcast messaging such as for credit card fraud, class changes, emergencies, flight delays and outages has become a key contact center tool as it improves service by alerting customers and others while obviating costly inbound calls. The challenge is to have a messaging solution that is easily expandable to meet needs and which is cost effective.

Noble Systems (www.noblesys.com) has come out with a new product, Noble Messenger EC, a flexible, on-demand line capacity expansion offering for broadcast messaging that answers those requirements. It includes all the functionality of existing Noble Systems platforms without third party integration, professional service setup or any additional equipment. The cloud-based offering utilizes existing infrastructure to seamlessly expand and contract available lines based on client needs.

I recently interviewed Lee Allum, Vice President of Marketing at Noble Systems to find out more about Noble Messenger EC. Here is our conversation:

Exactly, how does this system work?

LA: Existing Noble Systems customers have access, through the cloud, to virtually unlimited line capacity available through our secure servers. This offering allows them to tap into that resource on very short notice to temporarily expand capacity to meet immediate needs. Moreover, it looks exactly the same to their agents and managers – the same Noble Systems platform, screens, management tools and everything. That's really been the issue with a lot of burstable line expansion tools on the market today – they are on/off products that are likely to create as many problems as they solve.

What are some markets where you expect this solution to be of most use?

LA: Municipalities, information providers, financial services firms, or any company that has significant outbound messaging that may require a short-term spike beyond their base capacity limits will benefit. It's a perfect safeguard that could save significant resources by allowing a company to avoid outsourcing or an expensive upgrade for the sake of a temporary need.

How about education?

LA: We see a lot of potential but have yet to really explore it with any clients. The offering would certainly help institutions reach large numbers of students, donors or employees on a cost-effective basis. We're hopeful it is used in that fashion and look forward to the results.

How, specifically, can this solution help in the case of a disaster?

LA: Speed is of the essence in a crisis. Mass notifications, evacuation instructions, first responder collaborations to determine occupied residences – there are a lot of applications that would be very difficult on a traditional platform. Our offering creates clear, manageable options in a disaster response scenario, where previously it would have been essential to coordinate multiple providers to achieve the same thing.

Why is now the time for Noble to release such a solution?

LA: For Noble Messenger EC, the timing was really dictated by available technology, mastery of the implementation and support processes and existing client demand. When all those factors converge, we know it's time to launch.

Is this in response to customer demand?

LA: All of our offerings and enhancements are direct responses to client needs. We work closely with clients to understand the challenges of their businesses and tailor our solutions to meet them. In this case, technological innovation and client demand converged in a way that made this possible.

How has the market evolved these past years?

LA: Obviously, this kind of offering was impossible just a few short years ago. As cloud connectivity continues to transform the customer contact model, we're evolving to make the best use of the technology for our clients. At the same time, we don't innovate to follow market trends or industry buzz words. The distinctions between our Messenger EC offering and other burstable line capacity offerings should make that clear. We knew that extra capacity for our clients only made sense if it came without extra headaches.

What other innovations can we expect from your company going forward?

LA: As you'll see later in the year, we have several significant enhancements and new offerings set to debut in 2011. Look for valuable upgrades on our flagship Noble Solution offerings and some exciting applications that make use of the cloud to offer a new level of convenience, security and flexibility to our clients. **CIS**

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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION Solutions® magazine (ISSN: 1533-3078) is published monthly by Technology Marketing Corporation, 800 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854-1828. Periodicals postage paid at Norwalk, Connecticut and additional mailing offices.

— To Subscribe, Call: 203-852-6800 —

Or write to the circulation director at crusso@tmcnet.com. Subscription rates (published monthly): Digital Subscriptions free for qualified U.S., Canadian and Foreign subscribers. Print Subscriptions free for qualified subscribers in the U.S.A. only. For non-qualified U.S.A. subscribers, \$59. All Canadian subscribers, \$69. All Foreign (air mail), \$109. All orders are payable in advance in U.S. dollars drawn against a U.S. bank. Connecticut residents add applicable sales tax.

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Postmaster: Send address changes to CIS magazine, Technology Marketing Corporation, River Park 800 Connecticut Ave., 1st FL., Norwalk, CT 06854-1828 U.S.A. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to: Privacy Boxes International, P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2, CANADA

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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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Cloud Communications: Is it the right move for your business?

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Q&A PANELISTS



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Joe Staples
Chief Marketing Officer
Interactive Intelligence

Cloud computing has huge market momentum. Cloud-based business communications looks to be following the same popular path. The benefits are well-proven: reduced IT staff, increased flexibility, no/low upfront capital costs, and the ability to quickly expand and contract the number of licensed users. So does moving your business communications solutions to the cloud make sense? In this webcast DMG President, Donna Fluss will give participants the information they need to make the most educated decision. Erwin Thomas, Senior Director of the Customer Care Solutions Center at Philips Healthcare, will then discuss the process Philips went through when deciding to migrate its contact centers to the cloud, including the benefits the company has realized as a result.

An extensive Q&A session will follow the presentation, at which time Fluss and Thomas will be joined by Richard Snow, Ventana Research vice president and research director and Joe Staples, Interactive Intelligence chief marketing officer.

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Erik Linask, *Group Editorial Director, TMC*



What's the Best Time for Customer Surveys?

Having worked in a number of different research capacities prior to joining TMC, I often find myself thinking about survey research and, more specifically, how such research is conducted.

There is no question customer surveys are a fantastic means of collecting information and evaluating service levels and overall customer satisfaction – and we all know customer satisfaction drives business success. Consider the retail space. Customer surveys are a fantastic mechanism for improving facilities, enhancing service levels, and determining overall satisfaction levels. The question, though, is how to best implement them in order to solicit the highest response levels.

Many retail chains – such as Kohl's and Home Depot, among others – have implemented online surveys and include information on how to complete such surveys at the bottom of purchase receipts – along with an entry into a prize drawing upon completion. Restaurants have long used feedback cards that diners can fill out and either leave with their servers or drop into a box on their way out. And many call centers have implemented IVR-based surveys at the end of calls to their customer service centers.

The question is, are these the most effective ways to solicit customer feedback?

My experience suggests call centers have the right idea – catch people at the point of contact, when they have the best recollection of their experiences and are still in interaction mode, so to speak. When customers are still on the phone, taking a few moments to answer a few short questions is a reasonably painless experience.

On the other hand, the retailers that ask customers to log into their online systems to fill out surveys have an opportunity to gather greater detail, simply because they are likely to have the attention of respondents longer. But, the major drawback is they are dependent

upon customers agreeing to (or remembering to) follow through. There is also the likelihood they may not have the same recollection of their experiences. Customers may have shopped elsewhere in the mean time and can easily confuse experiences or, if a latter experience stands out more, they may simply choose not to register a response at all.

As for the more traditional paper and pencil method that is still being used in many dining establishments, it's time to enter the technology era. Not only do people have to write comments by hand, but someone has to then manually enter the information into a data entry system. No thanks.

For those businesses that employ the post-experience online survey, technology is available to set up a short survey at the point of sale, either using the same touchscreen endpoints used for payments or by adding separate survey endpoints. The idea is much the same as the end-of-call phone surveys: choose a few key questions that address the most critical elements of the operation and catch customers while they are still in your facility and most likely to be willing to provide feedback. In fact, even a single question can be used to address key pain points: WalMart has conducted single-question surveys on their credit card readers, which customers were asked to answer prior to swiping their cards.

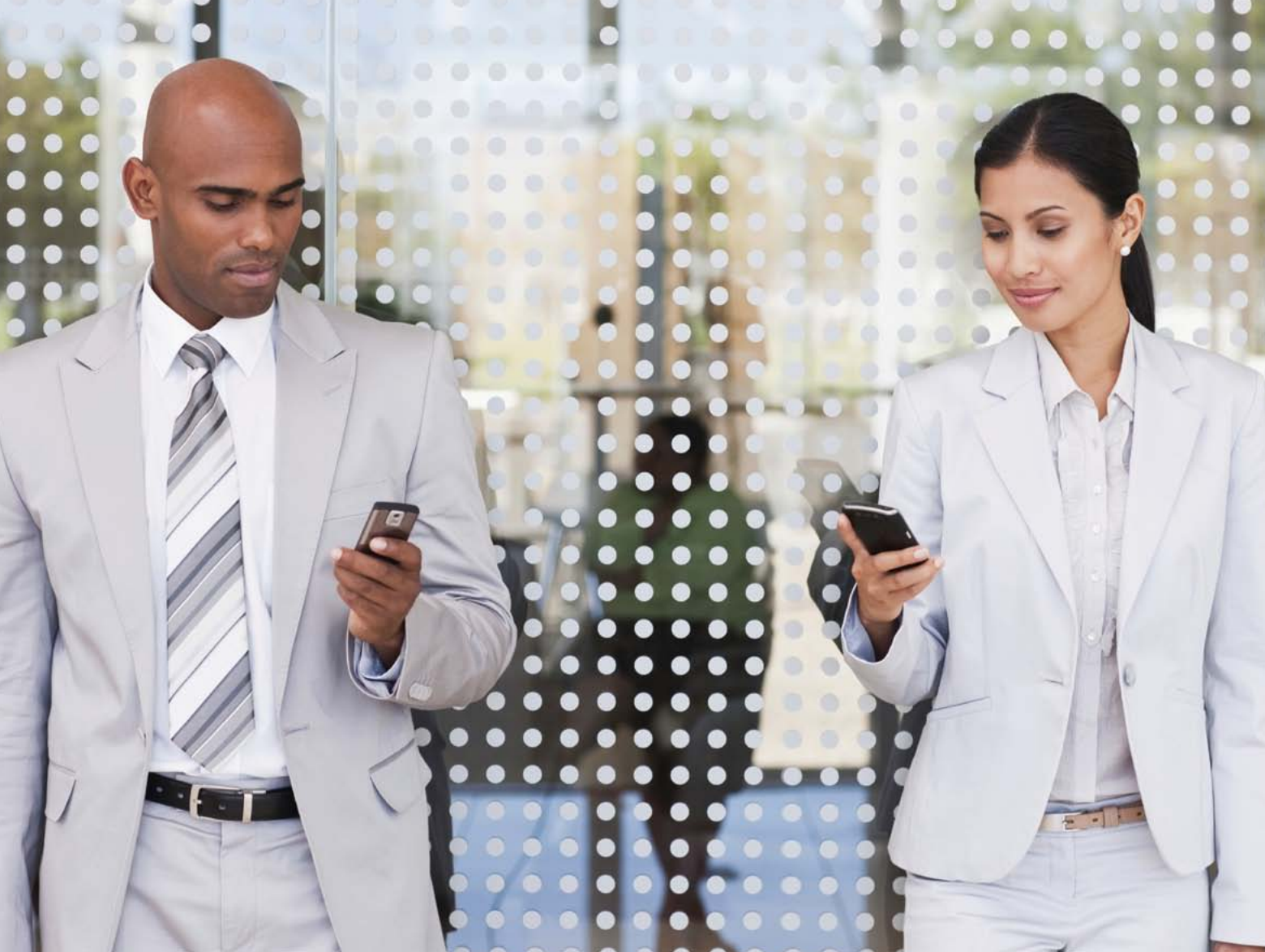
For the restaurant industry, why not spend a few dollars on tablets, install a survey application that can be connected to a back-end CRM system, and deliver the tablet-based surveys to customers with their checks and ask if they would mind filling out a short satisfaction survey. Hotels can employ the same strategy

with their video check-out systems. Again, it catches customers at the point of sale, increasing the likelihood of response – and genuine feedback. The idea of leveraging the latest technology to collect feedback alone is likely to increase response rates, as many customers will be intrigued enough to pick up the tablets and answer a few questions.

