



Secrets to Success in Supporting Today's Contact Center Technology

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ICCM Weekly, January 26, 2006

Following the news in our industry, it is easy to see that we are in an incredibly exciting and interesting time of change in both operations and technology. Voice over IP, speech recognition, multisite and multimedia contact routing and handling, home agents, data analysis and scorecards, outsourcing – overseas or in our backyard, and hosted solutions are just some of the things that grab our attention and can turn into important projects. As we make these changes, we implement technologies and apply them in new ways to enable the business to meet its goals. However, as centers embark on these projects, focused on the implementation itself, we often neglect a critical factor to success: how to manage the technology effectively on an ongoing basis. Without changes to the organizational roles and responsibilities and the support model and associated processes, we risk sub-optimized deployments of these powerful capabilities, reducing the return on investment.

A whole lot of change is going on

The changes in technology today encompass architecture, applications, and sourcing. Clear business needs may drive change, or the possibilities presented by a new technology or way to deliver it may catalyze operational change. For example, a leadership team in a multisite contact center may learn of the powerful business case VoIP offers such environments, and begin to pursue a new model for multisite, multimedia operations. Or, a small company pursuing significant growth may need to move faster and do more, while avoiding capital and facilities costs. They decide to take a hard look at hosted solutions. Another example of changes today is the many centers who are trying to take the mountains of data they have and turn it into useful information, measure against balanced key performance indicators, and analyze it for business intelligence. All of these examples lead to operational changes that can impact people and processes, and technology changes to enable them.

These types of changes create new environments that someone must tend to ongoing, and this has significant implications. Companies must define a new support model, and with it clear roles and responsibilities that may bridge IT, support functions within the call center, and possibly other areas. And there is urgency to putting these new models in place. As one company put it after building their VoIP strategy and business case: "That was the easy part. Now we need to define our support model in order to succeed." An effective support model is critical to success, and needs to change along with the technology.

Further complicating the situation in many companies, the processes, commitments, and follow through (sometimes referred to as Service Level Agreements) are not well defined or executed prior to these changes. That looseness creates a cultural hurdle to putting structure, clarity, and expectations to support processes. But companies must knock down this hurdle to succeed.



Prerequisites for a successful model

I need to highlight the prerequisites for success in getting started on defining, or refining, a support model, and knocking down that hurdle I just identified. This may sound like motherhood and apple pie, but it boils down to trust, partnership, and collaboration between IT and the users in the contact center. In working with companies tackling these issues, I've seen relationships between the groups that span the spectrum from quite healthy and communicative, to struggling but functional, to down right dysfunctional. You need to assess the health of your environment before you get started, and determine what you need to do to bring people together. Sometimes such a project can serve as a catalyst to enlighten both groups: IT about the things that matter to the business, and the business about the challenges IT faces in risk and resource management, and the tradeoffs they both must address.

I have two themes I beat on my drum here for IT. The first is for IT to be in a mindset of the contact center as the customer, and the second is to "take the mystery out of it." Often the disconnects are simply because the business doesn't understand enough about how IT works, and the issues they face, to appreciate the decisions they make. So quite simply, that's about communication. The customer mindset is a cultural thing that is inherent in some environments, and an adjustment in others.

For the business, the themes are right in line: be a good communicator of your needs, and an informed partner with IT. Seek to understand the reasons IT charges what it does, makes the choices it does, and the limits they face. Then work with them to get your most important needs addressed within the limits of time, resources, and money.

Criteria for successful design

When you embark on designing or refining your support model and related organizational roles and responsibilities, processes, and SLAs, consider these important elements:

- Address three scenarios: An effective model addresses troubleshooting and problem resolution, day-to-day support (configuration changes, minor upgrades, application tuning, etc.), and projects. The general structure should work for all scenarios, but you will need to define the processes and roles and responsibilities differently for each. Also make sure the definition of a project is clear – generally defined in X person hours of work for internal resources, or by another clear threshold of cost or time.
- Take an enterprise view if possible: Support models are most effective and efficient if they apply to all centers across your enterprise. If your overall organizational structure will support it, consider the needs of all centers collectively. This is more likely when a project is enterprise-wide, such as a VoIP infrastructure and applications.
- Define clear roles and responsibilities: What should IT do? What support functions should sit in the center? Do you create a contact center "center of excellence" in one or the other, or both? Or is there another place these functions should sit? How do they work together in the various scenarios? These are some of the most important questions you will address in your model. Consider building "RACI" models (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed) to show who has what role in key processes. And apply change management techniques to help people successfully execute the changes defined.



- Consider driving more application control into the business: As you define clear roles and responsibilities, consider that today's solutions often have simplified management tools. Hosted solutions can take the burden off IT and move management into the users' hands. Whether premise-based or hosted, the call center staff can control more elements, such as routing paths, announcements, desktop scripts, and knowledge base content. Staff within the center can be most in tune to the center's needs, resulting in fast response to business needs, and proactive application of technology. A well defined model, proper training, and access to the tools makes it work.
- Develop SLAs: SLAs define how quickly a responsible party has to execute, and what happens if they don't. We often think of these as something the vendors provide, but in a good support model, they exist on internal processes as well. How much time does IT get to try to resolve a critical problem for the call center before the center expects them to escalate to the vendor? Or what is the expected turnaround time on a change to a routing path, announcement or menu, or desktop script? These things should be defined, documented, and reinforced.
- Build a financial model that everyone can live with: One of the biggest sticking points in clearly defining a support model is how to fund it. If the business expects IT to do more, they may need more funding. If IT charges back for their services and the business thinks they generally charge too much (a common concern), that situation – whether perception or reality – may influence the model's design if not discussed and addressed. Financial discussions are difficult but critical to optimizing the model.
- Keep it simple: A support model will only be successful if people can document, understand, and execute it consistently and effectively. So keep it as simple as possible. Develop a framework based on the "typical" situations. Do not design to the exception, but allow for exceptions.

We have to do the hard stuff to succeed

Putting in new technology can be a fun, exciting project. At some point it is in and working and a celebration ensues. Changing call center operations to do something like handle multimedia or support home agents has an element of pizzazz to it, and results in reaching a milestone and having something interesting to show for it. Developing a new support model is not nearly so glamorous. In fact, it can be tedious, onerous, and easily put off due to inertia. There is almost always something better to do. But we have to tackle this difficult task if we are to fully realize the value of our new technologies and operations. Whatever key initiatives you are tackling in this exciting era of change, make sure your company is ready to effectively support your new environment.