Contact Center Technology Acquisition, Implementation and Support

By Lori Bocklund and Maren Symonds, Strategic Contact

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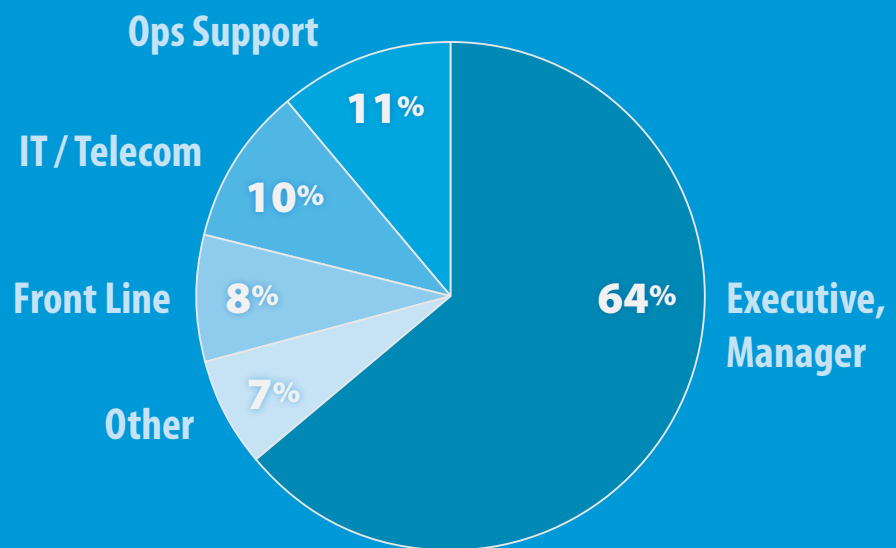
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FIVE THINGS WE LEARNED FROM THE SURVEY

1) Contact center technology decisions are tightly constrained by the corporate purse strings.

2) Most centers chase funding requests driven by the need to replace outdated solutions.

3) While most centers have a broad spectrum of contact center applications, there is ample room to gain value by exercising more of the features and functions. As usual, it's not just about technology; people and process work together to bring greater technology value.

4) Contact centers must actively engage with IT/Telecom to secure the proper level of planning, implementation and post-implementation technical support.

5) Most centers either have or would consider cloud-based solutions.

WHO ANSWERED THE SURVEY?

Industries represented:

- Consumer Products
- Education/Nonprofit/Association
- Financial Services
- Government
- Healthcare
- Hospitality/Travel
- Insurance
- Manufacturing
- Services
- Telecom/Cable/Internet
- Utility

Ops Support 11%

IT / Telecom 10%

Front Line 8%

Other 7%

Executive, Manager 64%

Survey goes behind closed doors for the real story on technology adoption and usage.

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Industry analysts, associations and trade press provide the latest news on contact center technology along with survey data or market analysis to suggest rates of adoption and usage. Some explore the rationale behind specific types of purchases as well as the implementation benefits. And yet we found ourselves wondering: Can centers acquire the technology that business needs dictate? Then, are they *really* getting what they want (or need) from implementation of this technology? And are they getting the requisite support to use it effectively?

In summer 2012, we reached out to the contact center community to get some answers. *Two hundred and thirty-eight* of you gave us a sense for the challenges you face getting budget requests approved, defining selection criteria, implementing technology successfully and securing effective support. Given the obstacles you face, we weren't surprised that 32% of you characterized your contact center technology as "lagging" and 51% as "middle of the pack," with only 14% feeling "state-of-the-art."

Despite the ever-present challenges of tight budgets, scarce resources and time pressure, best-in-class companies find ways to get the most out of their investment dollars. As we present the findings, we'll share our perspective on proven strategies to help you raise the level of your technology game.

Financial Considerations Dominate Technology Acquisition

Contact centers have often felt like neglected "step children" in the organizational hierarchy. They serve an essential role that weighs heavily on customer satisfaction and loyalty. And yet, they're always struggling to get the resources and tools (and budget!) they need to serve customers with excellence.

When it comes to technology, 40% of our survey participants said they only invest when absolutely necessary. Another 45% of participants only fund a portion of their high-priority projects every year. The typical funding request includes a project description, budgetary figures and a solid business case (e.g., ROI) to justify expenditure. Sixty-five percent report a requirement to provide post-implementation data to verify that they have achieved the business benefits that they anticipated.

