

## CALL CENTER/CRM MANAGEMENT SCOPE

**BY** Laura Powers, Nortel Networks

# THE BENEFITS OF IP-ENABLING A CONTACT CENTER

Voice over IP (VoIP) has come a long way since the first rudimentary applications which provided erratic, yet free, phone calls over the unmanaged, open Web. Today, the maturity of VoIP standards and quality of service (QoS) on IP networks provide new opportunities for enterprises in the form of IP contact centers.

An IP contact center leverages IP telephony to enable call center services on a converged voice and data infrastructure. The degree to which the contact center relies on IP can vary from one implementation to another. In its basic form, an IP contact center uses its existing PBX and automated call distribution (ACD) systems and takes advantage of cost-effective, efficient IP links to connect agents. A fully developed IP contact center is built completely on IP-based components, including agent access devices, application servers and gateway mediation devices that interface with devices and customers that use traditional telephone services.

Regardless of the method of deployment, one can achieve 14 key business benefits by enhancing a conventional contact center with IP telephony.

**1. Reduce network equipment and operating costs.** If your organization already has an IP network, you can maximize your investment by converging voice and data on that infrastructure. If you're establishing a new contact center, you can deploy a single,

converged network with one wire to the desktop and unified management — instead of disparate voice and data networks, with their different lines, jacks, equipment, management systems and support specialists. Naturally, this type of consolidation can translate into increased network efficiency, lower training and personnel costs and remote management through a single interface. A fully converged network can be considerably easier and less expensive to manage.

**2. Reduce toll costs.** For international operations and inbound toll-free traffic especially, IP telephony can generate significant cost savings compared to circuit-switched voice services. Furthermore, whereas traditional telephony services are priced per minute, IP services (such as those offered via cable modem and DSL) are generally priced on a flat rate. Also, the transformation of a key cost component from a variable to a fixed cost greatly improves cost management and forecasting.

**3. Reduce capital costs.** Whether expanding an existing facility or building new centers, IP can be less expensive than circuit-based solutions. For example, agents can be equipped with PC headphones, rather than a dedicated business phone plus a PC, thereby reducing equipment costs per agent seat.

**4. Locate agents anywhere.** Cost-effective IP communication links (usually with no toll charges) allow you to locate agents in

"virtual call centers" that include branch offices and home offices just about anywhere. The latest IP telephony remote office solutions make it much easier to work with remote agents and will likely spur greater acceptance of this variant on telecommuting.

**5. Reduce agent costs.** Indirectly, IP telephony enables contact centers to reduce personnel costs in terms of salaries and support. For instance, the option to locate agents anywhere enables recruiters to draw from labor pools in lower-cost markets; for example, in rural areas. IP virtual contact centers may still require a centralized head-quarter office for management, training facilities and equipment, but using remote agents can save significant facilities costs, such as floor space, heat and lighting. Home-based work options also contribute to lower costs by boosting agent productivity and reducing agent turnover and absenteeism.

**6. Improve agent quality and satisfaction.** The flexibility to work at home or close to home makes it easier to recruit and retain employees, especially if specific skill-sets such as language or technical knowledge are required, and meet the needs of a geographically dispersed workforce. In addition, agents working at home tend to be more satisfied because they can not only enjoy the comfort and conveniences of home, but they can also eliminate long commutes and the frustration of traffic and parking. According to some recent studies, agents working at home can be up to 25 percent more productive and have near perfect attendance.

**7. Provide a seamless user experience.** Remote agents and branch offices can be linked to the same contact center application used in the main contact center. Whether your agents are located at an Omaha contact center hub or in their rural home offices, customers and suppliers receive the same level of personal service and are unaware of any disparity due to the actual physical location.

**8. Easily support peak loads and 24/7 service.** By dynamically distributing calls among agents in many locations and time zones, contact center managers can support extended business hours and dramatic shifts in demand at far less expense. Agents working at home make it easier to cover peak call volumes — often times, these agents can work on short notice or during odd hours to

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provide additional call coverage. This flexibility helps attract and retain customers by making it easier to do business with you, any way and any time.

