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Jonathan Fuld, CTO and
Donald Palmer, CEO

SIP Print's On-Target

CONTACT CENTER APPLICATIONS

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Amazon EC2 Outage: What the Experts Tell Us

The recent outage of Amazon's EC2 service affected a number of leading-edge companies, which, in some cases, used the fact that they housed little to no infrastructure on their premises as a selling point to investors. Certainly, the cloud computing market is in what we could call a post-evangelism phase, where there seems to be universal agreement that the cloud has a role in most organizations – at least to help with some tasks – if not all. We know the concept of hosted solutions isn't new – many companies outsource payroll, for example, or tax preparation.

But, when the largest company providing cloud infrastructure has a major outage of one of its availability zones lasting days, it's time to sit back and reflect on the challenges of moving wholesale to the cloud without thinking the concept through.

In order to get a sense of what some of the major players in the space had to say, I reached out to a number of people to get their feedback. Here are some of the responses – as I get more, I will be updating this piece at tehrani.com.

Thomas Howe with consulting firm Embrase, produces an event with TMC called Cloud Communications Expo. When I asked him about whether companies should relocate to the cloud he had this to say:

"Well, in general, they need to run in the cloud. The question isn't is the cloud safe; the question is, is the cloud safer than what I can do? For nearly all companies, Amazon wins that battle."

When asked about how to limit the damage from such outages he suggested working with a few vendors like Amazon and Rackspace.

I reached out to John Engates, CTO at Rackspace Hosting, who said, "Companies should do their due diligence with regard to the promises made by their cloud providers and the SLAs in place to back them up. Transparency is key. If the provider is not transparent with its architecture, it's impossible to fully understand if what you're building is going to be resilient and highly available on top of that provider."

He echoed Howe's sentiment, explaining how cloud outages get major media attention, but they happen all the time in corporate data centers. He further likened a cloud outage to an airline crash: people will continue to fly after a disaster, but a thorough investigation generally results in many lessons learned for the entire industry. He said this happens in isolation, if at all, in a data center.

Another important point is that resources can and should be considered disposable. Rather than protecting a single server with high-availability components, as you would see in a typical data center, you should build a group or cluster of servers to handle the job. He says the companies who used this approach in a multi-data center or multi-cloud manner generally survived the Amazon outage in stride.

I also reached out to Joe Staples, CMO of contact center solutions provider Interactive Intelligence, which offers hosted services as well as premises-based hardware and software. Joe agreed that cloud environments are generally more secure and reliable than data centers.

When asked how customers can limit damage from such outages Staples responded, "Develop a solid business continuity plan. Look for alternate providers that can deliver basic services in case of a primary outage. Ask the question, how long could we be without this service? If it is a critical application, customers should spend the added money to ensure they have a solid business continuity plan to keep them up and running."

The general consensus here is putting an application in the cloud will generally make it more secure than a typical data center but if you want it to be more resilient you need to take steps to architect a cloud-based solution that can withstand outages in specific data center locations, or even across an entire cloud vendor.

As more and more companies begin to seriously consider the move to cloud-based services, the timing of this outage could even be considered fortunate in hindsight. **CIS**

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Erik Linask, *Group Editorial Director, TMC*

Increase Satisfaction, Put Scheduling in the Hands of Your Customers

TMC's Juliana Kenny recently discussed the inability of service providers – cable operators, specifically – to provide quality customer care, putting them in danger of losing more and more subscribers to alternative Internet-based video services (www.tmcnet.com/58837.1).

Kenny appropriately points out that today's consumers represent a new breed. They are more self-service oriented – Web self-service, in particular – and want to be able to quickly report an issue and facilitate a service appointment. They have little desire to wait on the phone listening to hold music and repeating their account information multiple times before going through a series of questions to finally qualify for a service appointment.

Anyone who has ever had to schedule an appointment with a cable operator, phone company, or other service provider knows exactly how that works – or rather, doesn't work.

The fact is there will be issues with almost every service provider from time to time – that's a byproduct of the modern era, where 100% uptime is nearly impossible when factoring in growth, technology evolution, unpredictable surges is usage, and other variables. While service issues are a nuisance, many customers are likely to overlook them if they are able to quickly and easily resolve them.

That being the case, providers should look closely at how they manage their customers' inbound interactions, offering options that allow each to use whatever medium is most convenient. More often than not, that is becoming a web-based, self-service option, not only because customers have little patience for waiting on hold, but also because of the continued proliferation of smartphones and tablets, creating an increased demand for automated options that can be accessed anywhere – a must for today's mobile lifestyles. In fact, even when at home, users prefer to be able to leverage automated systems that allow them to complete their interactions in a fraction of the time it takes to speak to a live agent.

Most service issues are not unique, nor do they have unique resolutions. Given that, it's very reasonable to expect providers to be able to set up automated systems for troubleshooting and appointment setting – both IVR- and Web-based.

This is the very point Kenny makes, and which service providers should consider a prime opportunity for enhancing their service operations. Users log in to a Web interface (or call into an IVR-based system using their Bluetooth-enabled device while in transit), provide account information, answer a series of service-related questions based on a logic tree to ensure only relevant information is requested (other than having to repeat information, there is nothing more irritating to customers than being required to answer questions completely unrelated to their service or issue), then are quickly offered a self-service solution, whenever possible, while always allowing a easy option for scheduling a service call automatically, at any point during the interaction. With today's sophisticated scheduling software, combined with vast amounts of information for accurately predicting the time required to resolve common issues, allowing users to automatically schedule a convenient service time should be easy. (The same holds for initial installation appointments.)

In fact, Moshe BenBassat, CEO and chairman of ClickSoftware (one of several vendors with scheduling software on the market today), suggested to Kenny the situation is far more than a matter of convenience. Rather, customers are quickly demanding the ability to "log into the site, click 'appointment booking,' tell them what the problem is, get options for the time they can send someone, click 'yes' on one of the options, and be done with it."

Of course, once an appointment is scheduled, the burden shifts back to the technicians' having the proper training, education, and customer relationship skills to facilitate a positive end-to-end experience. But, the chances of that are significantly increased – and customers tend to be much more tolerant – when their initial experience is a positive one.

Frankly, this same strategy should be applied by not only technology service providers, but any schedule-based service operation, from dental practices to hairdressers to photo studios. Every provider has a predefined set of standard services and an intimate knowledge of the time required to complete each service, and they should all be able to – and want to – provide an automated system that not only expedites the process, but gives customers an increased level of satisfaction derived from a sense of ownership and control over the process.

Last month, I wrote about optimal ways of conducting post-interaction customer satisfaction surveys. It's a safe bet that businesses that employ self-service technologies effectively will find their post-service feedback to be significantly more positive than those that do not. It may not be enough to stem the tide of defection from cable operators to alternative providers, but it might slow it enough to allow them to develop additional retention strategies. **CIS**

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by Brendan Read

SIP Print's On-Target Contact Center Applications

Most firms that are small-midsized businesses or SMBs have to be lean, flexible and very responsive to customers' needs to survive and grow. The smarter mid-sized enterprises, stung by the economic downturn, are adopting the SMB philosophy to increase profits.

To those ends, SMBs are now formalizing their customer service and support and sales into organized contact centers with dedicated teams to deliver more effective, efficient and trackable performance, with tools to identify and respond to service issues and sales opportunities. At the same time midsized and "lean enterprises" are looking at ways to do more with less from their existing contact centers to improve results. Both business types are seeking more direct control over their customer interaction quality and costs.

Enter SIP Print (www.sipprint.com) which has been supplying SIP (session initiation protocol) and VoIP call recording appliances to SMBs and midsized enterprises since 2008. It had developed a patent-pending hardware-appliance-housed solution that taps calls off of IP packets by connecting into port-mirroring switches that copies them for relaying to the units. The need was there; SIP/VoIP was coming into its own, says the firm, but there was no solution then on the market that was affordable for SMBs. Since then the company says it has come to dominate the SMB recording field as its solutions offer lower price points with faster installation and greater reliability than competing products.

Now to meet SMB and lean enterprise contact center needs, SIP Print has built out and has begun marketing a series of targeted applications, available a la carte via its channel partners or from cloud providers that have the SIP Print line, built on the SIP Print appliances. These are:

1. SIP Print Call Recording: Express, SMB and SME
2. SIP Print Screen Capture
3. SIP Print Quality Assurance (QA)
4. SIP Print WFM (workforce management)
5. SIP Print Call Accounting
6. SIP Care

Donald Palmer, SIP Print's CEO, founded the firm with Jonathan Fuld, the company's CTO. Palmer, who started in the communications business as a lineman in 1979 developed a blended digital and analog TDM call recording solution in the late 1990s.

Jonathan Fuld, CTO (l.) and Donald Palmer, CEO (r.) SIP Print

"About six months ago I said to Jonathan that a lot of these small companies now have separate customer service departments: mini call centers if you like with an average of 30-40 people down to a 6-8- or 15- person call center," recounts Palmer. "They needed to record calls, but they also needed to have customer interaction data with some of the same key features as used in the bigger contact centers. But there was nothing on the market for them. Same conditions when we launched SIP Print."

As with call recordings, it is not just small companies that are showing interest in SIP Print's new offerings, which have been in the works for 15 months.

"We've already had interest by customers with upwards of 500 to 2,000 users–contact center agents who have looked at our product and said that to adapt to it is very, very easy," says Palmer. "They liked that we have kept it simple and with a solid value proposition."

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SIP Print is hoping to achieve the same success marketwise with its SMB/lean-enterprise targeted contact center solutions as it has in SMB-aimed call recording.

“With our high-value offerings we believe that SIP Print products will dominate the contact center market like it has dominated the SMB SIP/VoIP recording market,” says Palmer.

The SIP Print Answer

The SIP Print CEO appears to have a strong foundation for his projection. The new SIP Print products are simple and flexible for SMB contact centers, providing them with vital capabilities–screen recording, QA and WFM that are found only in more costly enterprise-class products. The SIP Print line is modular, the solutions can be purchased all-in-one or mix-and-match and acquired when they are needed. Yet the applications are strong and supple enough for enterprise-level centers; each appliance can support up to 200 seats and can be clustered to carry the load for an unlimited number of users.

The SIP Print applications can also support home-based agents and remote staff such as field sales reps and techs. Supervisors can log into them and monitor performance remotely.

The SIP Print products are very affordable; they cost 75 percent or less than competing solutions–$200-$350 per channel versus $450-$600 per channel for call recording alone. They can be installed in just two to four hours compared with two or three weeks for competitors’ solutions.