Consumer electronics stores should consider at least trying out similar strategies, leveraging products they sell, creating a twofold benefit – in addition to collecting feedback, they are putting products in the hands of customers, effectively making a sales pitch without the customer's knowledge. A customer who has stopped at Best Buy for a new DVD, but is asked to complete a short survey on an iPad might very easily be the next iPad purchaser.

My personal experience is such: I have often completed IVR surveys at the end of customer service calls, simply because they are convenient. I have also left dozens of retail stores with a plan to log in and complete online surveys – but I have yet to actually do it. Why? It's the old adage: Out of sight, out of mind.

There is no debating the value of customer feedback but, the key to their success lies – just as with any product – in their placement. Present customers with a simple mechanism, a few key questions that are designed to measure the most important elements of your operation (nobody wants to complete a lengthy survey and questions can be changed as needs evolve), and hit them with the opportunity when they are most likely to accommodate your request – at the point of interaction. **CIS**



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ac2: The Next Generation Workforce Management

If agents represent the contact center planet, then its core is workforce management (WFM)—forecasting, staffing and scheduling, strategic planning and performance optimization. The ability of WFM to predict and assign the right numbers of staff when they are needed and make adjustments based on deviations from plan assumptions and forecasts drives up customer-retaining service, sales and accounts collected and avoids expensive under-and-overstaffing.

And if WFM is the core, the elements that give it its power are mathematics, statistical probability models and the underlying algorithms. The more accurate, they are the greater the likelihood that the contact centers who use them will achieve optimal service levels, balancing agent availability with costs.

ac2 Solutions (www.ac2solutions.com) is WFM to the core; the firm, founded in 2001 by Dr. Turgut Aykin, the firm's president, and his partners, offers what is believed to be the most advanced WFM solution set on the market. ac2's banner web-based Advanced Workforce Optimization (AWO) Portal, now on version 2.5, is built on a proprietary core mathematics engine that is highly advanced yet is easy to use.

The Need for Accuracy

Modern WFM methods had its origins more than 20-25 years ago. Initial research work was undertaken by Bell Laboratories in the late 1980s to develop a highly accurate WFM solution for its then-owner AT&T to schedule the carrier's operators. From that effort, AT&T launched NAMES10, which was one of the first commercially available WFM products in the early 1990s.

Dr. Aykin, as a professor at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Management, was at the time researching into WFM and collaborating with the researchers at Bell Laboratories. Yet the solutions he and his colleagues saw in the marketplace were, and still are, ineffective.

The WFM forecasting solutions then generally relied on the weighted moving averages method, and some still do. The weighted moving averages method was first used in the 19th century. They also use Erlang C for staffing levels, which was invented by A.K. Erlang, a Danish mathematician, in 1917.

While fairly simple to apply, these methods are outdated and have major flaws, explains Dr. Aykin. The weighted moving average has poor forecast accuracy due to its reliance on simple weights rather than rigorous statistical models that capture trends, day of week and week of year patterns and correlation in the data accurately.



Erlang C assumes that callers will remain in queue—which may have been true in 1917 with telephone users at the time willing to wait for a long time before being connected, but definitely not today, especially in the “want it now” environment. When Erlang C is used for staffing, as Dr. Aykin points out, customer abandonments lead to significant overstaffing and inaccurate service levels, abandonment, ASA and occupancy predictions. Erlang C, or a crude simulation used by some other WFM software, is also totally inappropriate for agents with specific skillsets to enable skills-based routing. Currently there is a lot of research into this issue but there is no known Erlang-like model that can capture the complexities of skills-based routing environments properly.

The forecasting accuracy with these tools had become so poor, recounts Dr. Aykin, that the DMG 2010 WFM Benchmark study reported that the majority of users surveyed rated their WFM software's forecast accuracy at 3 or below on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being highly satisfied. Almost a third of the participants use spreadsheets or some other software for forecasting.

“This is one of the reasons why firms do not rely on traditional WFM solutions' forecasting functionality,” Dr. Aykin points out.

The WFM solutions also suffer from poor scheduling efficiency. The DMG 2010 WFM Benchmark study reports that majority of users surveyed also rated their WFM software's quality of schedule optimization at 3 or below. These tools use heuristic incremental scheduling or “rule of thumb” algorithms to generate schedules. A heuristic method represents a hunch, a best guess that he says is not an effective way to achieve optimal schedules.

“Our customers have told us that they were not happy with their WFM software's forecasting and scheduling,” says Dr. Aykin. “The poor performance provided by existing WFM tools was the main reason for us to found ac2 Solutions. Our objective was and still is to research, develop and provide the next generation WFM and performance optimization technologies.”

ac2's Solutions

Dr. Aykin and his colleagues got to work on developing the next generation WFM technologies in the early 1990's. The AWO prod-



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uct they came up was first released in 2004, which utilized advanced time-series forecasting algorithms including Box-Jenkins ARIMA, one of the most powerful forecasting algorithms known today, Holt-Winters with additive/multiplicative seasonality and various trend models. It also has more advanced methods such as Transfer Function/Dynamic Regression, which also analyzes call drivers to provide future looking forecasts and superior accuracy. The AWO Portal combined them with an artificial intelligence (AI)-based expert system that automatically chooses for its customers the forecasting method that optimally fits their particular environments. The solution is both advanced and easy to use; any contact center manager with minimal training can run it from day one, says Dr. Aykin.

AWO overcame the agent requirements forecasting flaws in Erlang C with queuing models capturing abandonments correctly for non-skills based environments. It also has discrete events simulation that accounts accurately for caller abandonments, and captures and models the complexities of skills-based routing configurations.

AWO eschewed the heuristic incremental scheduling method used by other WFM software for scheduling with ac2-pioneered integer-linear-optimization (ILO) models and algorithms. ILO captures all scheduling rules including work and off day requirements, break periods and windows, and identical or variable shift or break start requirements with hundreds and thousands of equations and inequalities. It then solves them to optimize start and break times and on-and-off days for all agents concurrently.

ac2's AWO Portal has steadily been gaining loyal customers over the past 10 years thanks to impressive results. Their clientele have seen from six percent to as much as 13 percent drops in staffing costs with the software over the other WFM software in side-by-side trials (see Delta Air Lines cases study in the January 2011 issue).

"We've had Fortune 500 companies that did side-by-side studies, and they saw and understood the efficiency gains in their schedules provided by our software," reports Dr. Aykin.

ac2 was one of the first WFM vendors to bring these applications into the cloud. This delivery method lowers IT costs while making it easier to schedule and support both in-house and the growing numbers of home-based and remote agents (see related article this issue).

"If the software architecture is old client-server, it is significantly more costly to maintain and upgrade, and more difficult to support home and remote staff, as they need to schedule their work, time off or swap scheduled work periods and communicate with their team," says Dr. Aykin. "Web-based applications like ours only need a browser, Internet access and a password."

Yet if ac2 has such advanced tools then why are contact centers using outdated methods, and why are competitors continuing to use them?

"The answers lie in the fact that WFM software is a very big investment, and changing them out for many companies is not a feasible option," replies Dr. Aykin. "Fortunately with our solution, as it is web-based and it is also modularized, they do not have to rip-and-replace. They can run on our engine with the data in the legacy WFM."

ac2's Strategy and Developments

ac2's strategy has been from the start, and continues to be, focused on its best-of-breed core technology. To help organizations improve performance, ac2 has been developing and releasing new solutions over the years. For example, almost all WFM software currently offers a performance management module. However, they are simple reporting or monitoring tools such as dashboards, scorecards, reports and real time adherence; these capabilities alone make performance management passive and not proactive.

"Performance management or accurate performance optimization involves more than reporting and monitoring," Dr. Aykin points out. "For example, it involves optimizing skills and contact handling preferences, breaks, and overtime/VTO (volunteer time off). These functions are part of the intelligent Performance Optimization provided by ac2's AWO Portal."

ac2 came out with an integrated Strategic Planning module in 2009, which includes hiring, training, new agent ramp up/down, training planning, support staff planning, overtime/vto and vendor capacity planning, using the same advanced forecasting, staffing and scheduling algorithms as in the AWO Portal. This offering permits consistent and reliable results, as opposed to inconsistencies due to relying on third parties for strategic planning software and trying to plan their assumptions and modeling; these are different than that of the WFM software being used which operationalizes these plans.

The firm has steered clear of the bundling WFM-into-WFO route of its competition. Bundled solutions, says the ac2 CEO, almost universally do not offer state-of-the-art workforce management technologies.

"Bundled solutions are addressing very old concerns—from the early 1990s—in that interfacing applications was a big problem, and because of that, companies wanted then to get all-in-one integrated solutions," says Dr. Aykin. "Today, interfacing is not a problem. Also, the cloud-based WFM offerings are clearly offering a proof that interfacing, even over the Internet, has been streamlined to a point where it can be offered out of a box."

ac2 has developed a back office WFM application with its partners. It can capture the unique nature of back office work and the information needed to enable efficient scheduling and forecasting.

To assist firms achieve optimal forecasting and scheduling in a cost effective manner, ac2 also offers hosted and managed WFM services. Growing in popularity since the service's launch in 2008, with managed WFM services, ac2's dedicated experts run the AWO Portal on ac2 hardware for clients and become a part of the client's contact center management team to deliver needed workforce analysis and plans.

ac2 is continuing its research work into e-learning, quality management and analytics. It is planning to release new modules later this year to provide some of these modules.

"We at ac2 Solutions are proud of the advanced technologies that our R&D team has pioneered over the years. They are providing our clients sustainable and differentiating service and cost advantages as part of our AWO Portal," Dr. Aykin points out. **CIS**

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Call Center Survey Reveals Shrinkage Impact

Knowlagent recently conducted a survey to answer some important questions about contact center shrinkage. The intent was to determine how much time call center agents spend in shrinkage across different types of centers and to understand what activities contribute to this type of loss.

With the introduction of chat, text or social media for handling customer interactions in the call center, expectations for what agents must accomplish in any given day increase. Understanding how this expanding role impacts shrinkage and the differences across industries and of varying sizes was also a focus of the survey. These factors also give way to a larger concern: how can call centers gain better control over shrinkage.

Defining Shrinkage Categories

Two categories of shrinkage occur: Primary, which includes absenteeism, vacation, paid holidays, tardiness, breaks and lunch; and Secondary, which includes activities such as training, team meetings, coaching, paperwork, call research, knowledge base, e-mail and call backs.

Primary shrinkage comprises 54 percent of overall shrinkage and is largely outside of the call center's control. Activities in the secondary category – the remaining 46 percent – are more easily controlled through efficiency. Because these activities are not typically required to occur during specific times, they can take place when call volume is low, while agents sit idle, waiting for the next call.

Agent Time Spent in Shrinkage

Across all respondents, the average amount of time for an agent to spend in shrinkage is 24 percent. While call centers supporting newer channels, such as text, chat and social media, did not reveal a significant difference in overall shrinkage; industry, size and contacts handled filters provided additional insights.

By contacts handled, the highest percentage of shrinkage occurs with collections, at 26 percent, while technical support has the lowest, at 21 percent. Across industries, outsourcers experience the least amount of shrinkage. According to those surveyed, the average sized call center experiences the most shrinkage, while the smallest and the largest centers have the lowest percentages.