**9. Extend services to internal users anywhere.** Running voice over your existing enterprise IP network (and/or virtual private network across the public Internet) enables you to cost-effectively and easily extend contact center applications, including reporting and administration, to employees and managers located almost anywhere.

**10. Streamline contact center management.** Web browsers can be used to connect with all of your contact center management, administrative and reporting tools from virtually anywhere. Moreover, centralized management of call center applications reduces administration and maintenance costs.

**11. Adjust and expand to meet fluctuating requirements.** By definition, IP is highly scalable and flexible. The ubiquity of IP services indicates that almost any home or branch office can become an extension of the IP contact center, with only minor investments in IP access devices and interfaces. Contact center managers can therefore add agents whenever needed to meet seasonal business requirements or new promotions. Capitalizing on the reach of the Internet, contact centers can be easily set up and dismantled for transient requirements.

**12. Provide carrier-grade reliability.** IP networks have matured to the point where they can offer the availability and reliability expected for customer-facing voice communications. With some solutions, IP contact centers can be engineered for survivable local calling capability and automatic fallback to the public switched telephone network (PSTN) if necessary to maintain quality of service.

**13. Converge channels and services.** Placing voice and data on the same network presents new possibilities for converging the many ways in which customers communicate with your organization — voice, text, chat, e-mail, fax and Web co-browsing. For instance, a customer can click-to-call from a Web site and an agent can “push” Web pages to a customer to provide more information or have custom screen pops on the agent’s PC delivered over the same line as the voice call. Voice is still the dominant channel for

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## Are Your Customers In Call Center Hell?

*By Jay Henderson, Vertical Networks*

Branch offices and retail stores are still the primary customer interfaces — and the main revenue drivers — for many enterprises. However, few enterprises realize that their call center systems may, in fact, be doing more to harm local customer relationships than to enhance them. One of the main problems is the inability of remote offices and stores to collect, track and share intelligence about incoming customer calls with either the main call center or other remote locations. Another is that many enterprises have not adequately mapped all of the call flow scenarios that bring callers into remote sites, which prevents these sites from appropriately routing calls, or tracking them after they are automatically routed. Finally, a lack of connectivity between branch telephony infrastructure and corporate inventory, CRM or customer databases isolates remote locations from critical data. The result? A customer experience that most companies could only wish on their competitors.

Here’s a retail example that starkly illustrates what’s happening to customers thousands of times a day, unbeknownst to many retailing businesses and IT executives. A customer calls the local number of a store with which he or she does business to determine if a certain size and type of jeans is in stock.

However, the system transparently routes all calls to the main call center in Idaho or Kansas (to enable in-store staff to focus on in-store customers). The caller has a specific question for the local location, but the agent at the main call center has no identifying information about where that call came from, or what that customer might be looking for. In fact, the main call center agent will not have any idea whether the store in Paramus, NJ has those jeans in stock in the customer’s size. So after waiting in queue, and then not receiving the desired information, the customer is transferred back to the store, where a live operator routes her to the sportswear department. There the phone rings for five minutes before anyone answers it. The salesperson, after going to the aisle to check, returns to say they do not have the item in stock at this store. “Do you have it at your mall location?” asks the customer. “I don’t know,” says the salesperson, “you’ll have to call there.”

The scenario above is not an isolated incident. According to a recent survey by Begley Consulting, in calls to the nation’s top 27 retail chains there is a 1 in 4 chance that the caller will either be cut off after being put on hold, reach a busy signal or fail to reach either a person or machine.

In addition, all of this transferring of calls adds

up, even when long-distance rates are low. Not only are these situations occurring with alarming frequency, but worse, companies are not tracking, capturing and reporting on them.

It’s not hard to imagine how both the top line and the bottom line of a business would be significantly improved if these calls were handled and routed effectively at the local site. Intelligence about the call would be made available to the resource at the main call center, or alternatively, at the local site the store clerk or automated system would do a look-up in the corporate inventory database and route the caller to the nearest store that had that item available.

So how can this be accomplished? It’s accomplished by implementing call center capabilities on site in the remote locations, and by tying distributed intelligence from those sites to back-end enterprise applications. While large call centers have had the technology to do just this for some time, small sites have been shut out.

