



**Next Generation Contact
Centers: “The Killer App”
for VoIP**

A Technology Whitepaper
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Next-Generation Contact Centers: The “Killer App” for VoIP *A TECHNOLOGY WHITE PAPER*

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Customers in the Internet age are generally characterized as fickle and impatient, with ridiculously escalating expectations. They want to be recognized automatically when they call in, and get quickly connected to someone who can actually answer their questions. They don't want to punch in endless account numbers and cryptic codes, or repeat history that is already on file, and they'd better not end up in voicemail too often. In short, they expect the functionality that a high-end contact center provides, and reckon that the Internet technology explosion of the past decade should have put such capabilities within the reach of most companies by now. And the much-maligned customer is right.

Actually, while your competition may be only a mouse click away, studies show that many of your customers would prefer to be loyal. They like comfortable, seamless experiences — and change is disruptive, uncomfortable, and a big nuisance. Add this loyalty proclivity to the fact that it costs a lot more to acquire new customers than it does to retain existing ones, and you've just made the case for an IP contact center. A new generation of products now puts a rich set of contact center features and functions within the reach of virtually any company, and offers a flexibility that makes high-end call centers based on traditional telephony bring to mind beached whales.

Almost any company can now implement a converged contact center that optimizes interactions and gives customers the kind of experience they want. Such capability provides you with a key competitive advantage in a global economy that *does* give your customers instant access to the competition, and *has* pushed their expectations to giddy heights. Acutely aware of this, CEOs in a recent Ernst & Young survey made customer satisfaction *the* top priority—literally dwarfing other key concerns. Unfortunately, too many of today's contact centers simply add fuel to the fire, providing customers with experiences that range from bad to dreadful. They call in expecting to receive personal attention, recognition for their loyalty, and responsive, consistent service. Instead, they endure long hold times, get bounced from one unskilled agent to another, and are subjected to a flurry of inappropriate offers.

In sharp contrast, a contact center that leverages the capabilities of convergence can match your callers to the most appropriate agents, resolve problems quickly, enable effective cross-selling of products and services, maximize self-service, address increasing economic segmentation, and strengthen relationships with customers. And only IP enables you to deliver such benefits quickly and easy while reducing contact center costs.

The Legacy Problem

Traditional call centers began evolving decades ago, when call volumes were low and questions were simple and static. Separate call centers were dedicated to specific divisions or product lines, resulting in a proliferation of operational silos. This legacy has resulted in call centers that are centralized, inflexible, and tied to specific locations; impose a lot of fixed overhead; and are very difficult to manage or expand and contract operations as needed.

When the voice and data networks are separate, call centers must be built by integrating a traditional PBX with a CRM application—a mammoth undertaking. Consolidating all the silos is also quite a challenge. According to a Gartner recent study, while 64% of all contact centers have more than one location, only about half (52%) of these “multi-site” operations have actually been fully networked into one virtual center.¹ Similarly, the lack of full voice/data convergence has prevented most contact centers from implementing screen pops for the agents, because the cost doing this type of integration in a TDM environment is prohibitive. And last but far from least, full-featured contact centers based on traditional telephony don’t scale down very well, so they are out of reach for many mid-size companies.

The IP Solution

A true VoIP system distributes itself transparently across multiple locations, enabling virtual contact centers that draw skills from anywhere in the enterprise. Both the underlying IP voice network and the contact center application are seen by users and callers as one seamless system, and they can be managed remotely from anywhere via a management console that provides a single-system view. However, while presenting a unified front to the world, agents can actually be located anywhere. This enables businesses to take advantage of lower-cost labor pools, and to add hourly employees as needed to accommodate peak-demand periods. Such temps can be “hoteled” very easily, or even work from home.

Once the VoIP network is in place, the call center software is simply installed as a server-based application. Any local or remote user logged into the network can be designated an agent and assigned to a particular contact group.

Adding a new call center site is just as easy. A technician plugs an IP voice switch into the enterprise WAN and installs the trunk interface to the PSTN. IP phones are then connected to the network, and can be configured from back at the home office – or from anywhere via a web-based management interface. Individual agents can even work from home. All they need is their PC or laptop, a softphone, and a broadband connection to their corporate network.

The IP-based contact center scales down as well as up, enabling companies to start small and apply the technology to problems incrementally. Informal support groups can be formalized into specialized contact centers as companies grow, and advanced contact

center features can be delivered cost-effectively even to small operations. This is in stark contrast to more traditional contact center solutions, which involve so much overhead that they are cost-prohibitive for operations with fewer than 100 agents.