One key to the benefits of these new products lies in the appliance model, which also includes built-in APIs, which Palmer says permits far easier integration to third party applications such as analytics, CRM and data warehousing, as opposed to loading software onto virtualized servers that are shared with the other solutions. This also makes integrating easier with legacy software applications, which is a key consideration for lean enterprises as it avoids expensive and disruptive forklift rip-and-replace.

Another key is that SIP Print focused its product lines on the basic functionalities that its research found that most existing and prospective customers were looking for. They eschew the add-ons (i.e. bloatware) typically found in competing products that 99 percent of the SMB and midsized companies have no need.

“Some of the other major suppliers’ products come with so many additional features that most customers and contact centers will never use - that it is ridiculous,” Palmer points out. “We decided that we’re not going to do that. We’re going to keep our products very functional and cost-effective.”

At the same time, none of SIP Print’s major competitors reportedly offer call accounting applications. And even though VoIP methods like SIP is less expensive than traditional higher-cost circuit-switched or PSTN/TDM and are gradually replacing it, such calls still incur expenses that must be tracked and managed. SIP Print has developed Call Accounting for SIP/VoIP telephony, a tool as important to the contact center as is the leaderboard.

Conscious that SIP and IP telephony is still a relatively new technology for many companies, especially SMBs, SIP Print introduced SIP Care to help them ensure network reliability. SIP Care, available hosted, permits network managers to monitor all the devices on their network, SIP, data or mixed, physical or virtual LAN (VLAN), view reports and see real time analytics of what issues are happening, and allows those managers to remotely respond to them.

Yet companies often have unique needs. But instead of larding solutions with added features up front, SIP Print can, will, and has developed new customized applications to meet their specific requirements.

As one example Palmer’s firm was receiving calls from customers who have ShoreTel switches but they could not tell whether the calls being made over them were inbound or outbound and needed to know. ShoreTel, he explains, does not use SIP on its switches. Instead it uses an IP protocol called MGCP. While SIP Print’s recording appliance can capture ShoreTel’s MGCP-based voice packets, it could not determine the origin. So his company created a customized application for those customers.

“We’re so flexible in our product development/professional services that we can go back and customize various features, but we’re not going to be jamming out all of these little nuances,” says Palmer.

Appliance Versus Hosted?

SIP Print’s new contact center application set is coming into a market that is already seeing many similarly basic features offered on a low-cost, flexible and pay-as-you-go cloud/hosted models, aimed at the same customers. More of its competition in the contact center space is reportedly beginning to host recording and WFM applications themselves rather than reselling through third parties. So why should SMBs and lean enterprises go to the SIP Print appliance-based offering?

Palmer doesn’t see the market evolving that way. His competition is the software-only products. Instead he reports that the third-party hosting firms are coming to SIP Print as customers, reselling his firm’s solutions on a hosted model. Even so, he thinks most companies will still want applications housed in on-premise appliances.

“There’s a new small market for cloud and the cloud is going to get bigger but right now executives and managers want a product they can see and look at and know that it is working,” says Palmer.

Future Developments

So what are the next steps for SIP Print? One move is into offering IP phones, which would tie nicely into the new contact center applications, though Palmer concedes there are many players in that market.

One of the big areas under consideration by SIP Print is how to capture social media–comments made about firms on sites such as on Facebook and Twitter and on social collaboration sites–that leverage SIP Print’s appliance-based model.

“You have to look at these needs and at how you can meet them, because if you do not you will be left behind, “says Palmer. “Like our competitors in the PSTN/TDM market who said they would not go into VoIP no matter what and they’re now out of business.” **CIS**

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Knowlagent's Matt McConnell on Contact Center Workforce Issues

The key to efficiently serving the customers is effective workforce management (WFM): connecting them with the right number of highly-skilled agents for the right contacts at the right times.

Matt McConnell is President and CEO of Knowlagent (www.knowlagent.com). He offers these workforce trends and insights:

• The biggest contact center labor force trend is multisourcing. Multi-sourcing is a real mix of people — including insourced, outsourced, onshore, offshore, at-home, in-center, part time, full-time and temporary agents — who serve a company's customers, but don't necessarily have the company's name on their paychecks. As companies have worked to optimize service delivery costs, they ended up with a heterogeneous workforce with different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, trainings and motivations, serving their customers.

This poses a challenge. With a multisourced workforce, it has become increasingly difficult to deliver a consistent message and level of service.

At the same time, customers are increasingly demanding personal service. Most companies are concerned with first call resolution (FCR) because customers are demanding it. If you can't solve a customer's issue on the first call, it is a threat to the existence of the company. Low FCR is a high lead indicator for churn, and customer churn is a company killer.

However, with the growing need for personal service, there is an equally growing dichotomy in the contact center. On one side you have customers demanding more efficient and effective service on calls, but on the other side, you have a multi-sourced workforce that is expected to deliver greater service levels to customers with complex requests.

This dichotomy is impacting scheduling and adherence today.

By training and coaching agents during call volume downtimes, this carrier met its FCR and customer satisfaction goals. It fixed its customer retention issue — a big problem in the mobility space as the speed of technology innovation changes can often decrease customer loyalty

• More systems appear to be allowing callbacks, customer self-selecting agents and agents devising their schedules leading to this question: if and how these developments affect agent scheduling?

This goes right to the heart of the labor segmentation issue. Today, agent scheduling is not very dynamic; it is mainly manual. Agent schedules are built from historical forecasts, but chances are, you will be overstaffed or understaffed, which is common in the contact center.

By allowing callbacks and customer self-selecting agents, WFM can be more dynamic with labor segmentation of who you schedule to meet demand. Such scheduling provides a clearer view of "intraday demand," matching agents more effectively with customer needs.

In the future, companies will become smarter about what labor pool is best equipped to deliver efficient and effective service. I predict companies will do labor segmentation in the same way they do customer segmentation. Labor segmentation, however, is far more dynamic than customer segmentation because it is based on individual skills and knowledge that is over and beyond demographics

• There is an increasing trend back to personal service. Customers want a human being that will efficiently and effectively meet their needs the first time. When was the last time you heard someone brag about a great experience with an IVR or website customer self-service? Of course, it makes sense to handle simple requests through IVR and Web but, as companies have worked to optimize costs, customers are not fans of self-service through the Web for more complex requests — or, better yet, dealing with an agent perceived as incompetent.

As Kerry Bodine of Forrester recently wrote, companies like American Express, Esurance and Zappos.com have focused on creating a customer-centric call center culture instead of investing millions into call center technology projects. These companies realize that call centers are often the customers' first — and sometimes only — human interaction with the company. As more companies focus on personal service, the goal of call center managers is to effectively staff capable, prepared agents to deal with various customer issues at the lowest possible cost

• WFM gave the contact center a more accurate staffing model based on historical call volumes. The reality of WFM is very manual; these tools, at best, staff agents in 15 minute increments. Therefore, if understaffed agents are being called to come in, and if overstaffed they are being sent home: with the risk of not meeting supply and demand. With new applications, WFM will evolve to be more dynamic in how the technology deals with intraday changes in call volumes and how it matches agent skills with customer needs.

Companies need to have a more realistic expectation of WFM, understanding overstaffing and understaffing occurs. There are tools available today, like Knowlagent, to help deal with intraday over- and understaffing situations, so you can run your call center to deliver personal customer service more effectively and efficiently. **CIS**

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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION NEWS

Anametrix (www.anametrix.com) has released Anametrix InstaVista 3.0, which provides interactive visualizations of online and offline information. These include web analytics, point of sale, social media, search engine marketing (SEM), video and audio, e-mail campaigns, market research surveys, CRM applications and loyalty programs. The release also features real-time uploads from Microsoft Excel data, along with download to Excel options for every data source. The solution enables correlations and amortizations across an entire user base.

BatchBlue (www.batchblue.com) has upgraded its CRM software's social media integrations. Batchbook users can now view the last five Facebook wall posts for their contacts and Likes and/or comments right from the application. Users can also view education history if available, as well as Likes. Twitter Batchbook users can now follow, retweet, list as favorites and/or reply to Twitter posts right from it. They can also save individual tweets as Communications or To-Dos. For LinkedIn, Batchbook now displays the last status, work history, bio, specialties and recommenders as listed in LinkedIn, though similar privacy rules apply as with Facebook. Users will see publicly available information or details of contacts to whom they are connected.

CosmoCom (www.cosmocom.com) has come out with social media support for its CosmoCall Universe contact center suite through a deep integration with Buzzient's social media monitoring technology. The combination permits finding and analyzing relevant social conversations using business rules to identify and route only those interactions requiring attention. CosmoCall Universe selects the best customer service specialists to handle calls, present the interaction information, and report on it in a similar manner to other communications channels.

CTI Group (www.ctigroup.com) has launched the SmartInteraction Suite for contact centers. The new solution builds on its SmartRecord solution with several new features:

- The SmartListen audio mining allows organizations to utilize speech analytics to index recordings phonetically for easy retrieval and reporting. This feature also enables users to automatically categorize or tag calls based on the information found in the calls
- SmartEvaluate, an advanced form of call handler evaluation, utilizes audio mining and analytics enabled by Aurix to isolate calls by certain criteria to perform several functions including compliance, procedure, call handling and customer service
- SmartCapture is screen recording that links the voice recording with the corresponding visual recording of the keystroke activity
- Centralized cloud-based storage.

Drishti-Soft (www.drishti-soft.com) has tightly integrated its Ameyo contact center software with Skype, permitting its users to have a voice calls, send instant messages or have a video calls with contact center agents. All Skype customer interactions can be logged and treated like other calls, complete with reporting and call analysis for each mode.

Echopass (www.echopass.com) has untethered contact center supervisors and managers by enabling them to monitor and manage their operations from the cloud, and respond to issues in realtime. It has linked its Echopass InSite real-time cloud based management tools with mobile devices such as the Apple iPad and iPhone, and other vendors' smartphones.

Nimble (www.nimble.com) has launched a public beta version of its Nimble Contact, a new cloud-deployed social CRM platform that combines relationship management and social engagement. Nimble Contact integrates LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Google, e-mail contacts and conversations into one seamless and intuitive environment.

