The Agility/Complexity Dilemma

By Lori Bocklund, President
The National Association of Call Centers | Volume 5, Issue 8, June 4, 2010

Somewhere near the top of the requirements list for every contact center these days is "agility" or "flexibility" – and today's technology can deliver. But agility and flexibility come at the price of complexity, and it's killing us. It's time to systematize contact center technology deployment and support, and put all the right people, processes, and tools in place to manage the complexity required to meet today's business needs.

Choices can be great, but…

Not to reminisce too much, but "call centers" used to be relatively simple – both operationally and technologically – and that simpler time made life easier for everyone. Centers were characterized by single media (phone), rock solid voice systems (PBX/ACDs), and a few basic tools (IVR, WFM, QM). System operations were fairly smooth and straight-forward.

The contact center technology world today, on the other hand, is prone to problems. For example, we're engaged in multiple projects on a variety of vendor platforms focused on stability and resiliency. That's not a coincidence; it's an outgrowth of wide-ranging technology options and complex and highly interdependent architectures. Voice over IP (with its heavy reliance on data networks), multi-site, multi-media, enhanced performance tools, web integration, and more are essential parts of the center's ecosystem. Vendors and distributors have responded by offering services to monitor the performance of their servers, gateways, routers, etc. Such services are important considerations in technology procurement. (You can't just buy boxes and licenses anymore!)

The scale and options of network carrier services – another area that used to be "simple" – compound the challenges. Companies experience fiber cuts, over-commitment by carriers on what they can deliver, timing issues, etc. With voice highly dependent on data networks, companies applying best practices institute redundant, diverse networks, yet vulnerabilities remain due to the greater interdependency, complexity and scale in what those networks entail. Issues can be wide-ranging and wreak havoc on centers and customers.

Combine these environments with the lean staffing today and you've created a monster. Most centers' operational leadership has little or no time to plan for the next thing as they are consumed with the day-to-day operations and challenges. IT/telecom doesn't have enough time or bandwidth either. They frequently wind up reacting to trouble rather than proactively managing these complex environments. No one sees the reason to do the extra things with technology, tools, or processes until something (or many things) go wrong… then it's a scramble to stabilize and put remedies in place quickly.

If you think "this can't happen to our center," let me present some interesting statistics from IQ Services, a company that specializes in contact center technology testing and monitoring. They send hundreds of thousands of calls a month into centers all over the country, hitting a variety of voice platforms and carriers. They find that 4-5% of these calls encounter an issue such as ring no answer, busy signals, tens of seconds of silence, unexpected greetings, host unavailable issues, calls that are unexpectedly disconnected, and unexpected responses. Most centers aren't even looking at these customer-impacting issues. *Ignorance is NOT bliss*. Centers need to be in tune to the problems that are occurring or could

occur. That means testing and monitoring tools and/or services, and a commitment to identify and resolve issues proactively.

Organize and Commit

We've got to address the agility/complexity dilemma to meet centers' needs while providing a stable, robust environment. There are two important ingredients to success: getting your "house" in order, and committing the resources to do it right.

Execute clear and consistent processes routinely and thoroughly for both technology deployment and support. Find ways to build redundancy, diversity, and resiliency into your architecture so that the systems and networks take care of themselves as much as possible. With this type of infrastructure in place, you prevent problems in the first place and recover quickly when problems occur. Leverage in-house, vendor/distributor, or third party services for monitoring and testing – of premises equipment as well as network services.

Most companies are too lean in their technology support domain. Technology stability and resiliency suffer due to lack of focus on proactive optimization and management. Make the case to staff up, redefine roles and responsibilities, and solidify processes. This charge includes a focus on non-contact center technology and application changes. For example, IT must have processes in place that consider the impact on the contact center when making router changes on the data network. Review all technology support and management processes and the tools to enable them – especially for things like proactive technology monitoring and testing, and problem/incident identification and resolution.

Do it now

Agility and flexibility are here to stay as standard requirements for centers, so we've got to find ways to deliver and support those characteristics effectively. Much like disaster recovery and business continuity, it is difficult to muster the time, energy, resources, and investment dollars to put things in place to prevent problems you can't see or anticipate, or consider unlikely (it won't happen to *us*!). Use business requirements for agility and flexibility to drive a new look at the technology, processes, resources, and tools you need to make that complex environment stable and agile, and always available and responsive to business needs.

Want to learn more about contact center technology testing and monitoring best practices? Email Lori at lori@strategiccontact.com to gather some ideas on what to consider for your environment.