Pulling It All Together

With the right VoIP system providing the infrastructure, it is easy to consolidate geographically separated contact centers. They function as a seamless virtual contact center, with automatic load balancing across sites. Companies don't find themselves paying agents in one location overtime while the staff at another site is sitting idle. Agent resources are maximized, and managers get a single-system view of the multi-site operation. Customer-service reports are easier to prepare, because managers aren't dealing with distinct sets of data for each site. Multi-site consolidation can be done with legacy contact center solutions, but it is a complex and expensive undertaking that requires special software and interfaces and "in-the-cloud" routing.

A good IP-based contact center comes with a set of sophisticated tools managers can use to ensure service objectives are met and to supervise agents in real time. These include historical reporting, real-time statistical views, agent alarms, wall boards, and the ability to monitor agent sessions with customers and barge in when necessary.

The converged VoIP environment makes it very easy to integrate the contact center workflow with enterprise data sources and applications. An IVR menu prompts the caller to enter an account number, or to confirm an account associated with caller-ID information. The account information pops up on the agent's screen before the phone is picked up. This data integration can save up to a minute per call, which accumulates into big savings for the business and ensures better service for the customer.

Differentiated Services

One of the most powerful components of an enterprise-class IP contact center is a routing engine that can match inbound calls to agents with the appropriate skills, or apply business rules that give special treatment to certain calls based on the customer's importance, the time of day, or some other parameter.

Instead of being assigned to generic queues, agents are allocated to groups based on various skill sets. An agent with a highly specialized skill might be dedicated to one group, while others with a range of skills are assigned to several. Similarly, priority customers can be routed to the most productive agents. The inherently flexible IP environment makes it easy to create or dissolve groups, and to change agent assignments.

The skills-based routing capability enables an almost unlimited level of differentiated services, and can have a huge impact on contact center efficiency and efficacy.

- Call resolution improves significantly and even dramatically, because calls are directed to agents with the appropriate skills
- Call-processing time is reduced, minimizing hold times for customers

- With shorter calls, agents can handle more of them. A 25% increase is fairly common
- Getting recognition for unique skills can boost agent morale and encourage commitment and professional development

Agent productivity can be further enhanced by offering callers self-service options wherever appropriate. A scripting interface can be used to create a variety of self-service scenarios, which may include interactions with enterprise databases. When self-service is used, callers get to answers faster, without waiting and your agents are available for more complex customer interactions. When agent interaction is required, it can take place over any IP-supported medium the customer prefers, including voice, chat sessions, and e-mail.

The routing engine makes it easier to impose and revise centrally administered business rules across the organization, and provide customers with a consistent experience at every point and mode of contact. Some companies are increasing the value of these customer interactions by using them as an opportunity to cross-sell or up-sell. Value-added software captures and analyzes customer behavior so that agents with sales skills can “extend offers to customers at a time when they are most receptive,” says Elizabeth Herrell of Forrester Research.

Conclusion

A contact center that converges the voice and data worlds can increase the number and quality of calls, boost agent productivity, and improve customer satisfaction. The rich, multimedia environment increases the value of interactions in both directions, providing customers with a better experience, improving information flow, and increasing the amount and application of business intelligence. Callers can be automatically routed to agents with the right skill sets, and receive priority treatment if their status warrants it.

Such a converged contact center can be built using traditional telephony, but it will cost more and result in a platform that is far less flexible to use, expand, and manage. IP contact centers can be spread across multiple sites at will, letting you tap cheap labor pools and homeworkers and add temporary agents during peak periods while still having one virtual, seamless operation that can be managed from anywhere. You get a quick return on your investment, and can start small without sacrificing features.

In our global economy, the customer experience is increasing in value as products and services become mere commodities. With a distributed IP contact center, you can deliver a much better customer experience and gain a key competitive advantage. Make no mistake about it: While customers may want to be loyal, their expectations *are* rising, and you have to stay a jump ahead of them if you want to survive. As famed humorist Will Rogers observed, “Being on the right track is not enough; you can still get run over by the train.” A distributed IP contact center is an agile vehicle that can keep you ahead of the pack and ready to navigate any curves the future tosses at you.

¹ Gartner User Study: Multimedia Contact Centers Now Mainstream, North America, 2003, Drew Kraus, May 20, 2004