Parature (www.parature.com) has boosted social channel/social media support in Parature Spring '11. Among the new features is an expansion of its Direct Social Engagement Model from Facebook to Twitter and Lithium. It now permits ready management of multiple brands and Facebook Fan Pages from one dashboard while providing a complete view of social customer interactions. It allows instantaneous removal of inappropriate content like obscenities and spam from clients' Facebook pages. And there is now support for 33 languages across all social channels, including double-byte languages like Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

Parature Spring '11 has a host of other functionalities. It offers "EasyAnswer" Auto-suggest and Improved Search; with this feature customers automatically receive auto-suggested answers

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from the knowledgebase while submitting tickets. A Customer Experience Analysis of Search Terms and Feedback feature permits viewing, analysis and reporting on the service experience, captures search terms, determines the most popular searches by category and reports on incident feedback by channel. It also measures the self-service effectiveness.

Salesforce.com (www.salesforce.com) has unveiled Service Cloud 3, which lets organizations engage with customers on any social community, including Facebook, Twitter and other social networks via Radian6. With it, companies can scale their operations quickly and easily to manage a high volume of service issues, including the millions of conversations that are happening every day on social media sites. Leveraging built-in social analytics, agents will be able to prioritize interactions across any channel and tailor support strategies to meet changing sentiments on social media sites.

Sage North America (www.sagenorthamerica.com) now enables Sage SalesLogix v.7.5.3 customers and users to take CRM mobile for free on a wide range of devices, including iPhone, iPad, Android and BlackBerry Torch, as well as HTML5/CSS3-compliant browsers such as Safari, Google Chrome, Opera and Firefox. This functionality is courtesy of the new browser-based Sage SalesLogix Mobile solution that works with Sage SalesLogix on-premises and Sage SalesLogix Cloud systems and interacts with each device's navigation, mapping, dialing and e-mail functions. Sage SalesLogix Mobile operates online and offline, is centrally managed and customized and it updates automatically over the air.

SAP (www.sap.com) will be coming out this year with SAP Sales OnDemand, which offers social collaboration to permit sales staff easy and effective ways to work with teams on opportunities, manage customer information and communicate effectively with people in their networks. It is the first solution to be built on the hosted SAP Business ByDesign platform, which enables preconfigured process best practices and provides support for mobile devices.

Transera Communications (www.transerainc.com) announced the general availability of its Scorecard Routing software. Scorecard Routing, which matches valued customers with a contact center's best-performing agents, had previously been offered to several of the firm's key customers. The firm's CEO, Prem Uppaluru, reports they experienced a seven percent to 10 percent increase in sales conversion rates and 50 percent to 70 percent decrease in call abandon rates. Scorecard Routing can easily be integrated into any call center environment and integrates seamlessly with existing on-premises ACD systems owned in-house or provided by outsourced vendors.

WorkFlex Solutions (www.workflexsolutions.com) has come out with WorkFlex Alert, a new tool that applies real-time decisioning and flexible communications methodologies to monitor key utilization and performance indicators, among them average handle time, customer satisfaction, occupancy and service levels. The product also automatically alerts agents and/or supervisors as to issues and to corrective actions.

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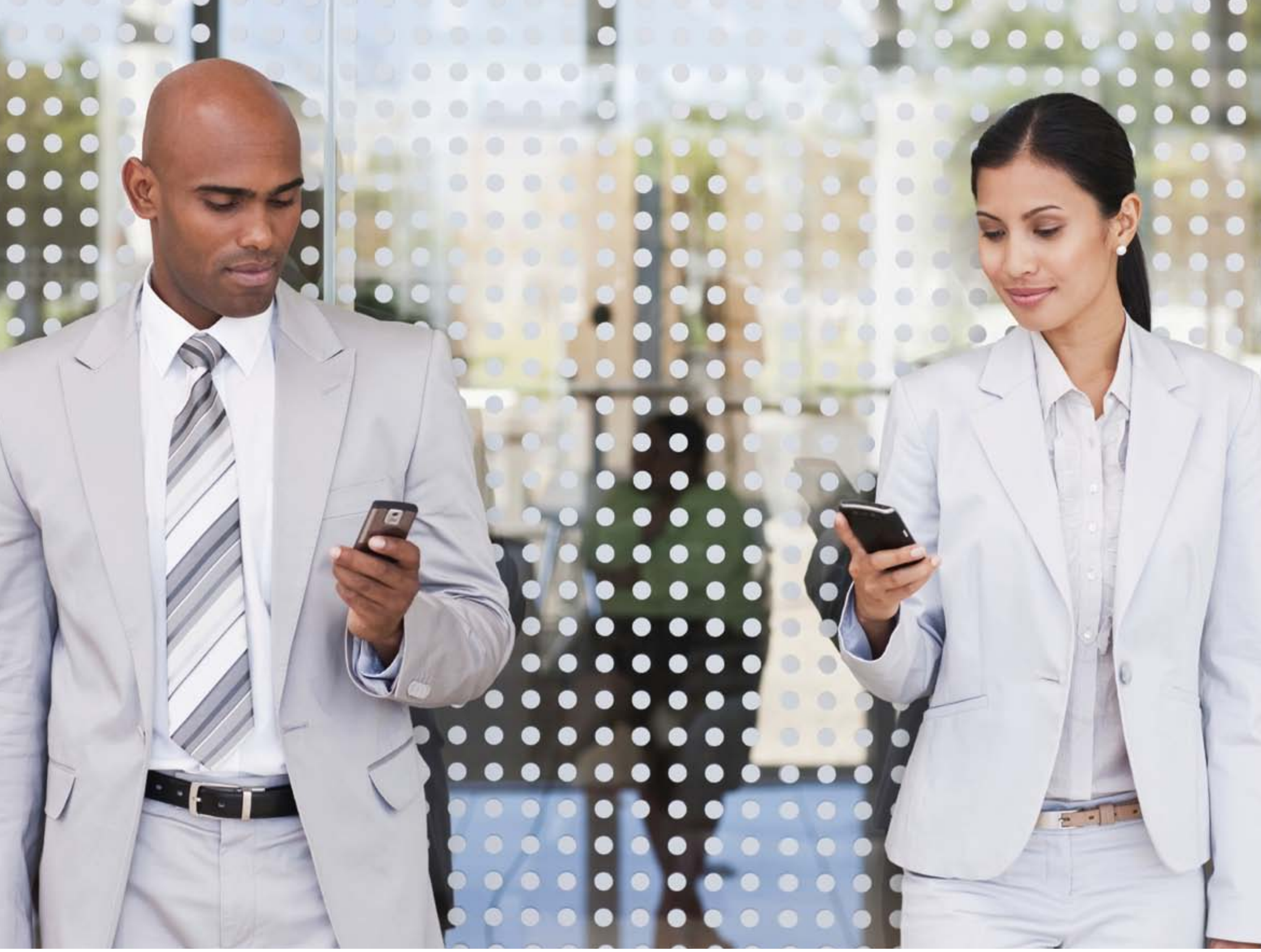

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by Brendan Read

Recording the Developments

Call recordings are at the core of ensuring contact center performance, productivity, profitability and compliance through the vital information they collect and store from customer interactions. To help centers decide on recording solutions and strategies, Customer Interaction Solutions reached out to several industry experts and firms and asked them questions on:

- What is new in contact center recording needs and trends and their drivers
- Whether contact centers need to have recording tools that are HD-capable
- The need to capture customer interactions on every channel, voice, IVR and text-based means

Here are the highlights of their answers:

CallCopy (www.callcopy.com)

Keith Kress, marketing manager

The big trend in contact centers right now is the desire to derive more business intelligence [from recordings] from the vast number of interactions that happen each day. Technology, such as speech and desktop analytics, are able to sift through huge amounts of data to uncover patterns or trends that may have otherwise been missed.

We've mainly seen HD audio for internal communications within an organization, but not to the general marketplace. The adoption of HD is always going to be limited by the weakest link. The ability to record HD audio is nothing new for CallCopy, and is actually beneficial for us in many ways. For example, higher quality audio is better for our speech analytics engine. We recommend that any organization looking to implement a call recording application should "future-proof" their investment by taking into account future trends, such as more widespread adoption of HD audio.

Customers are really driving this through their expectation of having more than one way to contact an organization. So there is an obvious need to capture and connect all of these interactions, regardless of the channel through which they are received. CallCopy has developed tools, such as screen-only recording and API triggers, to handle multi-channel interactions just like any other interaction.

Frost and Sullivan (www.frost.com)

Keith Dawson, principal analyst

Recording solutions have become commoditized, with little functional difference between tools. That's pushing prices down for bare recording, and making vendors work harder to develop value added applications that improve functionality. That's where the real innovation is happening, and it's what's driving recording these days. We're also seeing an interest in analytics and resurgence in interest in coaching applications.

What's also innovative is what people are starting to do with what they record. This includes subjecting the unstructured voice data to analysis and marrying it to data from other sources (switch data, CRM data) to get a better feel for the overall contours of the customer interaction.

I have not heard any vendor or end user talk about HD Voice. Present levels of non-HD voice recording seem to be sufficient.

You have so many technologies that operate in silos that gather and report on interactions, that it's a reasonable question to ask, in the face of all these channels, do you have a single view of the customer? And largely, the answer is no. Most centers don't have a way to see the connections between whether a person on the phone has also sent a text message, or is an authorized user in a customer support forum. This involves marrying data from those interaction systems, the call handling side, as well as the customer data itself, from the CRM and agent-facing systems, and all the knowledge base and self-service or community data that the customer has interacted with before even entering the formal contact center.

And if contact centers are going to create a holistic service delivery process that touches all those varied inbound channels, they are going to have to have a process for knitting the data picture from these interactions together as well. And the figures for people who say this is either happening or going to happen in their organization are going up, slowly but surely.

MiaRec (www.miarec.com)

Gennadiy Bezkorovayniy, CEO and founder and Tatyana Polyakova, marketing director

We see mention further expansion of VoIP technology in the contact centers and in call recording particularly. The key reason for this is that VoIP can reduce operational costs, as well support a more centralized application management and integration with a variety of enterprise applications.

Another big shift in call recording we are seeing in recent years is that organizations are actively taking advantage of hosted call recoding solutions, as well as of other hosted/SaaS-based contact center solutions. Functionally-rich hosted call recording solutions eliminate the need for large up-front investments and are available on a monthly basis.

At the same time, remote staffing in contact centers continues to rise. VoIP and hosted telephony infrastructure have made it possible to use home-based agents and to optimize costs. Consequently, call recording providers have to respond to the needs to track the call activity of remote agents.

We expect HD Audio to become a commonplace in the contact center industry in next two to three years, when HD Audio is successfully adopted at all stages of a telecommunication channel between customers and contact centers. That includes customer-premises phones, telephone service provider's infrastructure, interexchange network and the call center PBX systems.