Given a daunting financial environment, most centers (67.1%) defer funding requests until they must replace outdated or unsupported technology. Respondents also indicated process improvement initiatives, access to key features/functions, and growth may bolster the business case or create an impetus for change.

When funding is approved, few organizations (12%) look to be leaders in adopting new technology. Most (58%) are content to leverage mainstream technology, while 24% prefer highly proven solutions. These numbers reflecting risk aversion, along with the perspectives previously noted on current technology status, reflect a conservatively skewed bell curve for technology adoption. As noted in Table 1, page 3, cost effectiveness reigns king among the decision criteria for vendor evaluations.

There can be a natural tendency to get complacent about technology acquisition when there is such a steep hill to climb to get funding. If you wait to receive the end-of-life notice from your vendor before you jump into action, you may be setting yourself up for trouble down the road. Newer technologies are quite a departure from traditional offerings in architecture, design, implementation and support. It takes

Top Decision Criteria When Evaluating Vendors and Solutions, Table 1	
Criterion	**Response %**
Cost effectiveness	**82.6%**
Features and functions	**69.2%**
Stability, reliability, redundancy	**57.6%**
Ease of use for end user	**46.9%**
Architecture and technical fit	**40.6%**
Ability to support growth	**40.2%**
Ease of administration	**26.3%**
Support approach and resources	**21.9%**
Contact center experience	**19.2%**
Implementation support and resources	**12.5%**

expertise and experience to exploit the opportunities and avoid the pitfalls in selection and implementation planning. And it takes the right skills in-house and/or from your vendor/partner to support the new technology. Rushing a vendor selection, statement of work, service level agreements and technology implementation in the heat of the moment will not serve you well. Start planning early. (To read more about these topics, see the following Tech Line articles in the *Pipeline* archives: "The Value of Technology Assessment and Planning," January 2012; "Optimizing Technology Selection," August 2011; "Defining an Effective Statement of Work for Technology Implementation Success," September 2010.)

To ensure effective technology selection, implementation and support, best-in-class centers increasingly rely on a technology liaison to represent their interests with IT/Telecom and with current and prospective vendors. These individuals have the knowledge and experience to understand the systems and applications as well as the internal and external requirements for success. They also work closely with the contact center to understand their business model and operational requirements. As technology becomes increasingly complex and the benefits it can deliver increasingly compelling, it makes sense to invest in a resource who can help you chart the right course and guide you there effectively.

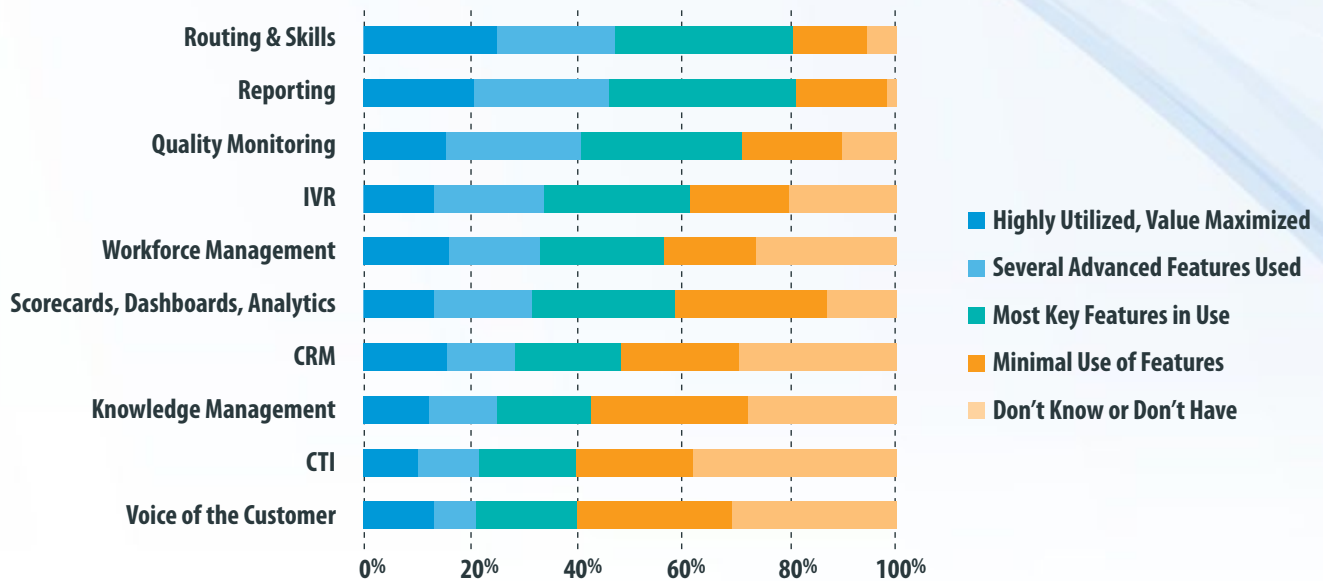## Technology Utilization Shows Room for Improvement

