Tech Line

Technology Bridges Organizational Siloes

Contact center applications pave the way by connecting centers that were once isolated to all parts of the enterprise.

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Contact center personnel often feel like the ill-fated crew on "Gilligan's Island" — cast away on their own island. Lacking connection with the "mainland," they leverage their own resources to devise tools and processes that meet their immediate needs. Absent effective lines of communication, they contend with a host of issues (dare we say, debris?) that originate from the "mainland" and wash up on their shores. Everyone knows that this situation is far from optimal, but the organizational chasm always seems too broad and too much trouble to span. No matter how daunting the task may seem, *it's time for the contact center to get off the island* — and technology is ready to transport them.

The business basis for operational integration across the enterprise has never been stronger. Contact centers have become strategic assets that are interdependent with their corporate counterparts. As a customer-facing organization, their performance has a direct bearing on customer acquisition and retention. As a key element in the "supply chain," what they do — *or don't do* — impacts the efficiency and effectiveness of all other parts of the business. The same can be said of other groups, such as marketing, sales, product manage-

ment, engineering, field operations, and fulfillment or other back-office functions. The bottom line: A stellar contact in one organizational domain won't carry much weight if the customer's end-to-end experience falls short.

Amid all this business opportunity, technology has become an impetus for operational integration. Today's technology includes solutions that enable rapid deployment of new programs or capabilities, process optimization and cost savings in addition to quantum improvements in customer service. But this technology only achieves its full measure of value when organizations consider enterprise opportunities and needs and institute processes that integrate contact center operations with the rest of the organization. Technology is the much-needed catalyst and enabler for building these long-awaited "bridges" between the contact center and the enterprise.

Taking an Enterprise View of Technology

Several technologies on the contact center's radar demand an enterprise view. Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) certainly heads the list. It

changes the core technology architecture from a switch per site to a shared telephony and applications infrastructure that is geographically independent. This evolution presents a huge opportunity for small and informal centers to gain access to "bells and whistles" that were previously beyond their purview. It also creates the opportunity for other parts of the business to lend a hand with customer interactions — for example, during peak traffic periods, or as a second tier of support for the most difficult and perhaps important contacts.

Unified communications builds on the VoIP architecture by delivering a set of tools that make it easy for people to work together, across media, regardless of location. Agents can use presence and instant messaging (IM) to query their peers, their supervisors and/or subject-matter experts to fulfill customer needs. They might use conferencing and collaboration tools to complete transactions, guide customers through Web-based activity or even demonstrate or display information via video. eLearning applications deliver training and valuable product or service information to the agent desktop. All of these features contribute to elevated first-call resolution and customer satisfaction while bolstering service rep competency and morale. And they all potentially engage resources beyond the contact center.

A whole range of business process optimization (BPO) tools have "workflow" capabilities that trigger process steps based on actions, events or outcomes. For example, a service rep could conclude a customer contact with a request for further action or follow up. A communications-enabled business process (CEBP) tool would move that task into the work queue for the appropriate person or group and provide reminders and tracking to ensure task completion. While such tools certainly drive efficiencies within a given organizational silo, the larger gains accrue when organizations carry the processes and the tools across the entire enterprise.

The explosion in social media creates yet another reason to tear down organizational walls. In most companies, marketing seems to have stepped to the fore to drive activity and monitor what "fans" say about the company's products and services. Yet the contact center is arguably the appropriate channel to respond to specific comments or provide opportunities for participants to engage with the company by actually talking (or emailing or chatting or tweeting) with someone. Clearly there's a warrant for coordinating content and sharing responsibilities and results across departmental lines.

New breeds of contact center performance tools cross interdepartmental lines to inform actions and decisions in other areas. For example, speech analytics processes mass quantities of voice recordings to extract useful information about the content and emotional character of interactions. When used in a contact center environment, it could generate hard data to convince marketing that their messages confuse customers, product management that their product creates an inordinate number of service calls, and training that the reps are in fact not complying with all the defined steps and statements. If no action steps emanate from these revelations, there's limited value to the insights that technology can provide. Other projects may emanate either from the center or other departments — data analytics or business intelligence efforts, eLearning tools for a "corporate university" or Voice of the Customer programs that take the customer's pulse on any interaction with the company. All of these efforts provide greater value when looked at across the organization. Contact centers with ambitions in any of these areas should start with a survey of what plans or projects are underway elsewhere; too often, the center is an afterthought in these important projects.

Customer relationship management (CRM) and knowledge management (KM) are, by nature, enterprise plays. Both are rooted in a customer lifecycle, an information lifecycle and a coordinated set of end-to-end processes. Clearly, the contact center is not the only organization that interacts with customers and has need for information on customers, products, services, problem resolution, procedures, etc. Likewise, contributors to, and users of, KM systems vary widely and go far beyond the contact center. They may even tie into social media through Wikis. Interested parties need to

The Contact Center and Enterprise Can Live in Harmony

If you think it's impossible to achieve harmony in pursuing and applying technology effectively across the enterprise, think again. Here are a few examples where we've seen companies reach new levels of business value by taking a broader view than just their contact center.

