

Contact Center: More Options, More Complexity, More Confusion

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If all vendor technologies have their positives and negatives, how does your enterprise find the solution that's right for you?



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March 13, 2019

I enjoy reminiscing on my early career days and marvelling at how the world of contact centers has evolved over the years. In the 1990s, I was working for a major vendor of enterprise communications in Maidenhead, U.K., instructing our European partners on how to install and program automated call distribution (ACD) software. It was an



integrated ACD, meaning ACD was part of the software purchased along with the base telephony business user software. Initially the ACD had just four basic historical reports for the call center and limited real-time information, only two types of overflow and messages while queueing, the printer was attached to the PBX, and we had to set baud rate settings on the four port I/O card!

In the '80s there were more "advanced" ACD systems – often standalone ACDs, with IVRs, computer telephony integration, and outbound dialers. However, most of those systems were only available for the large organizations who could afford it – telcos, airlines, and large hotel chains.

In the early 1990s more telecommunications vendors began to add ACD applications to their existing portfolio, and vendors of the standalone applications (outbound dialing, quality monitoring, workforce management, computer telephony integration, and IVR) began to integrate to the systems of the smaller markets. ACD feature functionality expanded – skills-based routing, messaging options based on various parameters, etc. -- and networked/multi-site contact centers sprouted, along with more self-service options through IVRs.

These changes and the increased offerings by more vendors brought down costs, therefore, SMB organizations could afford to implement contact center technologies.

Lower costs and increased availability, paired with the shift away from viewing the call center as merely a telemarketing engine, caused call centers/customer service centers to really take off. Call centers sprouted up in all sorts of businesses from pharmacies, doctors' offices, nursing triage and assistance, service desks, banking, insurance, online dating, organ donations, ticket sales, 911, 311 – virtually every industry now has a call center.

Moving Beyond Calling

The 2000s brought about different channels of communication – email, SMS, chat, and social media interactions -- and the transition from TDM to VoIP and now SIP. With more than just voice as a communication channel with customers, the call center became the contact center. The adoption of IP also assisted the proliferation of contact centers around the globe. This also brought in the move to sending contacts off shore to outsourced contact centers, also referred to as BPOs.

In the 2010s, with AWS coming on strong, the option to have a cloud application or a mixture of cloud and premise solutions for just about any application – contact routing, IVR, QA, WFM, knowledge management, reporting/analytics (speech, text), and data storage -- proliferated. Cloud applications provide organizations with the ability to add contact center technology without a huge capital investment. The benefit of cloud computing cannot be ignored, however, long-term the cost differentiation of premises versus cloud is often not that great.

One cannot forget the multi-channel and omni-channel terminology. I consider integrated multi-channel to be systems that have one main routing and reporting engine for all modes of customer interaction – voice, text, email, SMS, web chat, video, fax, and social media interactions. There are multi-channel contact centers; however, they have one vendor supporting the chat and email, while another supports the voice. They are not integrated; the one system doesn't know the status of an agent when they are on another system's contact, and the reporting is not integrated and often not consistent. Today most vendors are still trying to catch up on the integrated multi-channel environment.

Omni-channel is the next step; in brief, it is the ability to move from one channel of communication to another without losing the context of the communication.

For example, the agent and customer may be communicating through web chat and then one may decide to initiate a voice communication with a simple “click to connect” icon. Another omni-channel experience would consist of a voice call coming in to an agent and they will be able to see the ways in which the customer has interacted with the organization in the past – web search, an email, previous voice calls, social media, web chat history and so forth. What is displayed to the agent or how the customer contact is handled is dependent on what the organization deems vital for creating a good customer experience.

Enter AI

And the latest in vogue topic in contact center technology is chatbots and artificial intelligence. When chatbots are implemented properly, the technology adds value through self-service options to customers and can save organizations valuable human time and money. Chatbots can be implemented to assist with FAQs on the website. Currently most bots follow a set of rules programmed by a human via a bot-building platform. It's as simple as ordering a list of if-then statements and writing canned responses, and it often doesn't require even knowing a line of code. The more advanced chatbots are being coupled with AI to handle more complex interactions and tasks.