Meaningful Improvement of Shrinkage

When survey respondents were asked what they would consider a meaningful improvement in shrinkage, the overwhelming majority would be satisfied with improvements between 1 and 10 percent. Those with collections and tech support functions are looking for more meaningful improvement of shrinkage (10 percent or higher). Twenty-two percent of collections respondents selected this higher range, while 15 percent of tech support selected this improvement rating. In contrast, sales functions are more likely to look for im-

Achieving Improvements with Active Wait Time

Knowlagent can take activities that normally contribute to secondary shrinkage and deploy them through dynamically scheduled sessions during idle time. Since the technology integrates in real time with the ACD, it continually monitors service levels to ensure these standards are maintained.

Technology identifies and collects idle time across many agents to deliver larger, more usable segments of time that can be used for deploying shrinkage activities – creating active wait time.

To learn more about how active wait time can reduce shrinkage for your call center, visit www.knowlagent.com or call 888-566-9457.

provement in the 1-5 percent range, with 54 percent selecting this, as compared to customer service at 45 percent.

Based on industry average calculations, improving secondary shrinkage by just two percent could equate to a \$600,000 savings for a 1,000-agent organization. With the right technology, recuperating loss associated with shrinkage is easy to achieve.

Outsourcers And Shrinkage

Why, as the Knowlagent study reports, do outsourcers experience the least amount of shrinkage—less than 20 percent—compared with 20-plus percent for financial services, healthcare, retail and telecommunications?

The key reason lies in the highly competitive outsourcing business. Outsourcers go up against each other and in-house centers for business, including from the very industries they were compared with in the study. Outsourcers are therefore strongly focused on performance and efficiency and have long been leading-edge adopters of productivity-enhancing solutions and methods.



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Altitude Software (www.altitude.com) **Loquendo** (www.loquendo.com) and **SpeechVillage** (www.speechvillage.com) now offer natural language speech recognition-enabled voice self-service for inbound and outbound interactions. The joint offering integrates the Loquendo MRCP Server, which includes Loquendo multilingual speech technologies, automatic speech recognition and text to speech that is certified to work with Altitude Voice Portal. It also employs the SpeechVillage dialogue engine, which allows managing spontaneous voice questions and answers, making the system's dialogue capability similar to that of a human being.

Aperio CI (www.aperioci.com) has combined the functionality that its Bill Manager and Visual Bill Manager solutions had contained into one bill management system. New features and functions have also been added to the combined product. These include unbilled usage—customers may now view their unbilled usage to see if there is a possibility that they might break their bundles, split billing and payment processing. There are alerts for bundle status and bill amounts and they include additional subscriber data, such as handsets, value added services and contract end dates with reporting options. The new blended offerings also feature recommender options, such as a carrier electing to recommend an ITS plan once it sees a user making international calls and proof of saving options.

CallCopy (www.callcopy.com) has come out with cc: Fusion, an application integration platform with desktop analytics. It automates integrations between CallCopy's cc: Discover workforce optimization suite and third-party applications, thereby enabling data to be shared and triggering actions based on user activity.

cc: Fusion has several identified business uses. Among them is PCI compliance; it detects events related to credit card transactions such as an agent's mouse moving to a field in an application where sensitive information is entered, and triggers cc: Discover to pause call- and screen- recordings to prevent data storage on disks. cc: Fusion can automate the process of confirming that process certification steps were completed. cc: Fusion enables text extraction from third party applications and to use that text to enhance recordings.

OAISYS (www.oaisys.com) has created and is now field-trialing 7.0 versions of its Talkument and Tracer solutions. The solutions support 64-bit versions of Windows Server 2008 and Windows 7.

OAISYS quality evaluations have been enhanced to allow categorical grouping of evaluation criteria, customized effectiveness codes and a more flexible user interface. These changes include enabling radio buttons, drop down menus and default values. Tracer 7.0 now has several screen recording triggers such as voice activation, predictive dialer integration or other third-party applications and via the OAISYS Desktop Client Application; previous versions depended on CTI to enable this optional capability.

Other new features developed include active directory integration, which creates a single point of administration. It allows recording solutions to retrieve user account credentials and groups from the directory. Oaisys products can now support multiple Mitel MiTAI connections, thereby requiring fewer recording platforms to run in multi-node configurations. For public safety, automatic location identification information for the contact center is now integrated into the OAISYS Management Studio and is searchable.

OpinionLab (www.opinionlab.com) has upgraded its customer-feedback-translation tool by developing and deploying a custom-built language-identification engine that recognizes comments' language and automatically initiates translation of feedback into selected home languages. This proprietary system obviates the need for manual translation and outside language-recognition engines, helping to preserve the intellectual property rights of client comments.

prairieFyre Software (www.prairiefyre.com) has released a set of new and updated contact center solutions:

- prairieFyre Contact Center for Microsoft Lync, which provides multi-channel ACD contact center functionality for the Lync unified communications (UC) platform. The prairieFyre solution combines an ACD soft phone, enterprise presence and real-time contact center information in a Lync 2010-based client. It supports headsets and desktop sets optimized for Lync. Contact center agents can login to queues and control their availability with user-defined reason codes. prairieFyre Contact Center automates management reporting, forecasting and scheduling. All reports and schedules are rendered from the Microsoft SQL Server database in preformatted Microsoft Excel or Adobe PDF formats.
- prairieFyre version 5.8 release for the Mitel Contact Center Enterprise, Contact Center Business and Call Accounting portfolios. Version 5.8 introduces simplified licensing. Connection fees per phone system have been replaced with a single network license. Contact center media types (voice, e-mail, chat, fax and SMS) are all included in the prairieFyre Multimedia Contact Center. This feature permits choosing only the media desired and access further media types without paying additional license fees.
- prairieFyre has joined with Microsoft, VMWare and Mitel to create a line of virtual appliances (vApps). Leveraging Microsoft's Embedded program, the firm bundled the Version 5.8 portfolio with Microsoft Windows Server 2008. All Microsoft components and prerequisites are pre-configured on the virtual machine operating system upon vApp installation. Available vApps include Contact Center Management (Business and Enterprise Editions), Intelligent Queue IVR and Call Accounting or any combination of the three.

prairieFyre Version 5.8 includes additional reporting capabilities and schedule creation efficiencies. More flexibility has been added to Employee Portal, the firm's online employee-driven scheduling application, enabling contact centers to control access to suit scheduling policies.

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The Cloud Ascendancy

A growing range of increasingly sophisticated applications are ascending to the cloud. Among this ever-growing list are business intelligence, call recording, CRM, CTI, customer support, hiring and training, IVR/speech recognition, recording, routing and predictive dialing, unified communications (UC) and workforce management.

So much so that the cloud, offered by solution developers, OEMs or third party resellers, appears to becoming the norm, supplanting traditional customer-premises software (CPS). The traditional regime of installing and integrating software is slowly becoming part of the contact center past like dropping in, bolting on and wiring up hardware ACDs and IVRs.

Demand for the Cloud

Contact centers are both following the movement and pulling their suppliers to the cloud, driven by need to cut costs and improve service to enhance competitiveness being driven by the downturn and the slow recovery. Here are several observations from industry executives:

- Bill Patterson, Microsoft Dynamics CRM director of product management, reports that while the majority of customers employ it as CPS, “the fastest growing trend is our cloud services”
- Jeff Foley, senior marketing manager at Nuance, whose customer base is primarily CPS yet it is experiencing rapid increases in hosted demand with 96 percent growth from 2009 to 2010
- Steven Kaish, vice president of product management and marketing at CosmoCom is seeing larger firms going to hosted; it is not just small-medium enterprises or smaller departments that have traditionally sourced from these vendors.

“People are becoming more comfortable with going to cloud/hosted solutions,” says Kaish. “The whole movement to the cloud is trendy; every paper you pick up mentions the cloud.”

- Jason Alley, solutions marketing manager at Interactive Intelligence, reports that the firm’s communications-as-a-service (CaaS) revenue grew 74 percent from 2009 to 2010 which he says mirror, and even exceed, analyst forecasts.

“As the word gets out about successful deployments and benefits realized by mainstream contact centers, an increasing number of companies will join the pack,” says Alley.

Pulling the Solutions Upwards

Causing solutions and contact centers to ascend to the cloud are pulling forces. The most powerful of these is IT cost savings, which can be 60-80 percent lower than traditional CPS deployments, reports Kaish.



Cloud applications are more flexible, enabling buy-as-you-go pricing, which aligns solution purchasing with changing business needs, adds Alley. Deployment is also much faster.

To illustrate, Altea’s cloud-based UC solution cuts deployment time by 75 percent, management time by 90 percent and total cost of ownership by 25-30 percent over a CPS solution, reports Louis Hayner, the firm’s chief sales officer. The Altea UC system brings the costs of new systems to \$250-\$300 per user from \$2,000 per user with CPS.

Another key pull is that cloud-hosted solutions enable continuous improvements driven internally and from the experience of other customers. With this there is also no worrying about sourcing the latest version and expending IT resources on upgrades. In some cases the hosted solutions provide superior outcomes to CPS. They can also be less complex to manage.

These advantages are especially apparent on sophisticated products such as speech recognition. To keep them performing at their highest potential, these systems should be coupled with ongoing tuning and maintenance at the platform and application levels, advises Foley.

Foley says his firms leverage the massive amount of data collected through its Nuance On Demand deployments to improve speech recognition accuracy for every customer application. This network effect translates to up to 30 percent better recognition for Nuance On Demand customers compared to its CPS clientele.



Nuance On Demand includes an always up-to-date integrated solution stack that includes the inbound and outbound IVR platform, speech engine, text-to-speech, natural language understanding, call recording, analytics and tight ACD and CTI integration. According to the firm, this virtual package offers a clear advantage over CPS as it eliminates much of the infrastructure complexity and required systems integration and additional costs.

"The other great advantage with hosting is early access to technologies," adds Foley. "Nuance's latest speech technologies are typically made available to hosted customers months before on-premise customers are ready to deploy them. This time gap can translate into significant cost savings as customer applications benefit from higher automation rates and better customer experience."

The Innovation Push

Applications and customers are being pushed to the cloud by supplier innovations. These are erasing whatever functionality distinction there is between hosted and CPS deployments.

As one example, Microsoft dramatically boosted the scalability in Microsoft Dynamics CRM 2011, which is available hosted or CPS. A recent high-workload test revealed that it could support 150,000 users on a single tenant compared with 50,000 concurrent users in the 2007 version with less than four millisecond response time; five milliseconds is a blink of the eye.

Microsoft Dynamics CRM 2011 CRM Online provides full cloud development capabilities that allow customers and partners to extend and build custom relationship applications. They can accomplish this, reports Patterson, by deploying custom code, plug-ins and call-outs directly within their CRM Online solution.

Hosting solution clients can, in some instances, test proposed upgrades themselves before they go live. Parature now lets its customers can explore new upcoming features in a "sandbox" environment.

The contact center products have been modified to ensure that they work well in the hosted environment. For example, when CosmoCom introduced screen recording in 2009 it built its own solution, because those on the market it evaluated did not have a way to operate securely in a truly hosted environment.

"Traditional screen recording solutions cannot be hosted without violating corporate security guidelines," Kaish points out. "What we did was to design our screen recording capability so that sessions could be initiated on the agents' PCs out to the network, which is more secure than the traditional method of requiring sessions to be initiated from the network to the PCs."

Interactive Intelligence's Alley points to networks, virtual server technology and Web interface innovations that he says will effectively eliminate any remaining functional limitations to the hosted model. These developments, along with the others, are likely to accelerate hosted adoption.

"While minor limitations still exist with hosting, customers now effectively have access to the same functionality, with the same level of management control in the cloud that they are used to in a premise environment," Alley points out. "More importantly, they have access to proven platforms and partners that have adequately addressed fears associated with security, predictability, and flexibility. Together, this is enabling companies of all sizes to take advantage of the hosted model with minimal risk."