We see significant progress in adopting HD Voice by VoIP service providers, for instance, 8&8, Ooma, Verizon and other providers constantly increase the customer base for their own HD-capable VoIP services. At the same time, leading mobile operators such as AT&T and Verizon Wireless are declaring adoption of HD Voice in the next one to two years. Orange, a mobile operator from UK, already launched HD Voice service in September 2010.

Contact centers focusing on high-quality customer experiences want to have a whole picture of customer interactions across all channels. Consequently, they need solutions to able to track and analyze customer interactions at every touch-point. Of vital importance is social media. It is not a secret that customers are more likely to share a negative experience on social media sites, than by contacting the company directly.

Tracking and evaluating of all voice and non-voice interactions, including social media activities, provide contact center managers with better insights on customer service processes. They represent the opportunity for contact centers to improve their customer experience.

OAISYS (www.oaisys.com)

Brian Spencer, president

Many contact centers are now grappling with varied regulations and industry requirements along with their own business requirements. Think about how the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI-DSS) affects the ability to execute a 100 percent record and retain policy. This is driving contact centers to seek sophisticated solutions that will seamlessly integrate into their existing information technology in a way that very finely controls media capture, access and data lifecycle management.

The fact that TDM is still the dominant form of connection to the public network will be the limiting factor to HD Voice in the contact center. Until a large percentage of the total users connected to the public network—consumers and businesses alike—it won't be a contact center reality.

Most contact centers with which we are speaking are focusing the majority of their processes and technology around calls and e-mails. They have a more significant challenge than technology providers in driving culture change and acquiring the skills needed to assertively communicate effectively through social media—and the technology challenge is not easy! We expect this to be an evolution over time.

OrecX (www.orecx.com)

Bruce D. Kaskey, co-founder

Every day our customers face challenges brought about by new regulations, changes brought about by new management and changes brought about by new business opportunities. 100 percent recording is now the norm, basically because it's so much easier to record and search for calls. In the past the cost and the difficulties sorting calls forced customers to pare down the amount of phones they wanted to record.

HD Voice is important because the calls become clearer, with less static and with higher quality for customers. And for those customers that deploy or wish to deploy speech analytics, this is important because of the improved performance it enables. OrecX supports HD Voice and the g722 codec.

All customer interactions should be recorded, saved and analyzed for customer satisfaction, compliance and risk issues. All these factors can help a business be more successful. The best way to quantify how and what you need to record or manage is, "What would be the risk if we did not record, store or manage this customer touch point?" Obviously if it's the law, the risk is high, but what is the cost of losing a customer? Not knowing why you

Appliances for Recording

One option when choosing a call recording solution is selecting those that offer external appliances. SIP Print (www.sipprint.com) is a very prominent supplier of this product type. Don Palmer, SIP Print's CEO, compares the benefits and value propositions of appliance-based call recording with software-only both on-premises and hosted:

- Appliance-based call recording combines the best of software and hardware. SIP Print's hardware and operating system is custom tuned so that when it layers its software, there is a custom solution in the appliance

"When you sell software only, you require the customer to buy hardware and load the software (a quality issue), increase costs through project management, and IT staff time," explains Palmer. "Our appliance can be applied at both the premise and the host environment."

- SIP Print's solution enables clustering of its appliances to accommodate higher-end Fortune 500 customers: no regression testing for a software solution on a larger system, no competition for bandwidth, and NiC access on a VM machine.

"Does that mean that SIP Print appliances cannot be customized?" asks Palmer. "On the contrary, with our Application Programming Interface (API), we allow and encourage customized integration of the SIP Print Family of Products with customers' existing legacy reporting/analytics/CRM systems as well with other third party products on the market."

are losing the customer? How much does it cost to interact with the customer? How much does the customer up-buy by good customer service? Each customer or business must decide what interactions are the most valuable and how they must use it.

Call Recording Enhancements

Call recording suppliers continue to make their products more feature-rich, easier to use and deploy. Here is a sample:

- More call recording solutions are Avaya Aura-compliant, enabling easier integration with this IP-based contact center platform. Among them: Coordinated Systems, Inc. ’s (www.csiworld.com) Virtual Observer call recording solution

- Easier adaptability, navigation and use and security. Majuda’s (www.majuda.com) Majuda Voice Version 7.0 is reportedly the first call recording solution to incorporate Microsoft’s Silverlight software. Silverlight makes the Majuda product accessible across many widely used platforms and deliver a front-end that would be available to organizations deploying Internet Explorer, Firefox, Apple’s Safari and Google’s Chrome, to name a few. It can perform client side processing through managed code within the browser. Majuda Voice Version 7.0 allows users to sift through massive quantities of call data through multiple search criteria without incurring huge costs or threatening employee productivity. It is also deployed on enterprise hardware with enterprise database configurations and security

TelStrat (www.telstrat.com)

Ed Templeman, director of marketing

There is the need for robust recording and WFO (workforce optimization) solutions that are easier to implement and maintain and that reduce the initial and ongoing IT support and infrastructure costs associated with these capabilities. TelStrat sees this as solutions that allow much higher recording densities per server, or even a full WFO suite that requires only a single server.

The need for PCI-compliant solutions continues to expand, driven by several recent high-profile identity theft cases that stress the need to protect call recordings and customer data. TelStrat’s Engage Record fully supports the PCI standard and even implements measures that go beyond the requirements. Encryption, to AES 256-bit, is provided not just across public networks, but totally end-to-end, all the way to the playback client machine. TelStrat is upgrading other components of the Engage Suite, such as Engage Capture and Engage Coach to also feature full encryption.

The advent of HD Voice in contact centers promises to enhance customer/agent interaction with crystal clarity and a vibrant “in-the-room-like” presence. At double the sampling rate and more than double the frequency range of standard PSTN calls, HD Voice promises to alter the aural landscape for agents and customers alike. The increased fidelity will also allow greater accuracy in IVR, analytics, and other speech-related systems.

HD Voice requires an HD codec and, to realize the benefits, all portions of the network must support it. If any portion traverses the PSTN, HD quality is lost. This means that, while possible, practically speaking it will take a few years for anything but internal calls to achieve critical mass in the HD arena. That said, HD Voice is starting to take hold. Cellular networks in Europe, on Skype and others are already offering it. Recording vendors and customers would do well to be ready when the time comes.

The majority of our customers are still interacting with their customers using voice. Chat, texts, social media and other non-voice forms of communication are starting to play an increasing role as standalone customer interaction methods. The next logical step will be to capture, catalog, knowledge mine, and archive those interactions just as we do with voice calls today. To date though, we have not seen sufficient demand for such capabilities from our customers.

Verint (www.verint.com)

Scott Bluman, director, product management and Brynn Palmer, principal, solutions marketing

Bluman: The major trend right now in contact center recording has to do with centralization. As more centers make the transition from the traditional TDM trunks to VoIP-supported SIP trunks, they are also taking a closer look at their overall infrastructure and consolidating to more centralized server footprints. This reduces the number of servers and saves on costs. Because server capacity is increasing and costs are decreasing, we’ve seen our customers moving to 100 percent recording.

Bluman: We haven’t seen our customers deploy HD widely yet; Verint’s software can record audio utilizing high-definition voice codecs. There are factors that come into play outside of Verint’s technology. One is that network equipment and IVR systems don’t always support HD Voice. Adding to this, customers dialing into the contact center are, for the most part, on their analog POTS or mobile lines that do not support HD Voice end- to-end.

When customers start truly using HD Voice -capable devices we will likely see greater adoption of HD-capable contact centers. It will happen eventually because of the clear benefit of the call sounding better.

Palmer: Companies must fully realize that if they are going to have a 360 degree view of customers that they must monitor, record and analyze interactions that happen via chat, e-mail, texts and on social networks in addition to recording voice. [To do that] they must have the tools in place to collect the data at the enterprise level. [They must also have] the ability to quickly analyze the data and effective business processes to proactively address the findings and make real time adjustments at the right time to impact the business.

Companies are getting better at understanding the value of collecting data from the same source at the enterprise level and are now adopting speech, data and text analytics tools from companies like Verint to “listen” to the true voice of the customer. Organizationally, there has been a shift as well. **CIS**

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by Brendan Read

Changing Needs, Changing Shores

Where to land contact centers and programs – onshore, nearshore or offshore – is becoming less of a strategic permanent commitment to any one place and more of a tactical decision, and for good reason. Each locale's labor costs and quality, infrastructure, currency, security and stability must be carefully weighed against the caveat that these factors can quickly be altered, as economic conditions and political events and disasters graphically (and tragically) illustrate.

Changes in corporate needs also affect shoring decisions. As firms increasingly focus on retaining existing customers by bolstering service and, from this, attract new ones, so grows the emphasis on having agents who can provide top-notch performance, wherever they are located.

Customer Interaction Solutions interviewed several leading global BPO firms and onshoring/offshoring experts on key trends and factors involved with shoring decisions:

- **Judi Hand, chief marketing officer,** TeleTech (www.teletech.com)
- **H. Karthik, vice president,** Everest Group (www.everest-grp.com)
- **Jeffrey Puritt, president,** TELUS International (www.telusinternational.com)
- **Peter Ryan, lead analyst - BPO and Contact Center Outsourcing and Services,** Ovum (www.ovum.com)
- **Amit Shankardass, global chief marketing officer,** Sitel (www.sitel.com)

CIS: What trends are you seeing that are affecting where contact center programs are landing?

Hand: At TeleTech, the trends we're seeing are driven heavily by our client demographics. Our client base is skewed toward higher value market segments – organizations with increasingly complex customer needs that are seeking differentiated customer experiences through integrated CRM and technology solutions.

As a result, the trend is to base programs in locations where the talent has the credentials to deliver an excellent customer experience. Top factors for program placement include workforce quality, education levels, cultural affinity, language and technology infrastructure. In addition, currency and exchange rates will continue to factor in to the decision process for offshoring locations.

With these criteria in mind, TeleTech continues to see strength in bricks-and-mortar centers in the Philippines, Latin America and the U.S. We're increasingly using TeleTech@Home (our work-at-home solution) solution to meet client demand in the U.S. and internationally.

Karthik: We foresee a mixed bag for offshoring in contact centers. While companies will continue to offshore, they will do so more selectively (i.e., only if it can result in an enhanced customer experience coupled with reducing costs). Highly sensitive customer touchpoints (e.g., for mortgage loan defaults) will continue to remain onshore.