Despite budget constraints, most centers have been able to secure a broad spectrum of contact center applications. (See Figure 1.) Given the stated financial pressure, this finding suggests that centers have been able to demonstrate value in terms of cost savings, productivity gains, net revenue gains and/or improvements in customer experience tied to loyalty and retention. Nonetheless, there's clearly room to sweeten the ROI on existing investments by exercising a broader range of the various application capabilities. *So why does technology fall short of its potential?*

The road to technology adoption may be paved with good intentions, but centers still deal with a number of "pot holes" that dampen enthusiasm, if not their effectiveness. The following implementation challenges topped our survey participants' lists:

- Difficulty integrating with existing technology and/or applications (44%)

- Shortage of IT/Telecom resources (43%)

- Shortage of business resources (30%)

- Internal resistance to change (28%)

- Pressure to implement solutions quickly (22%)

Contact Center Technology Utilization, Figure 1

Legend:
- ■ Highly Utilized, Value Maximized
- ■ Several Advanced Features Used
- ■ Most Key Features in Use
- ■ Minimal Use of Features
- ■ Don't Know or Don't Have

Categories (top to bottom): Routing & Skills, Reporting, Quality Monitoring, IVR, Workforce Management, Scorecards, Dashboards, Analytics, CRM, Knowledge Management, CTI, Voice of the Customer

X-axis: 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Given these influences, it can be a difficult enough to arrive at cutover on time, on budget, and with the requisite functionality. Unfortunately, many centers view that milestone as the end of the road and declare victory. They don't invest the time and energy to pursue all of the benefits that the tool offers (the long lost "phase 2" of the project) and/or optimize their use of it. For example, we see lots of sophisticated CTI offerings used only for screen pops, never adding capabilities such as advanced routing, reporting or outbound applications. And knowledge tools often languish for lack of resources to enhance the user interface, apply advanced search functionality, keep content up to date and expand the information repository.

As difficult as it might be to secure funds for technology, it is critically important to get the resources to do the job right. The need for competent technical engagement from your IT/Telecom staff and your vendor is obvious. But you also need the resources to address the operational side of the house—especially business process redesign and change management—to ensure that you get the value you expect from your investment. Funds also need to be budgeted for proper maintenance and continuous improvement.

Technology Support Demands Advocacy

Contact center technology is highly complex these days. Voice over IP, multimedia, multisite, enhanced performance tools and extensive integration are essential parts of the center's ecosystem. Servers and gateways have replaced proprietary telecom hardware. Voice traffic runs over IP, and best practices call for use of redundant, geographically diverse data centers and resilient networks. With greater interdependency, complexity and scale of the applications and the networks on which they run, contact center technology has become vulnerable to failure and the risk that restoration of essential capabilities takes longer than the "real-time" contact center can afford.

We were pleased to learn that 37% of participants consider their technology to be highly stable. Only 12% reported having frequent customer-affecting issues, but add that to the half with the "occasional" technology issues and you've got a high percentage of vulnerable centers. Two-thirds have formal service level agreements (SLAs) with their vendors/partners, and 44% carry this practice into their dealings with IT/Telecom. Best-in-class centers use their SLAs to define all aspects of their relationship, not just thresholds for action on service disruption. For example, they define time to escalate and involve higher tiers and executives when resolution isn't fast in coming.