Is The Climb to The Cloud...Or Down to a CPS Valley?

For some firms the ascent into the cloud may be another way to get over the implementation mountain to a new CPS deployment.

Patterson is seeing that in hosted CRM. Today while smaller organizations start and stay in the cloud, medium/larger outfits begin there, such as for the smaller departments, and then as they become comfortable with the applications, migrate their enterprises to CPS.

But why go to CPS after being in the cloud? Patterson thinks firms take that path when they are faced with complex applications, such as in large-scale contact centers where CRM software has to integrate with as many as 15-17 systems. At that level, speed and performance begin to become an issue.

"It is not impossible for the cloud-based CRM apps to handle this but it is more difficult to do than with CPS," he points out.

The biggest holdback to cloud ascension by firms is security concerns—that data is arguably perceived to be at greater risk of being deliberately or accidentally compromised if it is hosted. The firms that are most conservative on this point understandably tend to be

OEM Versus Third Party Cloud

When going to the cloud there are two key options: OEM-hosted and third-party hosted. In OEM-hosted, the software developers sell the solutions that they developed themselves over the network as a service. Third-party-hosted firms buy the licenses from other vendors, install the software then resell it, typically with other applications in integrated platforms.

There are no overall advantages to either method, reports Steve Kaish, vice president of product management and marketing at CosmoCom. There are facets to consider in both options.

OEMs should be experts on their own products, but they need to put quality staff for customer support. Third parties are a step removed from the vendors, but can develop very deep expertise in their suppliers' products—which becomes easier when there are only one or two vendors.

"Third-party firms can also pull a whole range of services under one big umbrella," says Kaish. "Carrier third parties can offer corporate-wide voice/data and video carriage integrated with their hosted call center service bundles."



Third Party Hosting Advancements

Third parties have been enhancing their hosted platforms. Here are just two examples:

- InContact's solution has been expanded to include a new predictive dialer, quality monitoring and screen recording solutions. The screen recording feature can be configured by either the contact center or by InContact's Professional Services team and changed at anytime to meet regulatory and business requirements
- LiveOps has added a call flow authoring "studio", configurable recording, configurable dashboards and call visualization reporting. It offers APIs that enable seamless integrations with third party CRM and WFM applications. There is API support for telephony operations includes agent-to-agent transfer, dial plan and supporting enterprise web callback applications. There is also cross-tenant administration that allows user ID management across discrete contact centers; clients may create users that have access to multiple centers

in the financial services and healthcare industries, reports CosmoCom; they must also comply with strict standards and laws.

"Security is less of an issue on hosted contact center infrastructure like ACD and IVR when compared with traditional CRM systems, because they do not hold the same level of valuable personal information," explains Kaish. "Still, hosted contact center solutions need to also meet strong security requirements."

By the same token, he points out that one of the world's largest hosted solutions, one that handles customers' ID, financial and healthcare information via networks and outside servers is a CRM application: Salesforce.com.

"It is a perception of who is in control," says Kaish. "When a company is outsourcing to hosters they are relying on someone else and they may not yet be comfortable with that. But if the company looks more deeply at the security issue, they will find that most hosters have security policies that are at least as strict as their own."

Interactive Intelligence redesigned the architecture in its CaaS offering in 2009 to answer corporate security as concerns, reports Alley. It permits separation between customers' applications; it allows customers to keep the voice paths, their databases and recordings on their private networks—behind the firewalls—to increase security and for compliance.

Microsoft Dynamics' Patterson sees no logical reason why contact center and CRM applications could not be hosted.

"The issue is not technical, we've moved beyond that hurdle in the architecture," explains Patterson. "It boils down instead to corporate legal policies, loss of control and allowing some degree of dependency on external IT resource that some organizations do not have the comfort factor for."

Alley points to several reasons why some companies may prefer CPS over hosted. These include IT staff requiring full administrative access and control, the application environment demanding a high degree of custom development and general preferences to purchase solutions outright. They also encompass regulations or corporate policy that forbids hosting certain applications and that the business requires capabilities not currently offered by hosted providers. An example might be certain business process automation applications.

"It really comes down to preference and what model best supports a firm's corporate strategy, business goals and IT policies," says Alley.

When To Climb...And Avoiding Falls

So when should contact centers consider going to the cloud? There are two turning points, reports Nuance's Foley. These are when CPS solutions approach end-of-life and when contact centers are looking to leverage recent infrastructure investments or operational expertise as hosted extensions of their existing CPS tools.

One prevalent method for businesses to begin benefitting from hosting is to consider a hybrid model that integrates components of their existing on-premises equipment with some services deployed in a hosted model, suggests Foley. One example is deploying hosted speech IVR integrated to an on-premise CTI or ACD.

To avoid stepping into the service abyss when going to the cloud Duke Chung, founder and chief strategy officer at Parature, recommends that contact centers make sure they ask the right questions. These include are there upfront hardware and software costs, do they receive automatic updates and does pricing scale as you go.

"The answers are the tests of a real cloud, multi-tenant provider versus one trying to hitch their wagon to the cloud craze," Chung points out.

When selecting a hosted provider also consider their reliability both technically and financially.

"[We're finding] that our customers want bullet-proof systems, uncompromised voice quality and the ability to handle large spikes in traffic," explains Interactive Intelligence's Alley. "Customers also want a supplier that is predictable: a company that will be there for them for the long haul. This includes responsiveness, the willingness to share risk, and proven financial stability." **CIS**

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The BI Formula

Accurate information, created from data, is the building block of effective decision-making, such as whether to increase or reduce staffing levels, boost training, increase first contact resolution (FCR), adjust offers or launch new mobile, social media or telemarketing campaigns. And as any manager can tell you, you can never have enough high quality information in your hands fast enough, especially in today's economic climate where there is little room for errors or missed opportunities to grow business and cut costs.

Contact centers provide data in abundance, and more so as customers increasingly interact with organizations over a multiplying array of channels. Every call, chat, e-mail, site visit, text and Tweet and their contents contain that raw material. Yet there is more than centers can process quickly enough into actionable information. And too often it is dumped into and stored in silos.

Business intelligence (BI) methods and software provides an effective formula to process data into useful information and present it in the hands of managers. It draws and mixes the contents from the silos, providing a complete view of what is happening in businesses including operations.

And as contact centers become more central in organizations' marketing and sales strategies by retaining existing customers and attracting new ones, it is more imperative than ever for them to learn about and employ BI.

BI Interest and Drivers

There is increasing interest and demand growth for BI applications that touch on contact centers for those reasons. Mark Flaherty, chief marketing officer of InetSoft says that he is hearing this from his firm's sales team.

"The driving force for BI is the need to squeeze more knowledge out of the large amounts of data that are pouring through contact centers," he reports.

Richard McElroy, president and COO of Symmetrics is seeing his clientele becoming interested in the big picture customer interaction and operations assessments that BI provides. They are also seeking to extend BI analysis to pre- and post-call activity and data such as case management from help desk or CRM systems and to transaction (sale/no sale) results from CRM. They are interested in leveraging BI on the back end to



aggregate, integrate and optimize data by using it to automate data collection and optimization.

McElroy's customers also want to understand the details of both "within call" experience i.e. ACD/IVR information and the complete interaction experience. And one of the most critical applications and needs to those ends that are pushing BI use is bridging the contact center systems: ACDs, IVR, quality monitoring and workforce management to haul out the data they contain for processing and analysis.

Each of these systems has their own internal reporting systems that can report on only their particular "islands" or silos of information, reports the Symmetrics COO. His clientele commonly uses spreadsheets, Access databases or running of the canned reports and cutting/pasting info into spreadsheets and documents to get what they want, or a combination. Yet they are too slow and cumbersome to process and assemble the information.

"Many of our customers tell us that they can get a basic report with metrics from the ACD that give results of what happened," reports McElroy. "What they can't do is gain insight as to why the result is what it is such as, 'How is my service level percentage being affected by schedule adherence? What is average time of agent call sessions versus IVR self-serve sessions?'"

"The problem is that supporting data is not always in the same system or reports, and each may be saying different things," he adds. "With BI, contact centers can get their data, metrics,



KPIs and reports in a single common environment to obtain a holistic and singular version of what is happening.”

Another key driver is greater business agility to respond to rapidly changing needs. Many Pegasystems customers in this space adjust their customer interaction strategies multiple times each day, responding to competition, the flow of the day or simply to experiment and try out new things.

This kind of ‘hyper agility’ enabled by BI has another benefit—making it less critical to get the marketing and sales strategies, such as pricing, incentives and priorities, right from the start “because the strategies can be course-corrected on the fly,” points out Rob Walker, Pegasystems’ vice president of decision management and analytics.

BI, Predictive Analytics Integration?

BI can be regarded as looking back to where one has been to help see where one is going. Predictive analytics can be seen as looking ahead to plan the next moves and anticipate what is going to happen next. Both BI and predictive analytics working in tandem can therefore help organizations reach their destinations.

Symmetrics’ McElroy sees a role for predictive analytics in BI, one that will grow as data mining and predictive modeling technologies around it evolve, become easier to use and become more affordable. Yet contact centers need to get traditional BI right before they can effectively take full advantage of predictive analytics’ capabilities.

“We believe that predictive analytics will become a more prevalent BI technology used,” says McElroy. “However, it will not overshadow or diminish the focus on or importance of traditional BI in contact centers as it allows companies to ensure contact centers are delivering value in context of the overall business objectives. Yet as effective BI adoption increases in the contact center market, we’ll then see “advanced BI solutions” like predictive analytics increase in adoption.”

Erick Brethenoux, executive program director at IBM SPSS argues that predictive analytics should be installed and used alongside and at same time as BI, as it enables contact centers to become more efficient. For example, when a customer calls a firm on a service issue, predictive analytics can generate, as the agent enters the information, customer-tailored sales offers to the agent that they then can present on the spot. This avoids lengthier conversations, and more costly telemarketing and direct mail or e-mail campaigns.

“Business is going faster and faster; if you can see only one meter ahead of your windshield when the wall comes it is too late,” says Brethenoux. “You have to augment that vision to see what’s coming at you and that’s what predictive analytics does.”

The BI and predictive analytics integration is happening. The IBM SPSS unit, which provides predictive analytics solutions, now uses IBM-owned Cognos BI tools for dashboarding and

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reporting. In turn, Cognos 10, which came out in October 2010, uses some of the SPSS statistics tools.

Cognos 10 has other new key features, among them an integration with Lotus Connections that enables social collaboration analytics with intuitive navigation capabilities and simplified user experience. It also provides users with an integrated view of historical information with real-time updates to give users a complete picture of their businesses. Employees can now interact with each other in real time in communities, wikis and blogs.

"Once someone is on the line you can use predictive analytics to cross-sell, up-sell and to find out whether or not they are going to churn, and then you can use BI to report on what happened, all of the offers made and which ones were accepted," says Brethenoux. "It goes full circle to use that data to feed into the predictive analytics."

There are also solutions like SAP BusinessObjects BI and EIM 4.0 that work with existing data for the efficient discovery of interesting and predictive findings. SAP BusinessObjects Event Insight helps customers discover and understand the

business impact of events across business networks. These include events affecting customer service and contact centers as varied as product recalls and late deliveries. It processes large volumes of event data in real time, enabling firms to discover complex patterns in seemingly unrelated events, analyze the information within business contexts, and identify emerging opportunities or threats via alerts, dashboards, or reports.