Overall, customer retention has become a key business focus for companies given the crisis due to the slowdown in new customer acquisitions. Consequently, there is a paradigm shift in expectations from contact center work.

On a cost arbitrage basis, offshore locations are 50-70 percent lower costs than source (originating onshore) locations. Even if there are additional costs to manage in the offshore model (e.g. attrition), the net savings impact will still be significant for source geographies.

Offshore locations that offer a strong proposition based on language, cultural affinity, accent, will experience growth. Examples include Philippines for the U.S. and South Africa for the U.K. Nearshore locations to the U.S. (e.g. Central and Latin America) are also likely to experience growth given their Spanish language proposition. Providers will develop a global footprint: a mix of onshore, nearshore and regional centers to cater to business needs.

Puritt: For many companies, price has often been the primary consideration when selecting an outsourcing location. However, with wage escalation and rising attrition rates, particularly in traditional offshore destinations like India, outsourcing offshore may becomes less attractive. Additionally, the time and expense of traveling to offshore outsource partners' premises in order to manage and interact with them may also be a challenge. These considerations are driving some decisions to either repatriate work from Asia back onshore to the U.S., or to a nearshore destination like Central America. Enhanced geopolitical stability and infrastructure in Central America has materially influenced this trend as well.

Ryan: We are noticing a fair amount of economic nationalism in the contact center community. There are many outsourcers that are announcing themselves as more favorable to keep programs onshore, if possible, rather than moving them nearshore or offshore.

That is a reflection of the times, of the concern about job losses at home. There are also concerns about quality and compromising data security with offshoring, which are being fueled by the drug wars in parts of Mexico and the recent instability in Egypt. With that in mind, companies are becoming wary about going offshore. There are many thinking about hanging on their onshore contact centers and expanding, instead, in Canada and Eastern Europe, as opposed to going to cheaper, but much more risky, locations.

These trends holding back offshoring are not going to last, though. As the economy moves into recovery, companies are going to find it will be a lot tougher to handle contact center work at an affordable price onshore. Recent rising inflation numbers will hit home in rising wages and benefits.

Shandarkass: There are several trends we're seeing with the selection of geographic locations. In the U.S, there is a growing sentiment of having a certain piece of work serviced domestically. Several clients are specifically looking at customer segments, product types or service types and are re-visiting their domestic sourcing strategies.

There is also an increasing interest and demand for homeshore or home agent capabilities among businesses in the United States. We're seeing this for a number of reasons. It provides a more flexible, cost-effective delivery, due to lower infrastructure requirements and enhanced recruitment through a deeper, more geographically dispersed, labor pool. It even helps strengthen a businesses' carbon footprint as agents are not commuting to work.

Due to the overall increase in outsourcing, companies are seeing interest in continued offshoring. This is taking place in large part to geographies such as the Philippines, Latin America and to India, as well as to emerging locations, such as Nicaragua, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania.

CIS: There have been well-publicized concerns about offshore quality. Is offshoring competitive, when that perspective is accounted for with onshoring?

Hand: You can't paint offshoring with such a broad brush. It begins with location selection. If a company is simply looking at labor arbi-

trage and seeking the lowest labor rates, the initial savings are ultimately consumed by inefficiencies and customer dissatisfaction.

TeleTech goes to great lengths to match locations with our clients' complex needs. We place programs in locations where we expect to deliver an excellent customer experience in terms of efficiency metrics (like call length), as well as outcome-based metrics, like customer satisfaction and net-promoter scores.

Karthik: Leading U.S. firms, especially banks, have offshored 10-30 percent of their workforce in contact center work. Clearly, the offshore model has been successful. However, it requires investments in appropriate training and talent development programs. When these are put in place, offshoring can yield similar or, in some cases, even better performance compared to source locations (e.g. U.S., U.K.) It is also important to note offshore locations tend to attract a more qualified pool for contact center work (e.g. tertiary graduates in the Philippines) compared to source locations.

Puritt: Offshoring to a low-cost provider just to save money may help the bottom line in the short term. Yet, in our experience, it creates problems resulting in poor service and potential brand damage over the long term: escalations, repeat calls, customer complaints and poor customer satisfaction. It's little wonder the current trend is to repatriate customer-facing work back from offshore. Cost reduction alone drives the wrong behavior. Rather, service excellence should be the primary focus of any outsourcing partnership: and you will get what you pay for.

Companies have begun to recognize this. They are now looking to find sustainable improvements in efficiency and effectiveness and are selecting vendors and partners that have a demonstrated track record of expertise, wherever they may be located.

Ryan: Quality issues would have been bigger 10 or so years ago. The training offshore agents now receive is so high that I'd be surprised if the number of missed, disconnected, longer or escalated and repeat calls are significantly higher than that for onshore agents. While there may well be issues, I don't think they are as necessarily pervasive as what may be propagated by

Where To Serve Hispanic Customers

Hispanics represent one of the fastest growing U.S. population segments. There are now over 50 million Americans of Hispanic/Latino origin, the U.S. Census Bureau reported March 24, 2011 a 43 percent jump from 35 million in 2000.

Hispanics now comprise some 16 percent of the U.S.'s 309 million residents and amounted to more than half the nation's 27 million population increase over the past decade. The expectations is that the Hispanic population and market will continue to grow over the next decade to nearly 60 million by 2020.

Yet, while many non-English-speaking populations in the past quickly dropped their primary languages to assimilate into American society, such is not the case with today's Hispanics. Instead, they are retaining their Spanish fluency, reports Michael Curry, chief of business development, Conexion-One (www.oneconexion.com) a U.S.-headquartered BPO firm with a 3,100 seat capacity contact center location in Mexico City.

Moreover, Hispanics will prefer to speak in Spanish, even when they know English, especially on involved customer service, support, and sales calls. Curry has observed this firsthand. His wife is from Cuba and grew up on the West Coast; his household uses both English and Spanish interchangeably.

"If you have to get details, go technical and show compassion, you have to go to Spanish when speaking to a Hispanic household," recommends Curry.

The question is where to best serve the American Hispanic population, and the consensus that is emerging is nearshore, to cut costs and to obtain access to higher quality staff.

Of these countries Mexico continues to be a prime location. The narcoterrorism that wreaked havoc in its northern and border cities has quieted down, enabling its labor arbitrage benefits to once again grab corporate attention.

Mexico also has another important benefit, says Cury: cultural affinity to American Hispanics. Americans of Mexican descent comprises far and way the largest group of Hispanics: 67 percent compared with eight percent for the next largest, Puerto Rico, reports the U.S. Census.

The accent, tone, pace and words used are friendlier in Mexican Spanish – a key to keeping customers on the line – compared with that of other countries, such as Cuba, Guatemala and Puerto Rico. It's "akin in English between Alabama and New York City," reports Curry.

Do not overlook other and affordable, high quality and politically stable Latin American countries, such as Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, advises Peter Ryan, lead analyst, BPO and Contact Center Outsourcing and Services, Ovum. U.S nearshore programs have worked very well in those nations, which also have cultural affinity to American Hispanics.

Colombia, for example, has a strong but subtle and very effective sales culture. This attribute makes that nation ideal for contact center work requiring cross-selling and upselling on customer service calls, which more companies are seeking in order to grow revenues and cover costs.

"Colombians are very good at warm sales and can sell you something without pushing it," says Ryan. "I've bought items there without initially intending to just by the way they engage with you."

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View the FREE Archived Webinar: http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar/tmcnet/tmcnet-Building-Communities-Online.htm certain anti-offshore journalists. For if you are going to do offshoring properly, you are going to have to focus on quality training, retaining good agents and ensuring that issues are resolved the first time.

When the economy begins ramping up again, turnover is going to increase, as U.S. and Canadian workers who took contact center jobs because they had been laid off from employers in the fields in which they were trained will be hired back. This is going to reduce the number of quality people willing to work in contact centers and, with this, you can easily have service-related issues happening onshore too.

Shankardass: There were outlandish claims in the early days of offshoring in terms of what it could deliver in cost savings, like 40 percent. When companies look at it exclusively from that perspective, they begin to fail, because they put the wrong kind of work in offshore locations, and they have the wrong kind of expectations for what type of technology benefits they could get.

Sitel believes offshore outsourcing is still an economically viable option. The question companies should be asking is what those economics look like. If companies choose cost savings as the sole reason for going offshore, without balancing the ensuing potential changes in customer satisfaction, empathy and perception, that's when they fail. Businesses just have to balance what the expectation of that is, and be pragmatic and reasonable to what one would see in terms of cost savings.

CIS: Are firms and clients thinking twice about having programs handled in at-risk nations and regions like the Middle East, Mexico and the Philippines?

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Karthik: The recent political unrest in North African countries will pose concerns to investors' confidence in these countries. Companies will think seriously about risk diversification and business continuity strategies. While natural disasters have affected Philippines, they have not impacted BPO operations in a meaningful way.

Puritt: As an integral part of their due diligence process, firms and clients have to carefully evaluate where they locate their contact center operations. Along with price, location stability continues to be a top consideration.

It is, therefore, important to look at specific country risk factors – like political stability, currency changes, and team member safety – when deciding where to outsource operations. It is also important to ensure your outsourcing provider has strong business continuity and disaster recovery plans in place to address such risks.

There is inherent risk in choosing to locate one's business operations in an emerging market. But that's where the opportunity for considerable reward exists as well.

Ryan: The Middle East was setting itself very nicely to take on a lot of English and multiple European language work. Investors are now going to be very cautious about going into any location there. Many large BPO firms have opened centers in Egypt, especially over the past two years; it is going to be challenge for them to continue operations and to educate their clients on the stability of having their programs handled there. It is also going to make investors and clients wonder about other neighboring countries that have attracted offshore centers, like Morocco or others seeking them, like Jordan.

Places like the Philippines will continue to grow, despite the risks; there is no evidence of the contact center growth there slowing down. As for Mexico, in spite of the violence, is still extremely popular and is seen by the American enterprise community as an extremely stable location. The economy is perceived to be moving in the right direction, labor is affordable and higher-end English language skills are relatively easy to track down. Monterrey, the country's business capital, had attracted many contact centers, but was in lockdown last year. It has since calmed down and none of the contact centers have left, and the contact center work pipeline is getting filled, which are positive signs.

The world got into a false sense of security with offshoring and nearshoring with pockets of incidents like the Mumbai bombing. What the Egyptian turmoil has done is to show that a big country can be turned upside down very quickly and the impact that will have on Western investors. It has acted as a reality check.

