

Tech Line



Business & IT Collaboration: *IT's View*

By Lori Bocklund, Strategic Contact

It's like falling in love again: How to renew positive relationships with contact center technology and those who deliver it.

I have been in the call center industry for a long time. Without getting too nostalgic, I have to reminisce a little about a simpler time, when the lists of technology tools needed, or desired, in the center was not so vast, the vendor landscape not nearly so rich and diverse (or crowded, if you prefer), and people weren't overwhelmed by the possibilities and choices they had to make. People used to say things like, "I love our new phone system!" or "We got this new tool for scheduling our CSRs, and it's really making a big difference!" Yes, there was a time when people loved their technology, and even loved their vendors and IT department (or what was then their telecom department) for providing that technology to them.

Alas, it is a rare occurrence these days to hear someone speak highly of anything call center technology-related. "The vendor screwed up." "IT doesn't have time to address this need." "The new CRM doesn't work well with the old CTI." These are the more common views today.

We need to get back to a place where we can think fondly of contact center technology and those associated with it — and we can. We can find the love for these tools, and find effective ways to work together to optimize their business value.

So Many Opportunities, Yet So Much Pain

Today's contact center technology offers many capabilities, developed with more than 35 years of

industry experience. Solutions are based on what the collective buying power of tens of thousands of centers in the United States, and now around the globe, want to be able to do to serve customers better, save money in delivering service and/or build relationships (aka, sell). Competition in service has advanced the capabilities needed through market demands: Everyone wants to be "best-in-class." Competition among vendors — old and new — further enhanced functionality.

Over the years, we've had breakthroughs in many areas, such as the graphical user interface for developing IVR applications or the ease at which users request schedule changes or swap shifts. These improvements squarely hit business needs, and offered immediate business value. Other changes, such as the shift in architecture for delivering a voice call to a desktop — moving from time-division multiplexing to voice over Internet protocol — seemed to be all about the technology until they found their business value, for example, in virtualizing across sites.

New players entering the market have opened whole new technology areas, such as knowledge management, speech analytics and scorecards. While some of these capabilities are still gaining market traction, they can have a profound impact in the right environment. For example, those recordings we long presumed were just for quality review or logging are now mountains of information to extract gold from customer interactions.

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It's Not Just the Technology that's Exciting and Diverse

One result of all this technology opportunity is that it creates interesting and exciting functional roles. When it comes to contact center technology, IT is not just the land of developers, database administrators and engineers. Our world also opens up opportunities for business analysts, project managers, process designers and applications specialists. People often end up in contact center work by accident and then stay because of the "cool" opportunities: rich applications, running on advanced platforms and networks, constantly changing and diverse in needs (multimedia, integration with core applications, multisite, etc.). Contact centers offer the true triumvirate — people, process, technology — with technology as the key enabler.

During the time that we've had these innovations and enhancements and have created this interesting technology landscape, nominal costs have come down for many technologies because of the highly competitive market. The bad news is, the total cost of ownership has not necessarily decreased because of high implementation and integration costs, as well as the ongoing maintenance and support costs. But in the right environment, deployed effectively, these technologies can deliver a solid business case.

So given the exciting possibilities, it's time we find ways to fall in love again with call center technology. This means finding value in the existing systems and capabilities, and with new systems that you're pursuing, and revitalizing relationships between the people who use technology and those who deliver and support it.

Making the Old New Again... and Valuable

The first thing we need to do is consider how to make old technology lovable. Start by performing an "audit" of your current technology. IT and contact center operations leaders should review how technology performs measured against defined business goals and requirements. Good tools for this assessment include gap analysis and com-

parison against best practices. Your vendors, distributors or third parties may be valuable advisors in this process.

After such a review, develop a plan to redeploy applications — and do it right this time — or add functionality that is already there. Follow the best practices for optimizing technology (which are outlined in the sidebar on page 13) even when you're reusing what you already have. Contact center technology is notorious for being highly underutilized. Chances are, you can get more from your existing technology. And the collaboration of IT and the business, with a focus on business needs, will ensure that you drive greater technology value.

Making New Technology Lovable at Each Stage of the Project Lifecycle


The pursuit of technology has three key phases: planning, implementation and support. Too often, these steps are impacted by short timelines, inadequate resources (too few and/or not the right ones) and various types of shortcuts. Any time that the major driver in a project is speed, quality is likely to suffer. Any time that busy call center and IT staff are trying to do a major technology project "in their spare time," the chances of success — measured by being on time, on budget and delivering business value — are decreased. And any time that project completion is defined by cutover rather than a point some months out where business value is proven and support structures are solidly in place, the company is unlikely to achieve the potential of that technology.