"What-if analysis and predictive analytics play a critical role to uncover trends and patterns to solve business problems, anticipate business changes, and gain insight into what the future will hold," says Nic Smith, group product marketing manager of BI solution marketing at SAP BusinessObjects.

InetSoft's Flaherty points out, though, that completing such connections between BI and predictive analytics are not automatic. Predictive analytics applications still requires statistical modeling and segmentation analysis using specialized software and highly skilled analysts. But once these models are built, a flexible BI application can use them and apply up to the minute data to generate the desired alarms.

"You have to be careful in setting expectations for predictive analytics," advises Flaherty. "I think some vendors are marketing it as artificial intelligence that will solve problems for you. But predictive analytics still means using past performance to project future performance, not predict it. A BI application can help point out deviations from normal expectations and make decision-making by people more timely."

BI Affordability

As essential as BI may be in uncovering opportunities to generate more sales, improve service and with it customer retention and reduce costs, it is not inexpensive. The price tags run from \$25,000 to \$500,000 or more. Therefore, real need must be there or the investment will not be approved.

Symmetrics McElroy recommends addressing BI affordability and budget constraints by following this mantra: "think big, start small, go fast." Here's how:

- Establish a BI strategy that tries to encompass needs for a three- to five year outlook that will lay the technology foundation to get you there

Social Media and BI

The rapid rise and increasing customer decision-making influence of social media has made integrating and analyzing this data, converting it immediately into actionable information via BI imperative. The challenge is that myriad comments, like e-mails and SMS/text messages are unstructured. They need to be integrated with data from traditional sources, like transactions.

Nic Smith, group product marketing manager of BI solution marketing at SAP BusinessObjects, reports that there is shift towards sentiment analysis, which permits text data integration to analyze unstructured data sources like documents, e-mail, blogs and Twitter. It then summarizes the information into key sentiment that is surfaced throughout the content.

Data governance and quality visibility is important to empower business and IT users with a single environment to discover, assess, define, monitor and improve the quality of their enterprise data assets, he points out. And bringing information together from multiple sources is critical, whether it's one source or hundreds, making report authoring tremendously easier.

To permit such analysis and integration, SAP recently released SAP BusinessObjects 4.0. It provides deeper text

analysis integration that complements traditional business insight. With it organizations can monitor, analyze, explore, report and act with confidence in the accuracy of not only their transactional data but also with full insight into the trends and sentiments expressed in the unstructured content of blogs, e-mail and social media streams.

SAP BusinessObjects 4.0 also features a new multi-source multi-dimensional semantic layer and a new common authoring experience to simplify ad-hoc analyses and content creation. This allows users to obtain a more holistic meaning from the information in less time.

"[There have been] mind-blowing increases in the amount of data captured, the growth of consumer use of social media to discuss, laud and discredit brands and the move toward mobility on a global level," says Smith. "In order for companies to retain and grow their customer base, they need to be able to capture, monitor and analyze enormous amounts of data from a growing number of sources. Organizations need insight with confidence across business and social data."

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Going Mobile

Contact center supervisors are becoming less tethered to their desks. Thanks to smartphones and tablets, they can leave their desks and stay in touch with what is going on.

InetSoft is working on mobile apps of its BI solutions that are optimized for smaller screen spaces and different input methods scheduled to be released by mid-2011.

"The mobile channel influences the usage demands of contact center managers," says Mark Flaherty, chief marketing officer at InetSoft. "Now they expect to be able to stay in touch with the BI application that they are using to manage their operations when they walk away from their desk."

- Start in phases by addressing the most critical elements first, and then lay in additional elements within the foundation based on priorities and budget availability
- Once a phase one is established or proven and accepted, move quickly to the next phases to take advantage of internal momentum and executive buy in

"This approach maximizes the possibility of long term success by avoiding project 'implosion' often associated with trying to achieve too much at once, and enables shorter term issues to be addressed in priority that reflects the current business environment and challenges," says McElroy. "It also provides a budget-friendly approach that allows investment to take place over time. And it maximizes user acceptance by controlling the amount and speed of change to manageable levels."

Up-front costs are an issue though and Symmetrics is taking different routes to managing it. The firm uses a modular architecture that permits the phased approach via several layers. These are data integration/consolidation/optimization, content presentation/visualization and access/dissemination that are priced accordingly. It also offers a full-featured software-as-a-service (SaaS) hosted application as a lower-initial-and-support-cost option to customer-premises software.

"Our approach allows us to deliver a 'right-sized' offering that can either deliver a turnkey, end-to-end solution, or only specific modules that can be integrated with, or leverage, current BI infrastructures in place" explains McElroy. "It also enables those organizations that are comfortable with hosting to reap the benefits of BI while taking up a smaller infrastructure and IT staff budgets without the complexity of installations."

Symmetrics is now working on a software appliance that combines its BI application and a streamlined version of system software which can be readily installed on industry standard hardware and deployed as a turnkey. This method will save IT costs by avoiding server and integration expenses and eliminates the need to manage multiple maintenance streams, licenses, and service contracts.

"Our clients have told us they would prefer to avoid having to deploy and manage multiple IT layers like operating systems,

database environments and web servers just to run one application if they don't have to," says McElroy.

Making BI More Usable, and Useful

With the tasks BI can accomplish and the value it can create, it is not surprising that the software is often complex and can be challenging to learn and use. Yet to achieve today's demanding C-suite goals of "strong results yesterday, not today or tomorrow", this expensive software must be highly usable in the design and in the setup.

Suppliers are working on just that. For example, InetSoft has enabled users to individually customize dashboards using its Style Intelligence BI solution without any IT assistance. Both agents and managers can filter, sort and drill down into Style Intelligence to give them access to a huge amount of information that previously was only accessible to analysts.

Symmetrics has come out with a SaaS offering that delivers a new natural language interface and extended metadata layers within data models for its solution. It can answer simple queries and enable report generation directly by managers, supervisors and team leads in minutes, instead of taking days to have analysts do the same thing.

The interface allows users to ask questions in three parts: "what am I measuring, how do I want to organize and group the information and what filters do I want to apply?" This tool permits analysts to be used for more productive endeavors like diving into the data at a deeper level to better understand the "whys" – why are the results what they are and how can they be improved if they are not satisfactory.

Equally, if not more importantly, firms should obtain manager/user buy-in for BI and provide adequate training to avoid it from becoming costly shelfware. One step to take is to select metrics and KPIs that are aligned with business goals, recommends McElroy. In that fashion the results measured by contact centers are more readily translatable into actions that support overall business goals.

For example, if a software company's primary goal is "to lead the industry in technical support quality/satisfaction", then having a contact center KPI that promotes agents to have the shortest possible average call duration as a top priority is not in alignment with this objective. An FCR KPI would likely have been a better choice.

"Often our clients would say that reporting and analysis does not work or it is too difficult or hard to use, but once we began educating them, the lights went on and they would say 'this is now a major competitive advantage for me,'" says McElroy. **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

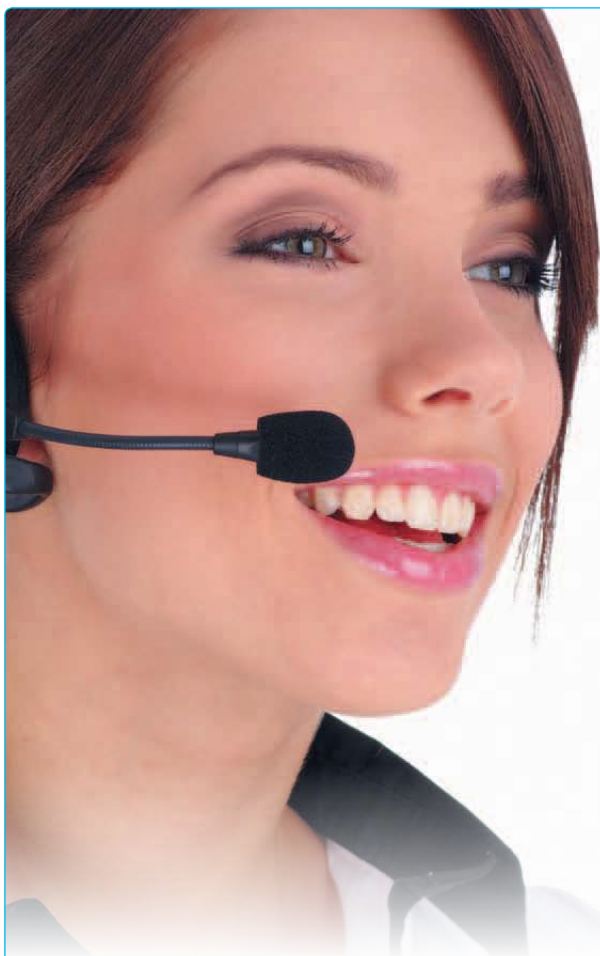
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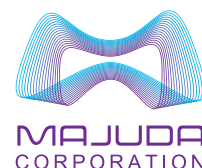
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Hosted Contact Center Solutions: Setting the Record Straight

Hosted contact center infrastructure solutions, also referred to as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) or Communications-as-a-Service (CaaS), are steadily gaining ground in enterprises of all sizes and in a variety of public and corporate verticals. Hosted solutions are reaching unprecedented levels of customer satisfaction because of the minimal cash outlay required, quick deployments, rapid and quantifiable return on investment, scalability and agility, ongoing investment protection, a reduced maintenance burden, and the opportunity to “try before you buy.” Vendors also continue to expand functionality through product enhancements and improved deployment and integration models.

need to correct the misperceptions that are hindering more widespread adoption of these solutions. DMG’s findings identify the five top misconceptions as:

Concern #1: Hosting is only for small contact centers.

The Reality: Eight years ago when the first hosted contact center infrastructure vendors were looking for funding and sought to explain their value to the market, one of their standard arguments was that this new business model would “democratize the world of the contact center.” In other words, for small and mid-sized organizations that couldn’t afford a premise-based contact center platform, hosting meant they could realize the same benefits as companies that had the financial and IT resources to acquire such a solution and support it on an ongoing basis.

Since then, hosting vendors have continued delivering new servicing capabilities that don’t require small and mid-sized enterprises to compromise on functionality. DMG research shows, in fact, that the typical buyers of these solutions are mid-sized customers, and that the majority of hosted solutions are actually deployed to replace an existing premise-based contact center solution that no longer meets the organization’s needs.

A potential downside of using an OEM-hosted solution might be lack of vendor experience in hosting applications. However, this will vary significantly, so a thorough evaluation of a vendor’s hosting track record is recommended – particularly access to hosted customer references.

Internet Protocol (IP) and Session Initiation Protocol (SIP)-based technologies have additionally eliminated physical communications constraints, empowering enterprises to be more responsive to their customers using the virtual, multi-channel and flexible servicing infrastructures of hosted solutions. Enterprises are looking for ways to leverage these new technologies, and contact center hosting is an ideal, cost-effective fit.

Moreover, the new generation of hosted/CaaS-based contact center infrastructure has overcome the technical and functional limitations of older solutions. Now the leading vendors

Concern #2: Hosted contact center solutions are functionally inadequate.

The Reality: Just as no two premise-based solutions are alike, neither are the many hosted contact center infrastructure solutions now available — each of which offers its own unique design, architecture and functionality. (Note that some vendors have even built their hosted offerings on premise-based contact center platforms.)

As the market continues evolving, hosted providers are moving toward a common set of capabilities that include call routing

by Roe Jones, Product Manager, Communications as a Service, Interactive Intelligence

and queuing, IVR, dialing, computer telephony integration and recording. At a higher level, a select few vendors have further taken an “all-in-one” approach to add modules for the applications most commonly used by contact centers, such as workforce management, quality assurance, satisfaction surveys, performance management, coaching, and knowledge management. All told, and with various packaging and pricing strategies to choose from, hosted contact center infrastructure providers now offer some of the most competitive and functionally rich solutions in the market.