Artificial Intelligence is in its infancy and we are just on the cusp of using AI in the contact center; it's not one technology, but rather a mixture of technologies that work together:

- **Natural Language Processing and Understanding:** The ability of computers to understand and process human speech more quickly and accurately; the ability to have open ended questions in an IVR can lessen frustration of endless steps in menus
- **Data Mining and Pattern Recognition:** The process of discovering patterns in large data sets involving methods at the intersection of machine learning, statistics, and database systems.
- **Machine Learning:** The ability of computers to learn without being explicitly programmed.

AI requires a lot of forethought, planning, and IT resources, along with good technology to even begin to make it happen and be successful for an engaging customer experience. It will require substantial financial undertaking and patience. However, AI soon will be as commonplace and applications will be readily available – just not right now.

Options & Complexity: We Have Come A Long Way

I have only highlighted the bare-bone changes that our industry has experienced; many articles have been written and even books on the topic of contact center technology. The changes I have seen in the last 30 years are phenomenal, and each year there is more to embrace. The industry is proliferated with technology and vendor options, and that is good in many ways for customers. But it also comes with a fair share of challenges. Let's look at the good, the bad, and the reality of contact center technologies.

The Good – More Options

The good news is the vendor variety and the fierce competition has:

- Brought the pricing down (and many businesses prefer the cloud opex to capex financing model)
- Increased selection of vendors to review for desired feature functionality
- Sped up the development for new and improved features
- Created even more of a demand for open architecture and APIs for in-house or external developers to make systems specific for the business user

The Challenges – More Complexity, More Confusion

The challenge with having so many vendors -- and a new one is popping up continually -- is that the time to fully investigate solutions is limited, leaving little to no time to separate the sales and marketing hype from the reality. There is always another shiny object that takes our attention away from some of the basic processes and technologies organizations should employ first.

In many ways this has always been the case, yet with so many more options to choose from, the information and number of customers actually employing their wares can be limited. Furthermore, if one has done their due diligence in investigating a vendor six months ago, that information is now old.

Another challenge is finding out which vendors are actually just white labeling another vendor's product or products. This is primarily true for a lot of the large 'telco' type vendors, however, even that is now changing.

Yet another challenge presents itself in scenarios where a vendor acquires another and winds up with duplicate portfolios or competing platforms. Even if some elements are complementary, it still leaves enterprises wondering what's

going to happen with solutions they already have in place. How can that vendor continue to support both products and hope to stay competitive? How will that vendor bring the new solution into its fold of applications, and will that result in changes that impact the enterprise?

This has been experienced when Avaya acquired the Nortel enterprise communications systems – the entire portfolio was a duplicate. In the more recent Mitel and ShoreTel merger, there was duplication of product portfolios, however, ShoreTel was offering a cloud contact center prior to Mitel, yet they also had competing platforms. Customers were wondering how long the ShoreTel product would be maintained or even continue.

The Challenges:

- So many vendors to choose from, a new one every day
- Information on the vendor is quickly old/outdated
- Difficult to keep up on the vendor portfolio and latest offerings
- Whose product is it really? (white labeling)
- Shiny new objects provide distractions
- Acquisitions continue to upset the market

With so many options and vendors, I find organizations often confused and not willing to invest the time, effort, and overall due diligence in choosing the technologies that will best fit their business requirements. This can only be discovered through a thorough investigation of where the organization is currently in the contact center technology adoption cycle, what features and functionalities utilized today that it wants to keep, and what are its business goals for the future – looking one, three, and five years out and itemizing that list.

Often without this investigative work the organization finds itself disappointed and not prepared for what was purchased and approved. I often say to customers I work with: “All vendor technologies have warts; we will choose the one(s) that has less warts.” Those “warts” can only be found out by doing research and a proper RFI and/or RFQ.

These challenges won't go away. Most good vendor partners are willing to take the time to demo their products to enterprises, answer questions, and possibly even allow trials. Of course, it all comes down to asking the right questions, and often a qualified consultant can be a smart investment to help your enterprise get to the bottom of things and better ensure a successful implementation.

Join me at Enterprise Connect next week, where I'll be discussing this topic in greater depth alongside my co-panelists in the session, "**Cloud Contact Center After the Sale: The Good, the Bad, the Reality**," taking place on Wednesday, March 20 at 8:00 a.m. in room Sun B. Hope to see you there!



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