A fairly prominent figure in the outsourcing community told me: "When you go into offshore destinations, you are not taking on a lower cost point, but you are also taking on a significant political risk."

Shandarkass: With the advent of offshore outsourcing, many countries have come into play that were not really looked at as viable outsourcing locations in the past. Companies have become prudent in how they source their work globally. It's a concept we call global sourcing: choosing the best location for the right type of work, and having the appropriate level of disaster recovery programs in place.

The reason Latin American countries have seen growth in offshore outsourcing is because companies have chosen to diversify outside India and the Philippines. These companies don't have all their eggs in one basket, and have better disaster recovery or backup options. Natural disasters happen in any part of the world, and the key to effectively responding is having an efficient disaster recovery plan in place. Political unrest is another factor that heavily goes into the decision-making process. For companies that are offshoring in a smart way, they are creating buckets of work in different parts of the world, so they can leverage one part of the world over another when natural disasters or political problems occur. **CIS**

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Optimizing Agent Performance in a Real-time World

The tools and processes to optimize agent performance are multifaceted — addressing the desktop to handle the contact, and performance tools to measure and monitor. The desktop includes knowledge management and scripting, as well as agent assistance tools. A performance tools suite includes quality monitoring, workforce management (WFM), customer feedback, and coaching tools. Another key ingredient is a strong feedback loop that uses those performance tools to drive actions that the individual and team can pursue for overall optimization.

Lori Bocklund, President of Strategic Contact, and Rachel Wentink, Senior Director of Product Management for Interactive Intelligence, collectively possess more than 40 years of contact center experience. Recently they sat down together to respond to common questions on how to improve agent performance in a contact center environment. Here are a few of their summarized responses... although you can read everything Lori and Rachel have to say in their new whitepaper, "Optimizing Agent Performance in a Real-time World."

Q: How does a center get the most out of its agents in today's complex, demanding world, without risking burnout and turnover?

Bocklund: My experience is that most agents really want to do a good job and succeed in serving their customers — even with the increasing demands placed on them. So the first thing centers need to do is provide the tools to help agents succeed. Knowledge management is a proven tool, for instance, as is the ability for agents to seek assistance using other tools such as internal chat to peers, unified communication functionality for presence and instant messaging to find experts, and even whisper coaching that lets a supervisor or QA person provide agents with information that they can then convey to the customer.

One other thing centers must do better is assign ample time for supervisors to coach individual agents, and provide coaching tools to ensure it gets done effectively — things like QM scores, scorecards and dashboards that help an agent see how they're doing and where they can target certain improvement actions. Then, centers need to reinforce performance through rewards tied to their metrics.

Wentink: An agent's job can be incredibly stressful. You can reduce the stress by empowering agents to play more of a subject matter expert role with proactive mentoring and, as Lori noted, with the right tools at hand. The benefit is that providing these tools reduces agent turnover, which in turn helps prevent potential damage to a company's brand from unprepared agents interacting directly with customers.

Q: Many centers measure internal views of performance but fail to look at the customer view. How does a center balance agent performance optimization with customer experience optimization?

Bocklund: Centers need to have a balanced set of metrics. That means having a mechanism for customer feedback and comparing those results to internal QM scores and other performance indicators such as service level. For example, a customer can get an e-mail with a link to a web survey, or go straight to an IVR after a call. Centers then need to execute consistent processes to assess performance across these balanced metrics and identify actionable improvements.

Wentink: It's also important to respond as quickly as possible to optimize performance and customer experience. If an issue requires repairing a damaged relationship, it might mean having a supervisor call a valued customer back that same day, and that requires having configurable alerts that come in as soon as the customer survey is completed. It's equally important to apply rules on how often to offer surveys, and best practices in how you construct the survey so that it isn't too long. Otherwise surveys can seem like harassment.

Bocklund: Another "hot" metric that reflects the customer experience is First Contact Resolution, or FCR. We mentioned some things already that help improve FCR — like knowledge management and agent assistance — and centers need to define a clear way to measure FCR and consistently

by Lori Bocklund, President, Strategic Contact and Rachel Wentink, Senior Director of Product Management, Interactive Intelligence, Inc.

track and report on it. FCR is truly a balanced metric because it optimizes both the customer experience and agent and center performance.

Q: Most centers today are asked to ramp up quickly to support new products and services. How do we help them consistently perform in this constantly changing world?

> **"My experience is that most agents really want to do a good job and succeed in serving their customers — even with the increasing demands placed on them. So the first thing centers need to do is provide the tools to help agents succeed."**
>
> – Lori Bocklund, President, Strategic Contact

Bocklund: One of the first places to look is self-service. If a company does self-service well — using IVR and the web — they can offload significant workload from agents. That benefits the center both during "business as usual" times and changes or events that throw curve balls at them. Self-service technology also helps to optimize contacts. A couple examples: A call transferred out of IVR can arrive with all the pertinent information already gathered. Or a customer on a web site seeking assistance can get it through text chat, web calls and collaboration. These kinds of scenarios can deliver a stellar customer experience while shortening handle times and letting the agent focus on the customer's real need.

Wentink: Content can additionally be made available for agents internally, via a knowledge management solution or a scripting application, and even for customers externally, via the KM application. This can encourage self-service and reduce overall contact center costs.

Q: Centers still face the age-old problem of putting the right number of people with the right skills in place at the right time to handle the workload. What can centers do differently and better with today's technology?

Wentink: Today's all-in-one systems make configuration and updates to data such as agent skills less onerous. Correct configuration is essential for proper scheduling to ensure that the right people and skills are available when the interaction arrives. Today's technology is also in a much better position to track demand and skills needed across different interaction channels, including tracking customer satisfaction ratings.

With seasonal peaks or new product/service launches, for instance, consider combining specific IVR prompts or DNIS to separate out certain types of interactions, then assign skills to cover the topics and add detailed KM content.

Q: A variety of industries face increasing regulatory pressures and challenges such as protecting personal information. What tools can help optimize performance in these areas?

Wentink: The most important thing any management team can do is ensure that agents have current information on what they are allowed to do, and on what is forbidden and why. A scripting interface or KM "canned" responses can be enlisted to guide agents with up-to-date information on procedural questions, and to help ensure that agents use the right phrases and avoid the wrong ones. It's equally important to include compliance in quality scoring and mentoring processes. If you can demonstrate a solid track record of scoring, mentoring, and rewarding agents for compliance, it will put your organization in a better position should any infractions be discovered. eLearning modules or instructor-led training should also be supplied for complex compliance areas to give agents the necessary knowledge to comply. CIS

by Brendan Read

Tuning Up Workforce Management

If there ever is a time for contact centers to tune up their workforce management to ensure that the right agents with the right skills are available at the right time, that time is now. There is a growing focus on efficiently delivering higher quality service to retain customers and attract new ones. That is on top of generating more income from interactions directly via sales and collections and indirectly through service. More contacts are now going through nonvoice channels.

Meanwhile the economy is slowly turning around and that will mean higher contact volume and staff churn, especially as highly skilled employees who took on contact center work because they had been laid off from their original fields return to them. Agents are beginning to know their power and are starting to use it, such as through seeking more scheduling flexibility.

"Over the past couple of years, if you have been anywhere near a newscast, you would believe that employers have their choice of any employee they want," says Teresa Schwartz, business performance consultant at Envision. "However that is not often the case in our marketplace. Quality contact center staff are not likely to stay if their needs are not met. More and more often, we see contact center employees who want to be challenged in a flexible, rewarding atmosphere."

Quality and Multichannel Trends

Economic rebounds and their driving up of volume and churn is not a new phenomenon for contact centers. There are two factors that appear to be different this time around that are affecting workforce availability.

The first is the quality focus. Simon Angove, CEO of GMT, reports that interactions that emphasize specific outcomes such as first call resolution, relationship building and sales targets will take longer than those that aim at handling calls as expeditiously as possible, which impacts scheduling. Each agent will typically handle fewer interactions, meaning that more agents may be needed for the same volume of customer contacts.

"Companies and their employees will then need to work together to craft innovative staffing approaches, including split-shifts, a part-time and full-time mix and others to ensure customer contact objectives are met," Angove points out.

Yet as interactions become more complex, so does agent training, consuming added time as well as resources. That is beginning to limit contact centers' ability to rely on part-time staff, reports Maggie Klenke, founding partner of The Call Center

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School; the savings in benefits cost and the gains in schedule flexibility are often offset by the management challenges.

In response, she is seeing contact centers getting more creative on scheduling their full-time agents. One technique they are employing is assigning different schedule lengths on different days of the week.

"Flexibility in scheduling is not limited to part-time workers although that certainly makes it easier," says Klenke. "The idea is to have more man-hours available on peak days and fewer on the lighter days each week. If just 5-10 percent of the staff worked non-traditional shifts, it can help a great deal in matching staff with demand. And what agent objects to getting a 1/2 day off every week? The idea is to be creative based on your distribution patterns."

The second trend is onboarding and scheduling agents who can effectively utilize nonvoice channels–chat, e-mail, SMS/text and now social media. These methods do take time and talent to utilize, and while the volumes are presently low, the expectations are that their use will increase, while the acceptable response times will decrease.

Suppliers are coming out with workforce tools that make managing these channels easier. NICE IEX Workforce Management, part of NICE's SmartCenter suite, includes multichannel adherence, which provides visibility into whether agents are doing their scheduled tasks regardless of mode.

Peter Bollenbeck, CEO of InVision Software, points out that adding these new channels will cause a "highway effect" which is comparable to opening up additional lanes. This multiplies the workforce management (WFM) planning requirements for contact center managers and operations executives.

"Accurate WFM solutions help to optimize staffing to ensure that multichannel interactions are handled by agents with the right skills on a timely basis," says Bollenbeck.

For example, social media outreach and response requires highly trained individuals fluent in the language of the channel who must reach out and reply in near-real time, between voice and chat, explains Dr. Turgut Aykin, president of ac2 Solutions.

"Contact centers need to use social media monitoring tools to capture company, service and product mentions, and with this allocate workflow to agents for a timely response," advises Dr. Aykin. "They need to plan for social media agent availability for customer services and support, and campaigns such as when firms launch new products or services. Different than the other channels used at a traditional contact center, speed-to-response is a critical performance target for social media."

Yet do contact centers really know who has the right skills, including for these new channels? Karen Hardy, senior product marketing manager at Genesys, an Alcatel-Lucent company, observes that contact centers too often lack a centralized view into employee skill sets and gaps especially as they relate to inbound and outbound interactions. This means there is no effective way of managing the talent.