A financial institution tackled a speech analytics project as a joint effort by marketing, the contact center, and product owners. All teams were part of the requirements and evaluation, and then provided resources to apply the technology. The contact center led the way in the project throughout, but knew that the ultimate success of this high powered technology relied on engagement of their peers in other areas.

In developing their VoIP strategy, the IT department of a travel company served as the catalyst to bring people together from the various centers (reservations, reward programs, etc.) and other parts of the organization that might leverage some of the capabilities of their improved voice platform and associated applications. The previous environment of a switch per location changed dramatically as all operations migrated to a shared infrastructure. The smaller centers and informal centers now had the quality monitoring and screen pops they had always wanted. The business case was more compelling by looking at the value across many sites and departments.

Knowledge management (KM) has arguably some of its strongest opportunities in manufacturing and high-technology environments. One company used that opportunity to look across their enterprise at all the groups creating, maintaining and using large volumes of parts books, equipment manuals, repair guides and other "knowledge" that resided in heads, stickie notes and cheat sheets. The project grew out of a transformational contact center initiative, but had wide-ranging impact as they saw how many resources — or keepers of knowledge — the centers depended on that were outside the centers. These other groups quickly became a critical part of the project and important knowledge contributors. Today, the contact center, engineers, sales and marketing, and other subject-matter experts use the KM solution.

An insurance company sought a hosted service to deliver their Voice of the Customer (VOC) capabilities. A project that started with a focus on the contact center quickly moved into branch offices, as well. The opportunity to capture customer perspectives on all interactions continues to offer additional opportunities to gather and analyze important customer insights. A dedicated group with the VOC role brings the various departments together to ensure an enterprise view of the customer experience.

collaborate to design, build and populate tools that leverage common information repositories while meeting distinctive needs.

Even technology sourcing decisions have taken on an enterprise character. It's too expensive, complex and demanding — both in terms of implementation and support — to duplicate application environments across organizational silos. The IT department is too overbooked and too understaffed to countenance unnecessary demands on its time, to say nothing of the impact of isolated applications or data repositories on customers and the business. With a new array of "cloud computing" (aka hosted or SaaS) and managed services options, departments can join forces to find economical solutions to common issues without overburdening the IT department, and glean the results of those applications relatively quickly.

Working Together to Build Enterprise Solutions

As you migrate toward enterprise-level technology implementations, you'll need to build bridges to your colleagues in other parts of the organization. Start by finding a mechanism to work collaboratively on the project at hand. Your IT group and/or project management organization (PMO) may serve as the unifying agent. You may find a meeting ground for specific projects through other shared services that provide support, such as training or business analysts. Or, you may decide that the organization that has the most at stake or largest pro rata investment should lead (own) the project and gather input from all other interested parties. You could bring in a third party to serve as champion of the enterprise view and/or mediator of competing perspectives.

Equally important — you need to figure out who the "buyer" will be. Will IT write the check? A specific department? A combination of departments? Don't let the hurdles of multiple funding sources create a barrier to crossdepartmental collaboration. Once you've tackled the funding question, you also need to define the total cost of ownership and the business case. Make sure you consider resource requirements for implementation and support, as this may require multiple departments to ante up new staff positions or roles and responsibilities to derive business value from the technology. The business case should be more compelling with an enterprise view.

Before you entertain vendor meetings, take the time as a team to architect your future working relationship and the organizational and process elements that go with them. You don't need to "stop the presses" while you work through all of the details, but you should at least define clear high-level requirements, process flows, and roles and responsibilities. This exercise will help you to focus discussions with vendors on what you need, not what vendors sell. The world is swimming in overbought technology that fails to deliver business value and creates unnecessary support and stability issues. You don't need to drown in technology right out of the starting blocks.

Your enterprise-focused team will not be foreign to vendors. They're ready for you! Contact center vendors have expanded their products and services to support enterprise needs. They've seen the challenges and opportunities that interdependency creates across a broad range of companies. Enterprise vendors recognize the strategic importance of the contact center and have developed specialized capabilities to meet their needs. The boundaries between voice and data are gone. Traditional voice vendors offer robust applications (e.g., multimedia, BPO, mini CRM) and data/application vendors a la Cisco, IBM and Microsoft have moved into multimedia communication with out-of-the-box applications that can be enterprise focused but meet contact center needs.

So with all these blurred boundaries, your team will get to decide: Do we find a specialty application for the contact center and extend it to the enterprise? Or do we find an enterprise application that does a good job in meeting contact center-specific needs? Can we have it all? Possibly, but the team should focus on finding the solution that meets the most common and important needs (80/20 rule) rather than spiraling into an endless search for the perfect solution.

Looking Out for the Company and the Customer

Though the arguments for enterprise-based solutions are compelling, you might be tempted to dismiss the possibility in your organization. You may worry that a comprehensive project scope and assessment team might stall mission-critical initiatives at the planning table. Or you may fear a loss of control when others weigh in on a proposed solution. The path of least resistance is looking out for your own problems, not the whole corporation's needs. Yet the business opportunity is too great to ignore. You need to challenge yourself to look out for what's best for the company and the customer while serving as a passionate advocate for your own needs. Tackle the tough challenges (resources and requirements, funding, application and optimization) and you will create a "sea-change" in culture that can deliver exceptional business value.

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