Responsiveness of Technical Support Organizations, Table 2		
Rating	**Vendors/Partners**	**IT/Telecom**
Good/Highly Responsive "There when we need them."	37%	45%
OK/Moderately Responsive "We have to push, but they come through."	56%	50%
Bad/Terrible Response "They do not provide the support we need."	7%	5%

Given the complexity and vulnerability, and the high dependence on integration of a wide range of technology, it's crucial to have a strong technical support organization to sustain it. On balance, survey participants were satisfied with their support. (See Table 2, above.) However, most report the need to advocate in their own behalf in order to get the service and attention they need.

Fortunately, few respondents (11%) reported dissatisfaction with their IT/Telecom group in terms of experience/interest in contact centers or capacity to serve their needs. Of the remainder, half felt that staff had the requisite experience in contact centers and understood the needs and issues. The others got the service they needed but felt they had to push to get it. The good news is that many centers can administer a broad range of their contact center technology applications, lessening their reliance on tightly constrained IT resources for day-to-day application of the technology to business needs.

The bottom line: In an era of dwindling resources on all fronts, the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" so it's a reminder for centers to assert themselves into all stages of the technology lifecycle, especially support. The "liaison" role mentioned earlier may be one secret to success.

Effective Partnerships Yield Optimal Results

We don't expect the world to get any less complicated, nor do we think that companies will shower their contact centers or their IT/Telecom departments with resources. Contact centers will need to make the most of the technology they have in place and work hard to secure the new capabilities they need. Centers, IT/Telecom and their vendors/partners will need to address issues, challenges and opportunities as they arise.

Cooperation, collaboration and communication between the contact center and IT/Telecom are hallmarks of a great organization. In fact, we feel so strongly about the benefits of a strong relationship that we dedicated an entire article to the subject. (See "IT and the Contact Center: Changing Together," *Pipeline,* October 2011.) Mutually beneficial planning, implementation and support processes promote better use of resources, fewer misunderstandings and smoother operations.

We strongly recommend that you examine the resources that support technology implementation and ongoing optimization. Though we typically think of ROI analysis as being associated with planning for and purchasing systems, applications and professional services, there's a strong case to be made for adding skilled applications specialists, business process analysts and other support resources to maximize the value of your investments. That's when expected return on investment becomes achieved business value. ⓟ

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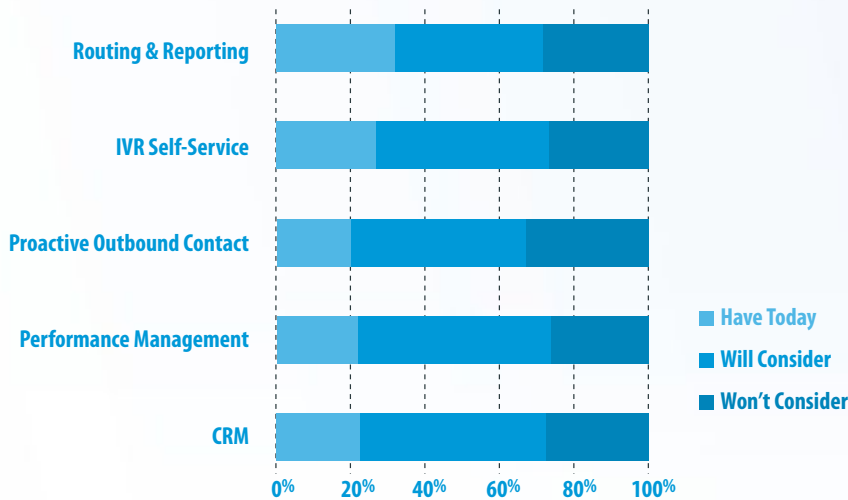
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IS HOSTED TECHNOLOGY THE ANSWER?

Chart legend:
- Have Today
- Will Consider
- Won't Consider

Categories: Routing & Reporting, IVR Self-Service, Proactive Outbound Contact, Performance Management, CRM (axis 0% to 100%)

With so many hurdles to acquiring, implementing and supporting contact center technology, cloud-based solutions should have appeal. They provide advanced capabilities with flexible pricing models that are attuned to companies' need to conserve capital dollars. Features and functions can be brought online relatively quickly without imposing much of a burden on IT/Telecom for implementation or ongoing support. As noted in the chart, a number of centers have taken advantage of this sourcing model, and many more will consider it.

Reasons cited for not considering hosted technology include no immediate need, organizational policy or preference for in-house solutions, loss of control and concern for information security.

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