So the starting point for ensuring a technology "love fest" is to allocate the proper resources, set a reasonable timeline and recognize that the goal is not cutover — it's business value. Apply best practices at each stage (see sidebar) and ongoing to ensure success in technology deployment.

You Can Fall in Love Again

Whether you're restarting old technology or implementing new, define a plan for ongoing phases and continuous improvement and optimization of technology application. Most businesses aren't static, and most com-

panies can't implement every capability of a new technology out of the gates. Don't let all the resources get distracted onto the "next big thing" before you have evolved the "last big thing" into what you really envisioned it to be. Allocate time and resources to do more with what you have and to get the most out of the new things you pursue.

Remember, technology is not inherently bad, in spite of the fact that we often feel that way (and certainly customers can feel that way). Similarly, IT/telecom or the vendors and distributors that deliver and support products are not inherently bad. In fact, they can be very good and generally have very good intentions. And the business has a responsibility for technology success, as well. We can find ways to fall in love again with contact center technology and those associated with it. I think the key ingredient is a little positive, collaborative work with a common set of goals. Then, chances are, you can find that lovin' feeling again. 

ABOUT US

Contact Center Pipeline is a monthly instructional journal focused on driving business success through effective contact center direction and decisions. Each issue contains informative articles, case studies, best practices, research and coverage of trends that impact the customer experience. Our writers and contributors are well-known industry experts with a unique understanding of how to optimize resources and maximize the value the organization provides to its customers.

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Best Practices for Optimizing Technology

The following are tips for optimizing technology at each phase in the project lifecycle, and pursuing the most positive relationship between a technology, its users and those they must rely on for success.

Planning

The planning phase follows strategy and vision, defining the business case and requirements, and finding the right solution(s) and vendors. The theme of the best practices here is: **Work together.**

- Use a cross-functional team. No contact center technology should be hoisted upon unknowing and uninvolved users, and no contact center technology should be acquired via an "end run" around IT. All parties have to live with the solution from an operational, technological and support perspective. A collaborative process ensures buy-in across the organization and reduces finger-pointing.
- Define the technology needs to meet business and operational needs; don't do technology for technology's sake. Define a business case together.
- Collaborate on requirements. Work top-down to define business requirements, then move to functional, technical and vendor requirements (including their role in implementation and support). One of the hardest things for project teams to do is focus on the "what" not "how" during the planning stage. Leave the details for later.

Implementation

Implementation may feel like it primarily involves IT and the vendor/distributor. But involvement of the right operations staff at the right steps — including analysts, process designers, trainers and some frontline staff — can make the difference between a system that is just "in and working" and a system that is delivering value on the investment.

- Work together on design documents. The users need to sign off on designs and help to test, so they need to play an active role in design. Don't just recreate the existing environment and plan to make changes later. This approach is too often used to get something in and working, usually with the result that you spend lots of money on a new system to do exactly what the old system did, and that's the way it remains.
- Be careful and thorough about testing, and involve users. A proper contact center technology implementation involves many types of testing — functionality, usability, end-to-end, integration, load and failure/recovery, to name a few. Carefully define what you will do in-house and what the vendors will do (which is usually very little). Involve the users in at least the functionality and usability testing, including resolution and regression testing. Spending the proper time

with the proper resources on this step will help to ensure that the technology delivers on expectations.

- Define, conduct and monitor a collaborative pilot. When the new application has a big impact on users — either internal or external (customers), make sure that a pilot is a key part of the project plan. Piloting is the only way to work out the kinks in a production environment with real users. A pilot can help to optimize processes, technology and its application to business needs.

Support

Support is an oft-neglected element of ensuring technology success. The nature of much of our contact center technology and how it is delivered today requires well-defined governance processes and clear roles and responsibilities for both internal and external resources.

- Define how you will measure technology success. It is often difficult (or undesirable) to go back and assess whether you achieved what your business case anticipated. Taking steps to assess whether the technology delivered is a sure path to optimizing value and ensuring credibility on your next project.
- Define how you will monitor technology success. Things change. Performance can degrade. We've seen way too many places where screens are no longer popping, IVR success rates have decreased or voice quality begins to degrade. Someone needs to keep an eye on the technology to ensure that it continues to perform to expectations. Develop an ongoing monitoring plan and consider tools to help monitor, depending on the nature of the technology.
- Define and communicate routine operations, administration and maintenance (OA&M) plans, service level agreements (SLAs) and governance plans. Proper "care and feeding" ensures that technology is reliable, available and performs well. SLAs ensure that everyone is operating under the same principles for prioritization, response and resolution of day-to-day needs, as well as issues. Well-communicated and understood plans can go a long way toward creating love between users, IT/telecom and vendors/distributors.

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