

Assessing IT's New Role in the Contact Center

By Nicolas de Kouchkovsky



It's remarkable that in today's high-tech communications environment, businesses are discovering that many contact centers continue to operate at suboptimal levels. Case in point: one financial services company has managed to turn "press zero to talk to a human" into not just a selling point, but also a major advertising campaign.

While some great leaps in efficiency and quality have been made over the past decade, contact centers are still in the early stages of evolution. Without question, the explosion in Internet-based transactions in recent years has raised the bar on customer service and significantly influenced the way companies operate.

Another shift that's transforming the enterprise is the expanded role of the IT organization into the front lines of business strategy and customer relations. There was a time when the IT organization only had to concern itself with the technology that makes a business tick, and the marketing experts focused on winning new customers and growing sales. But things are changing quickly these days, as companies are increasingly turning to technology and business process innovation to gain a competitive advantage.

In its new role, the IT organization faces several key challenges. The first is the pressing need to integrate all the disparate points of customer contact underneath one set of business rules and one centralized management structure. Historically the contact center has operated as a fractured operation with people scattered across locations and little sharing of systems and resources. However, as the backend systems have become more mature, it's now possible to have one customer view across all product lines and business units.

In addition to understanding what customers want in a retail environment, the IT organization must also play a key role in seamlessly integrating the key components of business transformation: technology, processes, and people. This will require a dual focus for IT – one part on strategy and the other on execution, as well as the ability to infuse IT functions into the lines of business and other operational organizations. The ultimate goal is to build a cohesive strategy for interaction management that crosses all media channels, while driving consistency and quality across all of the lines of business.

Perhaps one of the most complex challenges facing IT is the job of identifying and implementing quality and performance metrics that effectively measure and drive business goals. While virtually everyone agrees that measuring performance is important, the issue essentially boils down to "what should be measured and how should it be measured?"

Leading technology platforms, such as automatic call distribution (ACD), continue to provide a wealth of data, but what's been missing is a critical strategic element that focuses on the metrics that actually predict success. These reporting tools can effectively assess agent performance in meeting cost reduction goals, but often are largely ineffective at encouraging positive changes needed to achieve other strategically important goals.

Achieving these higher standards of measurement will require a new set of skills for the IT organization, namely that of strategic and analytical thinking. The IT organization will need to exert the full measure of its persuasive ability to move the contact center away from its existing quantitative culture to a strategic focus of measuring what's truly important. More specifically, it's about changing the focus of the enterprise from meeting arbitrary efficiency metrics to maximizing the value of each interaction.

Another big challenge for IT will be managing the people aspects of the contact center and the uncertainties that are inherent in this environment. Managing agents, optimizing skills and defining training priorities are activities where the outcomes aren't as predictable as they are in systems management. (Most problems aren't simply a scalability issue where you can plug in more bodies the way you plug in more servers). Rather, it requires looking at quality scores, evaluating skills and understanding when interactions are successful and when they're not.

Rather than simply avoiding unpleasant surprises, the new focus for IT is on creating value through technology. So in addition to execution, which involves running an efficient IT shop, the IT operation is now tied to business value. While application development has long been part of the IT toolbox, it has now evolved into bigger stakes. Increasingly, IT will be evaluated on its contribution to business performance and agility and its ability to roll out applications that add value and provide a clear competitive and business advantage.

Although the challenges are big and the stakes high, IT has acquired some unique strengths that will serve it well. First is its extensive record of accomplishment of solving large problems at the enterprise level. This includes planning and executing large system improvements, managing substantial technology budgets and securing the assets needed to deliver desired business results. Also proving valuable in the contact center world is IT's knack for solving problems for both scope and scale – that is, addressing issues at all points rather than in an ad hoc or case-by-case manner.

As IT assumes more responsibility for contact center operations, we can expect to see less emphasis on fixed reporting and simple dashboards and more dynamic, inter-group cause analysis, as well as a move toward targeted actions. Historically the approach to solving problems in the contact center was to train everyone on everything, which took too long and cost too much. The new focus will be on figuring out where the gap is and how to close it while involving the fewest number of people and products.

To be successful, IT must develop a broader understanding of business while maintaining the technology acumen necessary to sustain the infrastructure that supports crucial customer interactions. The good news for IT is that once it gets its arms around the strategic and analytical aspects of its new role, it will have significant opportunity to help companies drive more costs out of each interaction while driving more value in, from both the enterprise and caller perspective.

Does IT have what it takes to succeed? Without a doubt.

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