Concern #3: Hosted contact centers solutions are inflexible and not customizable.

The Reality: Actually, based on DMG’s findings from hosted customer interviews, the opposite is true. In general, hosted end users consider their vendors and solutions to be both flexible and scalable, although there are significant differences among hosted contact center providers (as there are likewise among premise-based competitors). In weighing a hosted solution and vendor, pay particular attention to ease of setting up and modifying the application, and to the vendor’s flexibility in making upgrades. For example, does a vendor enable your IT staff to add users and deploy new IVR services from your end, or do you have to rely on their people to perform such services for you?

Either way, a major advantage that most hosting vendors have over premise-based providers is the ease with which they can offer new functionality — they simply load software and make the new features immediately available. Hosted solutions are also highly scalable, and allow organizations to add and reduce users and functionality as needed to meet cyclical or seasonal volumes and pay only for as much contact center capacity as they use (all of which is often negotiable with hosted vendors, by the way).

Concern #4: Hosted contact center implementations and integrations are more difficult than premise-based initiatives.

The Reality: Few integrations are easy, whether solutions are premise-based or hosted. Fortunately on the hosted side, however, some vendors have built their platforms using technology that’s far more standards-based and open than many older premise-based contact center offerings, which makes integration easier.

Moreover, hosted solution vendors are highly motivated to get their offerings up and running as quickly as possible, since they don’t earn revenue until the system is in production, and especially since the majority of hosted end users have made it clear they chose a hosted offering to avoid an expensive and lengthy implementation. To that end, many hosted vendors offer fixed implementation and integration fees that compare very favorably to the cost of premised-based efforts.

Concern #5: Hosting has a higher total cost of ownership than premise-based solutions.

The Reality: There’s a reason the CFOs in many companies now prefer to invest in hosted solutions rather than

purchasing licenses for systems and applications. Or essentially, several reasons: hosted solutions require no capital investment; low implementation and integration fees, if any; payments that scale in line with business activity; no support costs; limited risk and obligations; and ongoing investment protection because any costs for upgrades fall to the vendor.

Also consider that total cost of ownership looks at the cost of an asset or investment over its lifetime, taking into account the purchase price, hardware costs, maintenance and upgrade fees, and the cost of internal and external resources to support the solution overall. While TCO numbers vary for every acquisition, in general, DMG Consulting has found that, in a three-year host vs. buy analysis for a contact center solution, assuming no functional (hardware or software) upgrades, no maintenance fee increase and a minimal IT and business resource requirement, purchasing looks to be less expensive than hosting. However, if the calculation includes the cost of upgrades and a significant amount of internal resources needed to support a premise-based solution, the hosted alternative will often have a lower TCO in the end. **CIS**



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Making Homes for Contact Centers

More contact centers appear to be going home: to agents' homes. Michele Rowan, president and CEO of Customer Contact Strategies has seen analysts' estimates that the number of organizations deploying home-based agents will grow to 80 percent by 2013 from 30 percent today.

One of the biggest drivers to home agents is cost savings and efficiency gains. The Telework Research Network's model (www.teleworkresearchnetwork.com) shows that contact centers could save as much as \$18,000 per full-time home agent per year. This is achieved by avoiding facilities costs, reducing absenteeism and turnover and increasing productivity; workers prefer to work from home.

Home agent programs also offer greater scheduling flexibility than at employer-premises centers. They lower healthcare costs through avoiding disease spread at workplaces and minimizing accidents incurred during commuting.

Agent quality is higher with home-based programs, especially as they migrate from satellite (agents working within travel distance to centers) to constellation (independent of centers) deployments that widen labor pools. And as the economy starts to pick up, the number of potential employees who are willing to work in contact centers shrinks.

"The quality of the agent is much better at home versus in a central contact center," reports Addison Hatch, senior vice president of service delivery at VIPdesk (www.vipdesk.com). "You can recruit nationwide for the ideal person to represent your brand versus recruiting in a radius limited to 30 miles from the center. There are many people who are great contact center agents who wouldn't want to work in the contact center environment for approximately \$10/hour but do very well working remotely."

Making the Steps

Customer Interaction Solutions interviewed several home agent experts and practitioners to get their insights on the best ways to make agents' homes into homes for contact centers. We asked them questions on:

- Differences in the work handled by home and by employer-premise agents
- How firms are implementing home programs including satellite versus constellation



- Methods, practices and technologies that are enabling more agents to work from home
- Home agent program obstacles and how to overcome them
- Will there still be a need for employer-premise-based agents?

Alpine Access (www.alpineaccess.com)

Chad Lyne, director of corporate strategy

This shift to the constellation model is a definite trend that we have witnessed. While many of the outsourced contact centers with brick-and-mortar assets continue to use a satellite model, both pure-play at-home providers and internal at-home programs predominantly rely on a geography-neutral constellation model. This allows them to tap into the true power of the at-home model, which is accessing the best and most qualified talent, without regard to where they live.

There are a number of factors that are further enabling the deployment of home-based agents. The first is the increased desire by employees to have work/life balance, resulting in more people seeking legitimate work-from-home opportunities. Second is the increased penetration of broadband access across the country, including into many rural areas where job opportunities are limited. Lastly, technological developments—cloud computing, security technologies and biometrics and workforce management continuing to further promote the adoption of the model.

The biggest obstacles to more rapid adoption stem from misconceptions and perceptions of the industry and its value proposition. A minority of companies continue to view an at-home workforce as a solution for the peaks and valleys of highly variable call volumes. While the home-based model solves this, it has also been proven as a viable replacement for any call volumes that are cur-

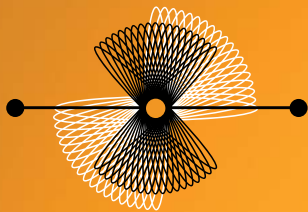
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rently premise-based. In the past two years, most other obstacles such as perceived security concerns, perceived lack of management and oversight have largely been overcome, as evidenced by the rapid growth and adoption of the at-home solution.

The reality is that some companies will never fully migrate to a 100-percent home-based solution. Some very successful examples (i.e. JetBlue) do use a 100 percent at-home solution and we believe more companies will do so in the future, due to the proven ROI of the virtual model.

Customer Contact Strategies (www.customercontactstrategies.com)

Michele Rowan, president and CEO

Most organizations start by moving some agents home and then once proven on technology and process, start hiring agents for home positions. Home-based agents generally handle the same work as employer-premise-agents but they often do it better, driven from the vast pool of applicants and talents and the delight of being home-based.

Some organizations are starting to look at different work, like social media response and integrated channel response, for home agents. This makes sense as their skillsets are, when organizations hire to successful home agent profiles, incrementally better.

There is a shift from satellite to constellation deployment models. As companies gain more experience with home agents, they generally expand beyond the neighborhood model to long distance hiring, training and deployment.

Regarding methods, practices and technologies, the connectivity and security features can mirror that of in-house, and can actually be enhanced beyond in-house deployments for companies

that want to increase security and access. So in terms of cost and ease of deployment, there's been tremendous progress. Retail, hospitality, tech support and services have been on board.

Managerial resistance to home agents is a reality and like the home agent change initiative, we just have to work through it. Staying connected with home/remote agents is a real opportunity and not one to be taken lightly. Most organizations have the technology (webcasts, e-learning, chat) and the business process (team meetings, recognition and reward, and voluntary social activities). It is a matter of moving all business communications to an online format and enabling voluntary social connectivity in a virtual environment as well, transitioning the process to virtual and leverage existing technology in doing so.

The question three years from now that we will have to answer is, "Justify why you need to have employees in expensive office space".

Frost and Sullivan (www.frost.com)

Michael De Salles, principal analyst

Home based agents are best at handling more complex transactions that require problem solving, technical support skills, [demonstrated] empathy towards customers and enhanced sales skills.

The general characteristics of a successful home-based agent are an outgoing personality, pleasant voice, a sense of responsibility, a self-starter mentality, resourcefulness, adaptability and to have the abilities to listen attentively, work well alone and to think and make decisions "on the fly". [They also tend to have] prior contact center experience, hospitality training or background and bilingual skills.

Both the satellite and constellation models continue to proliferate in the market. Companies that are just starting out tend to opt for the satellite or "hub and spoke" model by allowing their best agents to go home. It is often billed as an incentive for high-performing agents.

Connecting Home-Based Agents With VoIP

One of the most important reasons behind the growth of home-based agents is the advent of high-quality residential VoIP services, riding on high-bandwidth Internet connections. The chief reason is that VoIP markedly reduces the cost of delivering inbound calls to agents, especially those living/working outside of the local calling areas, which makes constellation—out of commuting distance—home agent deployments viable.

There are other benefits with VoIP. Ben Navon, president and CEO of Optimized Business (www.OptimizedBusiness.com), which provides voice, data and VoIP services to enterprises of all sizes including their contact centers, outlines them:

- Monitoring of calls and recording all or only those calls that meet a specific criteria
- Enabling agents to sign in from anywhere with an Internet connection
- Employees are able to work from home and/or multiple locations, but appears as a united front to customers

- Extensive reporting, including live reports. The reports are on the contact centers' own servers, rather than being hosted by the phone line providers

There are reported quality issues with VoIP; some contact centers are still reluctant to use it on home-agent lines for that reason.

Yet if the VoIP service is configured correctly, then these calls are clearer than those being placed on regular PSTN/TDM phone lines, Navon points out. He recommends that contact centers ensure that the agents are using a VoIP-quality class, steady spike-free data connection/DSL connection with low latency for excellent call quality and reduced bandwidth fluctuation.

"The instances where call quality are a concern are when the data connections, such as home-DSL fluctuates the bandwidth," explains Navon.



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The on-demand pay-by-the drink hosted contact center solutions model offers ease of implementation that together makes home agents especially attractive. No special hardware is required except a Pentium-class PC and a fast Internet DSL or cable connection. Any phone, any time and any place.

Outsourcing home agents is an attractive option to supporting them in-house. Most providers process 2,000-3,000 applications per week. They can choose the very best talent and generally take only two percent–five percent of qualified candidates.

In our opinion, the challenges for successful home agent deployment have little to do with recruiting, training, security or technology. They are communication between home agents and supervisors, creating a strong sense of “Team” and coaching and development. These are issues that take time and experience to overcome.

Many clients like having the ‘control’ that a brick and mortar center offers. The outsourcing trend, longterm, is to move to a more flexible work-at-home model in the U.S. Outsourcing providers like to offer their clients a ‘blended’ sourcing solution that includes domestic, nearshore, offshore and home agents and automated solutions.

TELUS (www.telus.com)

Ian Cruickshank, manager of workforce management TELUS at-home agents (AHAs) are deployed by voluntarily moving existing premises-based agents into the AHA program while maintaining the same role that they had while in the office. There is no difference to their role, compensation, benefits, schedule or IT tools that they utilize. They enjoy a near-seamless transition from office environment to home work environment.

Most of the TELUS AHAs are structured in a satellite model where they can live up to 150 kilometers (approximately 100 miles) away from their premises-based TELUS offices. We are piloting a small team of AHAs who work 100 percent at home and never return to a TELUS office. We are assessing the results of this pilot to determine if it will work well for the overall AHA program.

Training and Managing Home-Based Agents

Together two of the most critical elements of enabling home-based agent programs are training and managing them. And for managers accustomed to seeing staff, having employees working remotely requires adapting existing and adopting new ways of supervising and coaching them.