The Genesys Workforce Optimization (WFO) suite in the Genesys 8 solution takes a skills-centric approach that permits effective centralized WFM and control. There is tight integration with routing to ensure that agents only receive interactions that they have been trained to handle; it also prevents routing based on a future agent's state.

Genesys WFO provides skills assessment and analysis tools that feeds and correlates internal and external data, such as interactive employee test results, quality management and evaluation scores and customer survey results into a single common skills repository. These features help identify employees who are exceptional at their jobs and isolate areas of skill gaps and improvement for others. They then allow scheduling the right agents at the right times. The solution also enables training by dynamically creating, scheduling, and managing it at the most convenient times: without impacting service levels.

The challenge for agent scheduling and forecasting in the newer media is that there is very little history to draw from,

WFM Solutions Training

It is one thing to buy a solution. It is another to use it. And there are reports of contact centers making minimal use or walking away from WFM tools.

Teresa Schwartz, business performance consultant at Envision, reports that crux of the issue tends to be relative to setting clear, attainable expectations and providing initial, as well as ongoing training to all of the employees involved.

One reason lies in the contact centers not being adequately trained on the expectations, both initially and on upgraded features, reports Maggie Klenke, founding partner of The Call Center School. She urges contact center staff to get more professional development on them, including from WFM vendors.

InVision has partnered with The Call Center School to provide its users with a full range of workforce management training programs beyond just software system training. These programs are available as traditional classroom training, live web seminars, or self-paced e-learning programs depending on the user's preference.

"Understanding that software alone is not the answer, we have taken the necessary steps to provide a wide range of training options that help users to make the most of their WFM investment," says InVision CEO Peter Bollenbeck.

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reports Tim Kraskey, vice president of marketing and business development at Calabrio. He expects this issue will ease as contact centers determine the right match of personnel skills to the channel, and historical patterns settle in. There is a looming downside though– the generation who grew up with and knows these tools are more likely to demand greater flexibility, more immediate feedback and job hop.

“This reality puts new demands on contact center managers to provide them with visibility into job performance, and to offer more self-service in terms of scheduling input and flexibility,” says Kraskey.

Scheduling for Work/Life Balance

Contact centers have to be more accommodating to employees’ needs, which impacts scheduling. For example, enabling agents to self-schedule gives them more control but the downside is that it risks leaving unpopular shifts unfulfilled.

“It is OK for a few high ranking agents to devise their own schedules as a reward as long as the rest of the agents have enough flexibility in the schedules to fill in where needed,” says Klenke. “We see that done in a number of places; it needs to be kept to a small percentage of the total staff – say less than 5 percent.”

The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has also affected agent availability, with some centers experiencing 25 percent absenteeism, reports Klenke. The law entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage.

Some employees could be gaming the system she points out, reportedly aided and abetted by physicians who are allegedly willing certify patients for FMLA for a fee; when one is found, the word spreads quickly among the staff. Contact centers are getting wise; they are now requiring second opinions by doctors of their choosing, and they have seen dramatic reductions in losses in some cases.

“So it is incumbent upon HR and call center management to be totally familiar with the laws and know what their rights are as well as the rights of the staff so that a balanced approach can be taken,” recommends Klenke.

Home-based agents are typically used to manage peaks in increments as small as every 30 minutes. These agents can work split-shifts much more readily than those who have to commute to employer-provided premises. Yet that requires having home agents available. And if the agents are independent contractors–there are companies that offer them on an outsourced basis–they cannot be compelled by firms to work specific hours and shifts, leaving those hours uncovered.

Dr. Aykin recommends a hybrid and web-based system where home-based employee agents are either pre-scheduled up front or are required to work a minimum number of

“Shrinking” the Shrinkage

Agent shrinkage, time spent with off-phone activities that on the surface reduces productivity, has long been a growing concern and issue inside contact centers.

Chuck Ciarlo, president and CEO of Monet Software, points out that the increasing complexity of contact center configurations with multiple locations and home-based agents along with more demanding customer interactions and new communication channels make managing shrinkage more difficult. Moreover, contact centers have no effective way to forecast and schedule non-call activities such as breaks, meetings or unplanned discussions – resulting in shrinkage.

“You cannot manage the shrinkage in today’s complex centers just by standing up and looking out across your center or using a manual/spreadsheet based approach,” says Ciarlo.

“Therefore, shrinkage becomes more of an issue for those call centers that don’t leverage WFM solutions, because they don’t get the necessary visibility into what happens at any moment in time and what is supposed to happen based on the published schedule.”

Yet utilizing shrinkage may provide an opportunity to bolster agent performance and productivity, such as through coaching training during idle or wait periods, as opposed to taking them off line for such tasks

Matt McConnell, president and CEO of Knowlagent points out that are actually two types of shrinkage–primary loss (activities outside of call center management’s control like tardiness and absenteeism) and secondary loss (activities within call center management’s control like training and social learning). According to Knowlagent’s Contact Center Shrinkage Survey, total shrinkage accounts for as much as 30 percent of an agent’s time per day spent on off-phone activities, and secondary loss constitutes 10-12 percent of an agent’s time per day.

He calculates that the average agent has 4-6 hours per week of shrinkage handling off-phone tasks. Ironically, those same agents have 4-6 hours per week of idle time. Many of those secondary shrinkage activities can be handled during unproductive wait time by effectively managing those available periods, aggregating them and creating active wait time.

“Moving secondary loss activities into active wait time reduces shrinkage hours, yet still accomplishes the training and coaching, that agents need to effectively deal with customers and delivers personal service cheaper,” says McConnell. “Thus, companies can deliver personal service to customers more efficiently and effectively than ever before.”

hours each week, and to work out these needs with companies supplying independent contractors. Home-based agents can sign up for additional hours as they are made available based on the latest forecasts.

LiveOps supplies independent home-based agents that use its cloud contact center platform. Tim Whipple, vice president of LiveOps' Agent Community concedes that occasionally agents may choose not to service a program, leaving some time slots with low or no agents choosing to take calls. The firm then typically offers higher incentive pay to provide services.

"Because the LiveOps opportunity is so highly flexible and rewarding, we typically have enough independent agents who want to service our client calls," says Whipple.

Scheduling for Customers

Empowering customers to schedule interactions, such as callbacks, and allowing them to select agents that turn them into individual account representatives, builds customer relationships and loyalty by permitting more personalized service. WFM tools can be deployed to permit this.

Customer empowerment increases scheduling challenges though. For example, if agent self-selection contact centers have to plan for outbound calls for those agents if the customers are not able to reach them and they leave messages, reports AC2's Dr. Aykin.

Bill Durr, principal global solutions consultant at Verint points out that callbacks are troublesome as they warp the data that workforce management professionals rely upon. The technology, he says, shifts the caller demand into subsequent time intervals, while at the same time disguising the true interval demand. The more a contact center relies upon callbacks to flush out long queue times, the less likely they are to ever understand actual demand and will probably never schedule correctly to meet initial caller demand.

"Most scheduling efforts are predicated upon the notion that any agent with the appropriate skills can handle the interaction," Durr points out. "When customers are given the opportunity to select particular agents, or are afforded the opportunity to receive a call back at a time and place convenient to them, the underlying basis for scheduling agents is altered."

Workforce Management Needs

These needs and challenges are pushing WFM solutions' envelopes. Matt McConnell, president and CEO of Knowlagent, points out that WFM solutions have to become more dynamic in scheduling agents based on customers' intraday demands and more labor segmented by matching agents' skills to customer demand. They also need to route the right secondary shrinkage activities (see box) during downtime.

ac2's WFM solution, AWO Portal, revolutionizes WFM technologies with sophisticated statistical and mathematical optimization models and algorithms, says Dr. Aykin. It uses advanced time-series forecasting algorithms including Box-Jenkins ARIMA, Holt-Winters with additive/multiplicative seasonality and various trend models. It also has Transfer Function/Dynamic Regression that analyzes call drivers to provide future looking forecasts and superior accuracy.

AWO uses queuing models capturing abandonments correctly for non-skills based environments. It also has a discrete event simulator that accounts accurately for caller abandonments, and captures and models the complexities of skills-based routing configurations. It incorporates ac2-pioneered integer-linear-optimization models and algorithms, which capture all scheduling rules 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.

Aspect Workforce Management has added a new enhancement package to optimize seats in the contact center. This package allows contact centers to streamline and automate the seat assignment process, utilizing the optimal schedules put in place. It also helps them to strategically plan and manage seat utilization to optimally meet long-term facility requirements as well as short-term, intra-day seating needs while reducing costs.

In the pursuit of high quality customer service through connecting customers' specific needs and channel preferences to the right agents, contact centers can get too granular. Klenke sees many centers with more skills defined than makes sense, resulting in low volumes that make them difficult to plan and forecast. She recommends that centers take a hard look at the routing plan and redesign based somewhat on the feasibility of staffing to the plan.

"When a skill gets 50 calls a week, who is to say, with any degree of accuracy, which half-hours will have calls and which won't," says Klenke. "Forecasting accuracy is not statistically possible with these low volumes, never mind the ability to schedule when some periods show no work but we know we might get a call anyway." **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

ac2 Solutions
www.ac2solutions.com

Aspect
www.aspect.com

Calabrio
www.calabrio.com

The Call Center School
www.thecallcenterschool.com

Envision
www.envisioninc.com

Genesys (Alcatel-Lucent)
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by Brendan Read

The UC Taste Test

The right technology solutions can improve contact center vitality by permitting them to meet customers' and business' needs more effectively. Unified communications (UC) is one such example, as it seamlessly integrates contacts from multiple channels to agents wherever they are located.

To get a taste of what UC can achieve, firms need to check and see what others have achieved with it. Case in point is MonaVie, which sells an extensive line of nutritional drinks, supplements and snacks via its independent distributor network. The firm has two contact centers– one in South Jordan, Utah, where it is headquartered, and one in Taiwan, to be joined by a third location in South Korea sometime in 2011.

Each week MonaVie's contact center agents manage approximately 6,200 inbound calls, plus 3,700 e-mails and hundreds of digital chat sessions through Microsoft Outlook. The contacts come from distributors ordering products, potential distributors requesting information and general inquiries, explains Jake Larsen, MonaVie's contact center manager.

MonaVie has tapped into the growing consumers concerns for their health and well-being. Its business has been expanding so rapidly that by 2006 the call volume subsequently generated surpassed its contact center platform's ability to promptly handle it, reports Larsen. The firm also had to have a separate team to handle chat and e-mail, which created inefficiencies; it needed to integrate the channels. It also required a tool that would work with contact centers located in other countries and with home-based agents.