Of course, you have to have technology at both the main call center and remote sites to support a distributed model. We’ll get to that in a minute. But it’s not just about technology. Here are the steps for successfully implementing a distributed call center:

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## 1. Know thy customer.

The organization must map out and understand: Who is calling? Where is the customer calling from and to? Why is the customer calling? This information often already exists in corporate databases, ERP and other enterprise applications. If it does not exist, enterprises should create a SWAT team to call a sub-segment of customers to understand what is happening when they call. Only by analyzing customer calling patterns can the enterprise design a highly efficient and effective distributed call center.

## 2. Understand whether your organizational structure is making the problem worse.

Where does the expertise or particular talent in the company reside? In many cases, callers are not being directed to where the appropriate resources actually are.

## 3. Investigate the dynamics of existing call flows.

What percentage of your customers are successfully completing a transaction in one call? What percent have to talk with two or more agents? How you staff your distributed call center will depend upon what you learn.

## 4. Determine which call center capabilities are required at the branch.

An Integrated Communications Platform (ICP) with robust call center soft-

ware needs to be deployed at each branch. There are many competing systems in this category. This approach enables branches to continue to leverage local phone and network services, but also to benefit from tight links to strategic corporate databases. Connectivity allows calls to be automatically routed to the most appropriate location. A call from a known credit risk (based on a lookup in the corporate database by the local agent) could be automatically transferred to the corporate credit department rather than handled locally.

Critical call center functionality for branch sites includes:

**Flexible call routing and queuing.** Based on the number dialed (DNIS), the originating number (ANI) or touch-tone digits entered, the call center application on the ICP system routes a caller to the company representative with the right expertise.

**Interactive voice response.** Enabling self-service frees local staff to handle more complex requests. Flexible script-based applications should be available to customize an unlimited number of nested menus and prompts. By integrating the IVR system with enterprise databases, branch locations can quickly route calls based on the caller's individual account information.

**Integration with enterprise applications.** The ICP software should integrate with back-office applications via ODBC, COM and other standards-based APIs to enable detailed customer infor-

mation lookups. In addition to IVR input, calls can be directed using a wealth of data including: inventory levels, store hours, staff availability, holiday schedules or call queue levels.

**Monitoring and reporting.** Call center capabilities at the remote site should provide a high degree of visibility into day-to-day operations at all remote locations — for tracking customer contact data to identify peak calling times and call abandonment patterns — by department and facility; measuring staff productivity by monitoring call handling and queue statistics — by individuals and groups; and analyzing trunk traffic and network utilization across all sites.

In addition, centrally located enterprisewide management is imperative for provisioning, managing, controlling, monitoring and reporting on applications running on distributed platforms. According to Gartner, "Networking capabilities [for managing multisite call centers] introduce resource efficiency savings of at least 15 percent."

The neighborhood store or branch location continues to be the customer service "front line." Enterprises are just beginning to learn how distributed call center technology can be deployed to help to impact the top line.

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*"The Benefits Of..." continued from previous page* providing contact center service, but customer expectations are rapidly evolving. As a result, the ability to interact with customers via multiple communication media will soon become a key differentiator for enterprises. IP telephony is clearly the future for converged, multichannel communication, as it unifies all interaction types onto one infrastructure for routing, application access and reporting.

**14. Support future high-end applications.** The traditional telephone network cannot support bandwidth-intensive applications, such as streaming video. Video is not widely used by contact centers today, but as broadband access becomes mainstream, customers can soon expect to be able to view contact agents, interactive product demos or informational broadcasts as part of their online experience. With adequate network performance, IP contact centers could readily support such high-end services which are simply not feasible on the PSTN.

## In The End

The business case for an IP contact center makes sense. You can easily extend your contact centers to agents anywhere, while still providing a seamless experience for customers and suppliers. This flexibility can help attract and retain customers by making it easier to conduct business with them — in any way and at any time. You can also save pennies per agent/minute, resulting in significant savings over the long-term. Overall, IP-enabling your contact center delivers the flexibility and functionality you need to handle customer contact needs more efficiently and effectively, resulting in stronger, more profitable relationships.

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