Tim Dewey is chief operating officer at B Virtual. He teaches the RCCSP Professional Education Alliance’s (www.the-resource-center.com) courses on home/remote agents and virtual support management. Here are his best practices methods:

- With distance learning growing at 33 percent a year, there is now a learning formula that states there is diminished value with in-class, instructor-led training only. With that said, create a training program that is consistent across both onsite, as well at home resources
- Do not deploy an at-home model without a performance management plan. It is critical to have KPIs and a plan that includes the qualitative and quantitative requirements. It is important to note that most great service organizations already have this in place, and if so, extending it to at home workers is very easy
- Test, test, test. It is important that all training end with testing to ensure retention. By doing this, managers can validate learning objectives and have the confidence that the learning objectives are being met through the training medium
- Create learning avenues such as with collaborative tools for at home teams. Learning avenues are ways that at home resources can communicate and collaborate to learn informally

Managers need to develop remote employee management skills; the RCCSP Professional Education Alliance’s Virtual Support Manager course teaches this. Among them is expecting higher performance for home-based agents, otherwise some of the key benefits of this model are lost, warns Dewey. Managers should also determine career paths for their employees that can include progression, even working from home. The RCCSP Professional Educational Alliance’s Virtual Support Professional course teaches employees to be more successful working from home than in brick and mortar.

“Working from home is not a phenomenon; it is an evolution of the workforce,” says Dewey. “Managers should have a well laid out plan for at home teams, as well as brick and mortar teams.”

Stable and widespread high speed Internet access, the maturity of virtual private network technology and the emergence of thin-client technology are all enabling our AHA program. Contracted AHAs where the contact center employees are independent contractors are emerging.

To avoid [program resistance] companies must put the right employees into their AHA programs, have the right technology to enable them and provide the right training, rules and guidelines and expectations to their AHAs. They should have a dedicated project team and measure program results, making adjustments on the

way. They must also have alignment across multiple levels of management within the organization with a good communication plan to get a consistent message to all stakeholders. It helps to have a senior-level champion of the concept on board.

[Going home] really depends on the level of comfort of a company. There are some roles that, for security reasons, some companies will want to keep in the offices, such as if agents are working with large sums of money or financial transactions. That said, if a company is comfortable in moving to an AHA-based model, there is no reason why that it couldn’t represent 100 percent of agents. **CIS**

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Serving the Social Customer

Customers have always been “social” for they—we as human beings—are social creatures, relying on each of us for vital information to help us survive and prosper. We have asked and have listened to our peers, and have passed the information we gleaned on to them. When we have items to offer, customers listen to us and then consult others and we do the same in turn when we are buyers.

Mass media, merchandising and the atomization of living and working into auto-isolated suburbs, accompanied by the fading away of formal and informal face-to-face social vehicles such as service clubs and kaffeeklatches diminished—but not eliminated—the “social customer”. This left though an unmet demand for such interactions. Not surprisingly, when the Web and the knowledge accessible over it, enabled by residential and wireless broadband that permits anytime, anywhere communications that overcame the spatial barriers, the social customer returned.

Rosetta Stone, which makes language learning software, offers an excellent example of serving the social customer. Founded in 1992, it permits millions of schools, organizations and individuals spanning across 150

explains Jay Topper, Rosetta Stone’s senior vice president of customer success. An integrated solution with social media would accomplish these goals.

Rosetta Stone decided to engage with its customers and prospects via social media directly by hosting its own Facebook site. It tapped Parature (www.parature.com) to manage the presence, aggregate the Facebook comments with those from the contact center and record, filter, flag and notify the firm’s contact center agents of issues and opportunities from a centralized database.

Parature had just developed Parature for Facebook and was looking for beta customers. Parature was the first, and to its knowledge, the only software company that provided

Rosetta Stone’s Wall, search the knowledgebase, peruse FAQs and/or chat with the contact center agents. All Facebook support inquiries would be directed into a single Parature database.

The Parature team created a customized online support engine specifically for the social media venue and managed the launch, which, says Topper “meant simply making the solution live on the social media site. Agents did not need to undergo extra training since they were already familiar with the Parature system.”

The program, which went live in August 2010, has been a success. Weeks after setting up, results from a survey reported that Parature for Facebook support through live chat went from zero to 10 percent, while customer satisfaction rose 90 percent. A single contact center agent could chat with multiple customers from different channels simultaneously on Facebook, TOTALE and the Rosetta Stone website.

Every week Rosetta Stone receives approximately 25,000 customer touches. It also provides real-time support to around 300,000 Facebook fans on a website that those users are already visiting.

Results from a survey [for Rosetta Stone] reported that Parature for Facebook support through live chat went from zero to 10 percent, while customer satisfaction rose 90 percent.

different countries to learn 31 languages with its award-winning technology. Headquartered in Arlington, Va., it serves its global clientele with a 100-plus seat contact center, located in Harrisonburg, Va.

A couple of years ago, Rosetta Stone’s management began noticing that many individuals were commenting about the firm, not just via phone to its contact center agents, or in e-mails or paper letters, but on their individual Facebook pages. At the same time, it wanted to increase customer satisfaction, boost live chat use and promote issue self-resolution to keep costs down,

direct support access through Facebook. Rosetta Stone then became Parature’s first beta and live Parature for Facebook users.

“With Parature for Facebook, the ultimate goal was to provide a new channel of contact for customers to reach us, not only for customer service and support, but also to connect with other existing customers to chat about their experience using our software,” explains Topper.

The program developed by Parature for Rosetta Stone permitted fans, from a single Facebook page, to write on

Future plans will see these numbers grow markedly. Rosetta Stone is expanding the Parature for Facebook program to other countries without adding to its customer support team.

“We were attempting to extend support to a large and rapidly growing Facebook fan base of customers, prospects and language enthusiasts,” says Topper. “By installing Parature for Facebook, this challenge has been overcome. Though [our] customers span across 150 countries [we’re] confident that Parature will be able to keep pace during the expansion.” **CIS**



Reducing Churn: The Fast Route to Profitability

Shrinking customer churn is arguably the key concern of today's businesses, and for good reason: it costs less to keep customers and to acquire new ones. Yet it is a lesson that too many firms, especially those in the wireless industry, which is a key business bellwether, required a painful economic downturn to learn.

Aidan Connolly is ceo, Ildiro Technologies (www.ildiro.com). He points out that during the boom years, wireless companies cared little about churn and paid little heed to providing quality service to keep it down. Why be concerned with customer care, was their attitudes, when they had a queue of five prospects ready to take the place of every single dissatisfied customer that left? As a result, churn rates in North America and Europe in the middle part of the 2000s hovered around the 25 percent mark.

"During the good times, when the money kept flowing, credit was readily available, and customers were willing to put up with inconveniences, errors, and in some cases, poor treatment just in order to receive the goods and services they desired; the blemishes associated with customer service were easy to hide," reports Connolly.

A Cataclysmic Shift

When the economic tide turned, and the level of discretionary spending scaled down—and customers realized that they indeed do have some control over how they spend and how they are treated—mobile operators made a complete about-face when it came to customer service. Providers understood this changing dynamic and took whatever capital was available and invested in technology that could help take deliver more prompt, efficient, and satisfactory customer service. These included new platforms, advanced CRM tools and more skilled and better

trained agents gaining prominence within the organization. Good customer service was considered a cornerstone of the brand, rather than an afterthought.

"Where once there were legions of potential customers, the reality was those remaining with disposable income became the new and smaller addressable market," Connolly points out. "These new target customers were embraced, welcomed, celebrated and endlessly thanked for their patronage."

Enter SNA

One of the more innovative solutions that have been introduced to drive better customer service is advanced social network analysis (SNA). These advanced technologies, says Connolly "give businesses real insight into the behavior of customers by allowing providers to understand the relationships between customers and how these relationships influence their purchasing decisions." Armed with these insights providers can then cost-effectively target compelling retention, acquisition, up-sell and cross-sell offers to the customers most receptive to receiving them.

In simple terms, SNA solutions map the communities that exist among an operator's subscriber base, explains the Ildiro Technologies' ceo. Using data from CDR (call data record) and other demographic data, and then applying a number of

complex algorithms that determine the nature of the relationships between individuals and how these relationships impact an individual's decision making behavior. SNA tools can then give providers a very good understanding of the millions of communities that exist within the network. They identify who the "influencers" and "followers" are in each group, so that operators can determine how, when, and to whom to deliver an appropriate communication or offer.

It should be noted that all customer details are masked in the SNA process. Data and customer details are always secured, and all government mandates regarding data protection and privacy must be strictly observed.

SNA tools have made a dramatic impact on an operator's ability to retain good, profitable customers. The industry has seen stark improvements in customer retention, sometimes in the neighborhood of 45 percent.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects behind the concept of mitigating churn is for the operator not to focus exclusively on the customers that have already indicated they are about to leave as the chance of saving them substantially decreases. Instead, providers are encouraged to act quickly to act quickly to identify and save the subscribers that could be influenced by that disconnecting user.

"By understanding the interrelationships that exist between subscribers, and then delivering compelling offers that satisfy specific interests, operators can often pre-empt systemic churn, avoid launching expensive acquisition and marketing program and turn subscribers on the brink into satisfied advocates for the company," Connolly points out. "And all of this has a tremendously positive effect on the bottom line." **CIS**



Customer Interaction Solutions Magazine's 26th Annual Top 50 Inbound Teleservices Agency Ranking

At the start of the second quarter of each year since 1986, Customer Interaction Solutions has delivered its "Top 50" Teleservices Agency Ranking. True to form, for the 26th time, we present our Inbound rankings (please refer to the March 2011 issue for our Top 50 Outbound Teleservices ranking).

Our "Top 50" rankings are based on extensive detail gleaned from an exhaustive application process, in which inbound teleservices vendors quantify their service delivery in terms of minutes usage in their various call center locations. Through more than a quarter century of consistency in processing and evaluating applications, the Top 50 ranking has become the benchmark for businesses seeking high-capacity teleservices agencies.

Ranking Criteria

Because the primary factor in our rankings is agency size, based on annual call volume, Customer Interaction Solutions has always relied on measurable, third-party-verifiable data to determine our rankings of the "Top 50" agencies. More specifically, we ranked these agencies based on the number of minutes each was billed by each of its phone companies for telephone service for 12 months, from November 2009 through October 2010.

Qualification

Qualifying teleservices agencies in this year's "Top 50" were required to submit responses to a detailed questionnaire, indicating the nature of their operations and listing the number of billable minutes for the 12-month period. Verification, in the form of the signature of each agency's president/CEO was required, in addition to submitting a letter of verification from each telephone service providers used, certifying the number of minutes for which the providers billed the agencies during the evaluation period.

Exceptions

Agencies that did not supply the required third-party verification were disqualified, with three exceptions: 1) a client of the service agency was billed directly for its telephone service and would not provide a letter of verification for anonymity reasons; 2) part of the billable minutes were

with a foreign telecommunications carrier that could not provide the data by the deadline; 3) legitimate business situations prevented an agency from obtaining verification from certain carriers. In these situations, we have traditionally allowed providers to certify a portion of the missing minutes with a letter of explanation and signed verification of billable minutes pertaining to the explanation from the president/CEO of the agency. You will find an asterisk (*) next to the name of all agencies that supplied a portion of their verification from their president/CEO.

Understanding the Listings

The Inbound rankings have been divided into three categories, ranked by size, beginning with the largest. Category A lists U.S. teleservices businesses; Category B consists of international teleservices businesses, including international components of U.S.-based agencies. Agencies that are ranked in both Category A and B are indicated with a dagger (†).