Turning to UC

MonaVie then turned to IP-based UC to effectively handle and integrate the channels and agents. And after investigating other suppliers, it turned to ShoreTel (www.shoretel.com), choosing the ShoreTel Enterprise Contact Center.

ShoreTel's products were less costly to install and maintain that those from competitors, explains Larsen. It has easy backwards compatibility for analog trunks, for working with analog lines, and the modems and faxes that run on them. ShoreTel's open standards and APIs allowed for straightforward integration so that previously stand-alone functions can be centrally orchestrated through one highly available platform.

"Since our telephones and communications tools were not fully integrated, this slowed the time for agents to complete calls and for other departments as well," reports Larsen. "To remain successful at fulfilling orders and expanding the business, we needed to deploy a UC solution that could rapidly scale to meet these demands."

MonaVie installed ShoreTel solution February 2007; it took a month to go live. It also integrated the ShoreTel solution with its custom-built CRM application, and the ShoreTel phones with Outlook and e-mail.

There were a few challenges. One set involved upgrading from the legacy platform to the ShoreTel solution, as it required user re-training for user interfaces and application changes, while also causing changes in some original call flows. Another called for integrating the multimedia elements, which required it to use ShoreTel's implementation services due to lack of training on the advanced applications.

UC Results

The investment and effort in the ShoreTel UC solution paid off for MonaVie. The firm eliminated the separate chat/e-mail team and reduced headcount, saving some $500,000 annually. Features such as screen pop-ups that help instantly verify caller ID and other data enabled MonaVie's agents trim up to 15 seconds per call, for more than 1.6 million calls per year.

The UC functionality, distributed architecture and open standards APIs in the ShoreTel product also allowed MonaVie IT administrators to shift to and support home-based agents beginning in 2010. With this, some 80 percent of MonaVie's contact center employees are now able to work offsite.

The ShoreTel tool also permitted improved customer service to MonaVie distributors with automated call backs, outbound surveys and credit card issue resolution. The company initiated an agent scorecard, with data aggregated from customer surveys and other contact center statistics collected through the Enterprise Contact Center reporting tools and built into Microsoft Excel. The scorecard bolstered productivity by permitting agents and supervisors to quickly understand and improve efficiencies related to call handling, training sessions, and customer satisfaction.

"Now [with ShoreTel Enterprise Contact Center] we can manage the same level of traffic better and more efficiently," reports Larsen. "We have this anywhere ability to integrate everything into the desktop toolbar: screen pop-ups, caller ID confirmation and even birthday verification." **CIS**

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by Brendan Read

Customer Interaction Solutions Magazine's 12th Annual CRM Excellence Awards

For the 12th consecutive year the editors of Customer Interaction Solutions have dared firms to prove that their companies have what it takes to win the coveted CRM Excellence Award.

Here are the enterprises that offer the best and brightest customer relationship management products and services. Winners were chosen on hard data: quantifiable results that convinced us that the offerings that they have devised and deployed have improved the abilities of their customers to in turn more profitably serve their customers.

More information about the winning companies and their solutions can be found at www.tmcnet.com.

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Firstsource
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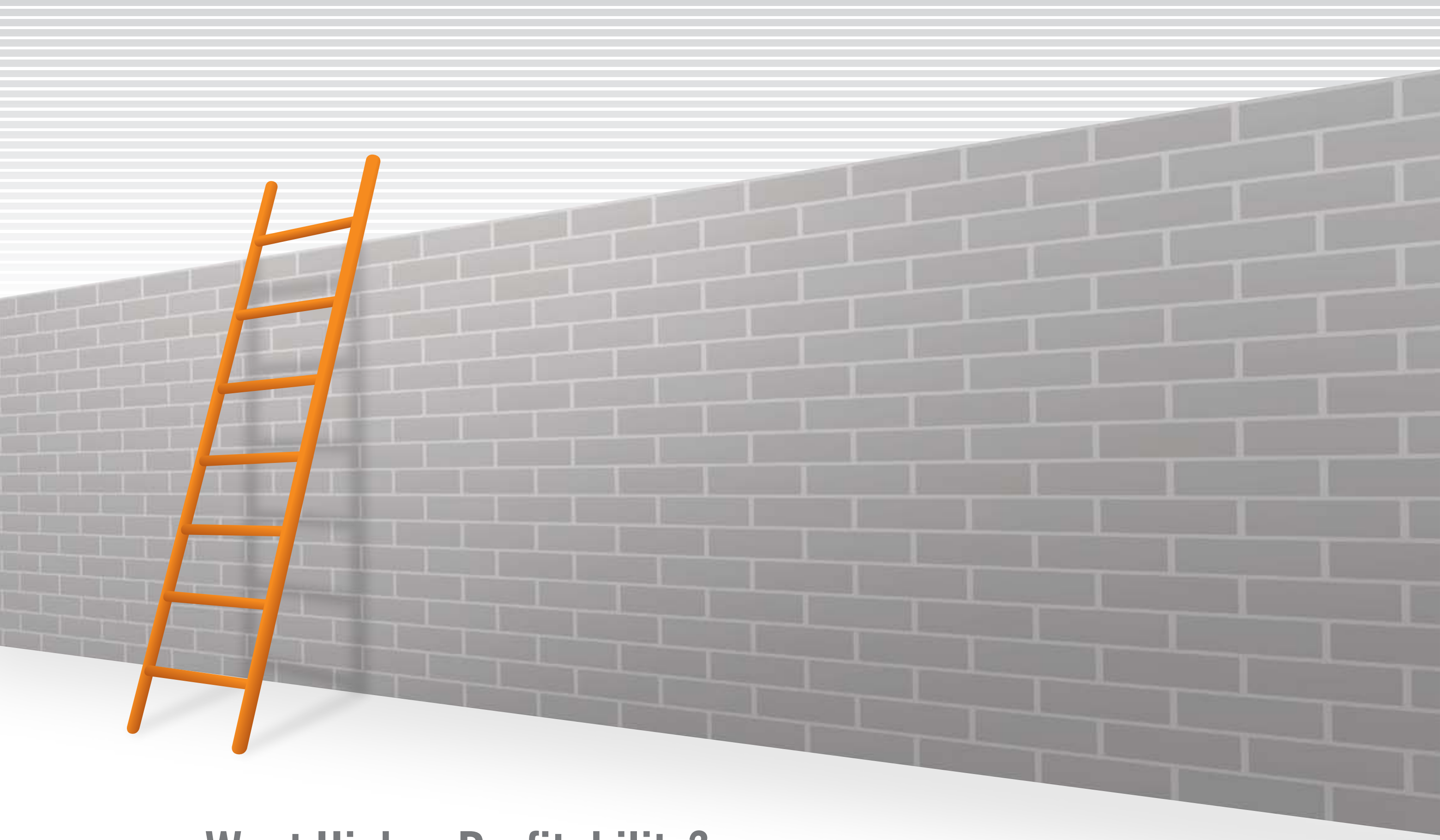

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Brendan B. Read, *Senior Contributing Editor*

Getting It Right on Social Media

Contact centers are conservative organizations for good reason: they have to get it right on their tasks, whether customer service, support, sales, or billing and collections, as they are on the corporate front lines, interacting with customers. There is little room for error but when these occur–which are inevitable even in the best of outfits–they hear about it ASAP.

So it is understandable that contact centers have been cautious when it comes to handling customer comments and leads via social media. The wrong strategies, training and responses could have serious consequences for their organizations, or in the case of outsourcers, their clients' brands and reputations, and their collective bottom lines.

Tim Passios, director of solutions marketing at Interactive Intelligence points to this reluctance in a Feb.17, 2011, blog entry titled "Contact Centers Today-Support for Social Media is practically nonexistent". Tim wrote, "most contact centers just aren't feeling the absolute need to support it as a channel for now."

Instead, what contact centers appear to be doing, Tim reports–and rightly so–is undertaking due diligence on social media. Contact centers are "asking all the right questions", such as whether they need to monitor all of social media or focus on just a few sites, how to respond and how quickly and how to queue and route these interactions.

And they are asking what is arguably the most important question of them all, which is how do they prepare their agents, supervisors and their customers for social media support?

Why is this last question critical? Because social media is media, just like TV, radio, online and print, where the speakers, in this instance comments posters who are working for organizations, are acting as corporate spokespeople.

The impacts of remarks made in media are deeper and more immediate than any words uttered in customer service. And with the realtime nature of social media, there is little leeway for buffering remarks as there is in e-mail or chat. You rarely get a second chance in media, and social media is no different.

This set of points was driven home by high-profile "misTweets" –and resulting firings–as reported in a *New York Times* story written by Stuart Elliott, "When the Marketing Reach of Social Media Backfires" posted March 15, 2011.

The piece cited an employee of an ad agency handling the Chrysler consumer brand's Twitter account who was kicked to the curb after posting a comment that read, "I find it ironic that Detroit is known as the #motorcity and yet no one here knows how to drive." Between "to" and "drive" was a vulgarity. And Gilbert Gottfried, the most-used voice behind the AFLAC duck got 'plucked' so to speak when he "started to post at least 10 jokes to his personal Twitter feed about the earthquake and tsunami in Japan — a market that accounts for 75 percent of Aflac's revenue," said the Times.

"Brands need to "establish a social media policy," said Daniel Khabie, CEO of digital media ad agency Digitaria because without such precautions, "we're giving people loaded guns to do incredible harm."

To prevent that from happening, organizations should have corporate communications (corpcomm) create a policy in consultation with legal and act as the gatekeepers. Corpcomm should select and train staff for dedicated social media teams, approving those with media and PR experience as well as contact center skills. In smaller firms corpcomm would be the social media team, just as they do for other media. All companies need to collect social comments and try to match commenters' social handles with names in customer/prospect databases and integrate these with their remarks from other channels. They can then obtain complete and close-to-realtime views of customers', prospects' and the public's viewpoints, such as for followup.

In such a fashion, contact centers will get social media right. And the sooner they do, the better it will be for their organizations because social media is becoming one, if not the most critical interaction channels.

When combined with the rapid takeup of self-service coupled with stronger demands for higher quality service from customers it is not inconceivable then that the social media teams will become the contact center teams. **CIS**

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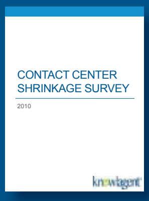
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