Category C ranks the interactive services (i.e., no live operators) of these teleservices agencies. The growth of this category reflects the increasing demand for automated self-help services. Companies that are ranked in the Domestic and/or International lists, and also in the Interactive category, are marked with a double dagger (‡).

And, because we have already ranked the Outbound services provided by these firms in the March issue, we also include Category D, the Overall Global Ranking, which aggregates global outbound, inbound, and interactive minutes to provide a view of the size of these businesses on global level.

As always, we provide these rankings with the hope that they will benefit you as you look to fulfill your teleservices outsourcing requirements. Please be sure to let your teleservices providers know you found them through the Customer Interaction Solutions "Top 50" Rankings. **CIS**





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CATEGORY A — U.S. DOMESTIC

1. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France/
Salt Lake City, Utah) † ‡
www.teleperformance.com
2. Sitel Operating Corporation
(Nashville, Tenn.) * † ‡
www.sitel.com
3. Alorica, Inc. (Chino, Calif.) * ‡
www.alorica.com
4. LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.) * ‡
www.liveops.com
5. GC Services Limited Partnership
(Houston, Texas) † ‡
www.gcserv.com
6. TCIM Services, Inc.
(Wilmington, Del.) †
www.tcim.com
7. DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.) * ‡
www.dialamerica.com
8. The Connection (Burnsville, Minn.) * ‡
www.the-connection.com
9. VXI Global Solutions
(Los Angeles, Calif.) * † ‡
www.vxi.com
10. Cross Country Automotive Services
(Medford, Mass.) † ‡
www.crosscountry-auto.com
11. The Results Companies
(Dania Beach, Calif.) * †
www.resultscompanies.com
12. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) * † ‡
www.telerx.com
13. USA 800, Inc. (Kansas City, Mo.)
www.usa800.com
14. American Customer Care, Inc.
(Bristol, Conn.) * ‡
www.americancustomercare.com
15. Synergy Solutions, Inc.
(Scottsdale, AZ) * ‡
www.synergysolutionsinc.com
16. AnswerNet (Willow Grove, Pa.) *
www.answer.net
17. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) incl.
Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * † ‡
www.influentinc.com
18. Affinitas Corporation (Omaha, Neb.) *
www.affinitas.net
19. Telvista, Inc. (Dallas, Texas) * ‡
www.telvista.com
20. Ameridial (North Canton, Ohio)
www.oksameridial.com
21. Thomas L. Cardella & Associates (Cedar
Rapids, Iowa) *
www.tlcassociates.com
22. TMS Health (Boca Raton, Fla.) ‡
www.tmshealth.com
23. InService America (Forest, VA)
www.inserviceamerica.com

24. 121 Direct Response (Philadelphia, Pa.)
www.121directresponse.com
25. Callbox, Inc. (Encino, Calif.)
www.callboxinc.com
26. Teleservices Direct (Indianapolis, Ind.)
www.teleservicesdirect.com

CATEGORY B — INTERNATIONAL

1. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France/
Salt Lake City, Utah) † ‡
www.teleperformance.com
2. Sitel Operating Corporation
(Nashville, Tenn.) * † ‡
www.sitel.com
3. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) incl.
Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * † ‡
www.pccwteleservices.com
4. VXI Global Solutions
(Los Angeles, Calif.) * † ‡
www.vxi.com
5. The Results Companies
(Dania Beach, Calif.) * †
www.resultscompanies.com
6. Listen Up Espanol (Portland, Maine)
www.listenupespanol.com
7. Skybridge Marketing Group
(Greenfield, Minn.)
www.skybridgemg.com
8. 24-7 Intouch
(Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada) ‡
www.24-7intouch.com
9. TCIM Services, Inc. (Wilmington, Del.) †
www.tcim.com
10. Voxdata (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) *
www.voxdata.com
11. Cross Country Automotive Services
(Medford, Mass.) † ‡
www.crosscountry-auto.com
12. GC Services Limited Partnership
(Houston, Texas) † ‡
www.gcserv.com
13. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) * † ‡
www.telerx.com

CATEGORY C — INTERACTIVE INBOUND

1. XO Interactive (Beaverton, Ore.)
www.xo.com
2. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) incl.
Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * †
www.pccwteleservices.com
3. Dialogue Marketing
(Auburn Hills, Mich.) *
www.dialogue-marketing.com
4. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France/
Salt Lake City, Utah) †
www.teleperformance.com
5. Sitel Operating Corporation
(Nashville, Tenn.) * †
www.sitel.com

6. GC Services Limited Partnership
(Houston, Texas) †
www.gcserv.com
7. LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.) *
www.liveops.com
8. 24-7 Intouch
(Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada)
www.24-7intouch.com
9. TMS Health (Boca Raton, Fla.)
www.tmshealth.com
10. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) * †
www.telerx.com
11. Cross Country Automotive Services
(Medford, Mass.) †
www.crosscountry-auto.com
12. Synergy Solutions, Inc. (Scottsdale, AZ) *
www.synergysolutionsinc.com
13. The Connection (Burnsville, Minn.) *
www.the-connection.com
14. DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.)
www.dialamerica.com
15. Alorica, Inc. (Chino, Calif.) *
www.alorica.com
16. American Customer Care, Inc.
(Bristol, Conn.) *
www.americancustomercare.com
17. Telvista, Inc. (Dallas, Texas) *
www.telvista.com
18. VXI Global Solutions
(Los Angeles, Calif.) * †
www.vxi.com

CATEGORY D — GLOBAL AGGREGATE RANKING

1. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France/
Salt Lake City, Utah)
www.teleperformance.com
2. Sitel Operating Corporation
(Nashville, Tenn.) *
www.sitel.com
3. XO Interactive (Beaverton, Ore.)
www.xo.com
4. Alorica, Inc. (Chino, Calif.) *
www.alorica.com
5. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) incl.
Influent (Dublin, Ohio) *
www.pccwteleservices.com
www.influentinc.com
6. LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.) *
www.liveops.com
7. GC Services Limited Partnership
(Houston, Texas)
www.gcserv.com
8. DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.)
www.dialamerica.com
9. VXI Global Solutions (Los Angeles, Calif.) *
www.vxi.com

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www.teleservicesdirect.com
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www.usa800.com
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www.tlcassociates.com
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www.dialogue-marketing.com
23. Listen Up Espanol (Portland, Maine)
www.listenupespanol.com
24. Callbox, Inc. (Encino, Calif.)
www.callboxinc.com
25. 24-7 Intouch (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada)
www.24-7intouch.com
26. Ameridial (North Canton, Ohio)
www.oksameridial.com
27. Affinitas Corporation (Omaha, Neb.) *
www.affinitas.net
28. Skybridge Marketing Group (Greenfield, Minn.)
www.skybridgemg.com
29. 121 Direct Response (Philadelphia, Pa.)
www.121directresponse.com
30. Telvista, Inc. (Dallas, Texas) *
www.telvista.com
31. InService America (Forest, Va.)
www.inserviceamerica.com
32. Voxdata (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) *
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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION SOLUTIONS® magazine (ISSN: 1533-3078) is published monthly by Technology Marketing Corporation, River Park, 800 Connecticut Ave 1st Fl., Norwalk, CT 06854-1628 U.S.A. Periodicals postage paid at Norwalk, Connecticut and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to: **CUSTOMER INTER@CTION SOLUTIONS®**, Technology Marketing Corporation, River Park, 800 Connecticut Ave 1st Fl., Norwalk, CT 06854-1628 U.S.A.

To subscribe, call toll-free: 800-243-6002. If busy, call 203-852-6800 or write to the circulation director at srusso@tmcnet.com. Subscription rates (published monthly): Free for qualified subscribers in the U.S.A. only. For non-qualified U.S.A. subscribers, \$59. All Canadian subscribers, \$89. All Foreign (air mail), \$109. All orders are payable in advance in U.S. dollars drawn against a U.S. bank. Connecticut residents add applicable sales tax.

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Demolish The Call/Contact Center?

I must confess to never hearing or using the term “call centers”—now multi-channel contact centers—when I first started covering them in the mid-1990s. Instead I knew and referred to them by function, i.e. “billing”, “canvassing”, “collections”, “customer service”, “fundraising”, “order entry”, “polling”, “research”, “reservations”, “tech support” and “telemarketing”.

At around that time there had been a massive growth in live agent phone-based interactions. “Mail order” and air carrier and phone company storefronts and mom-and-pop travel agencies became obsolete while regulators clamped down on automated outbound robocalls. Formal call centers, enabled by new high-efficiency ACD and predictive dialing technologies, were set up in smaller high-unemployment low-wage communities and away from corporate headquarters and off employees’ career tracks. These “contact center” tools were expensive though, and required large operations to spread costs. To cut expenses many firms began outsourcing their telemarketing and customer service, sorry, call centers.

At about the same time, and perhaps not coincidentally, customers began noticing that high quality customer service was becoming honored more in the breach. Agents, being graded by cost-focused metrics such as calls per hour, would nudge callers off the lines. Meeting such numbers—which often had no direct relationships with corporate goals—became more important than ensuring excellent customer experiences. If customers had problems with products and services the attitude of too many enterprises became “they can deal with it or toss it into the trash and buy new ones”, which made more profits. Customers too became disposable. Wasn’t there one born every minute? So too were agents—the longer they stayed the more wages and benefits had to be paid—so why encourage them to be loyal?

Yet it is high quality that customers are demanding—and are insisting that they receive from expert, empowered, motivated and committed employees—or else they and those of the people they influence via social media will take their business elsewhere. Disposing of them is no longer an option. While firms that get it have made improvements, with metrics, and coaching and training focusing more on customer satisfaction and retention, customers’ expectations appear to be rising faster than what contact centers have delivered.

The need for contact centers is decreasing. Telemarketing is rapidly dying as customers move to off-limits wireless devices. New social collaboration tools permit them to obtain assistance

and support from their peers. Increasingly sophisticated voice, text-based and web self-service tools are taking on more inbound and outbound contacts. As “Watson” dramatically demonstrated on Jeopardy!, advances in artificial intelligence (AI)—and AI is at the core of human-like natural language speech recognition—can provide superior and faster-delivered replies.

Isn’t it time then to demolish the contact center?

To re-integrate service and sales tasks with parent departments and in doing so create more profitable customer experiences while providing career paths for exceptional performers? To connect customers with anyone who has the skills needed to meet their needs whether they are in or out of the office, on the retail floors and behind the counters or front desks with customers, via voice, online and video? To link buyers with subject matter experts that can best handle their issues and opportunities?

And, most importantly to humanize the customer relationships by smashing the anonymity walls by permitting customers to seek out and ask for assistance by name—just as they can in a store—and for employees to treat them as clients?

The tools are there to permit enterprises to function without contact centers. Feature-rich, highly and affordably scalable multichannel routers and dialers can route and connect calls to and from anyone, anywhere, in any department on any device, wired or wireless. Customer-directed routing, such as specific departments or individuals and callbacks, make traditional call distribution obsolete. VoIP-enabled unified communications have expanded the old agent-state to the rest of the business, connecting subject matter experts. CRM, recording, security and workforce management tools are becoming location-agnostic. Servers are becoming virtualized, as are hiring and training.

The question then is not whether but when will organizations push the levers to bulldoze the old contact centers. Will they take the initiative...or be forced to when their competitors delivering equally attractive products and services get it...and create more effective organizations that will provide higher quality service for less? **CIS**

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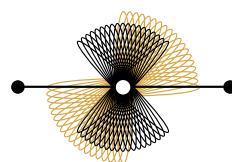
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Call Centers Director
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- Real-time Adherence

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