

The Contact Center Selection Checklist

Hello! How Can I Help You?

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Introduction

Do you have a contact center yet? If not then look at this statistic:

- It costs about \$500 to service a customer if a sales rep has to visit their premises.
- It costs \$50 to service a customer in a retail store i.e. when the customer comes to you.
- A contact center with a live agent speaking to the customer costs just about \$5.66 per transaction.



Obviously there will be occasions when you cannot do without one or the other, but smart businesses will obviously maximize transactions where the costs are least. Even if you are able to shift a large part of your customer interaction effort to the contact center, there are still ways to save even more.

What part of your contact center is self-service and what proportion of your customer needs are met by speaking to live agents? Live calls to an agent cost your company \$5.66 per transaction. A self-service transaction using an interactive voice response system (IVR) costs 45 cents per call and if you can use the web to clear most queries – like eBay does, it will cost you just 24 cents per customer interaction.

The implication is simple; a business that has a fair amount of customer interaction but is not using a contact center is bleeding money. In a contact center, you can filter your callers between those really needing to talk to a live person and others who can self-service themselves. There are large scale efficiencies to be gained and much money to be saved if you implement a contact center intelligently.

In this paper, our aim is to cut out the jargon, remove the clutter and help you understand what is critical to implementing a great contact center. While many old time practitioners thought that a contact center was a necessary evil, modern businessmen look at it as a profit center.

Contact Centers versus Call Centers

The industry had started off with the humble telephone and the switchboard. It was soon realized that the call center could perform more value-added functions than merely speaking to customers and trying to resolve their issues.

The Internet brought in major changes and capabilities and added multiple means of communications with the customer. The customer could email, fax, chat and send voice mails, and so on. The term 'call center' became redundant and 'contact center' came to be the accepted nomenclature. In many cases, a client can dial the contact center and finish what she wanted to do without ever needing to speak to a live agent.

Starting at the Top: Basic Requirements

This is an area that many businesses ignore, surprising as it may sound. A contact center is to answer customer calls. Right?

No. And unless there is clarity in what the contact center is built *for*, it will always be found wanting. Here is what you must ensure right in the beginning.

Feature	Brief discussion
Mission and Vision Statement	<p>This is a clear statement that lays down the <i>reason</i> why the company is setting up the Center and what the company hopes to achieve. All further decisions will be guided by this statement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will this be an inbound contact center (customers call us e.g. warranty support or to buy tickets)?• Will it be an outbound contact center (we call the customer: telemarketing, bill collection, etc.)?• Or, will it be a blended center and do both?
Objectives	<p>This is how the company will measure the efficiency of the service provided, the revenue generated and the tangible and intangible benefits to the company.</p>
Performance drivers	<p>These are the things under the control of the company which must be done that will aid in achieving the objectives listed by the company.</p>
People decisions	<p>This looks at the people manning the contact center:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What will the roles and responsibilities be?• What skills are required?• How will accountability be ensured?• How will the workforce be kept motivated?

Contact center management processes	<p>What processes will be used to manage the contact center?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling and workload forecasting • Managing agent performance • Procedures and policies • Recruiting personnel and training • Compliance and regulatory issues
Technology issues	<p>This looks at the entire gamut of technical issues surrounding the contact center:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the solution be hosted on the company premises or in the cloud? • Will a license model be followed or will there be an outright purchase? • What communication systems will be used? • What kind of network will be required • What software application will run? • How will the applications be integrated with company systems? • What levels of security will be required and how will they be ensured? • What disaster recovery procedures will be needed?

It is critical that the management is absolutely clear about the issues listed above. Lack of clarity about any of these will result in a solution that will need to be reworked in the future.

Telecommunication Technology

Most contact centers use a number of critical technologies to make their operations more efficient and cut down the length of their calls, while maintaining customer service. Computer-aided operations that detect the customer phone number and provide relevant information to the agent even before she picks up the call, can help shave off a few seconds from the call. This can be an important saving as the text box alongside shows.

A ten second increase in average call length in a call center handling a million calls a year adds up to an additional 3800 hours of staffing.

In all modern contact centers, the following technologies are absolutely essential. They improve customer satisfactions and improve the efficiency of agents by supporting them in their work. As emphasized earlier, every second saved reduces the costs of operation.

The following table lists the key technologies every contact center should have:

Feature	Brief discussion
Auto Number Identification (ANI)	Customer is identified automatically and information is made available on the computer screen even before the call starts. A big aid in reducing call duration without sacrificing quality.
Dialed number identification (DNI)	If you have a number of lines terminating at the contact center, DNI detects the number the customer dialed and helps route the call accordingly (there could be specific numbers for claims, warranty, order status and so on). First stage sorting of calls helps save time.
Dynamic routing	This takes place before the call even reaches the contact center. If you experience a surge in calls, incoming calls can be routed to other locations to handle the overflow. The customer doesn't even realize that the call is routed elsewhere. Some companies use this to route calls to centers around the globe in a 'follow the sun' kind of system.

Interactive voice response system (IVR)	This gives the customer a menu of choices to choose from and allows a number of self-service options to be selected. Many operations can be completed without having to speak to an agent. Typical uses are to check order status, bank balance, bills due, etc.
Auto call distribution (ACD)	This is the backbone of the contact center. It creates queues of callers based on their choices in the initial IVR interaction and connects callers to the agent most suited to handle their query. The ACD creates detailed reports, both real time and deferred, that allow managers to optimize their operations.
Predictive dialer	<p>If your contact center makes large numbers of outbound calls, e.g. for bill collection, telemarketing and so on, a predictive dialer can give a 300% boost in effectiveness.</p> <p>It places calls automatically after analyzing agent load to ensure that idle time for agents is kept minimized. The system automatically rejects busy signals, answering machines, fax numbers, etc. so that the agent gets a live call to address.</p> <p>It can work within predefined rules and ensure that calls do not go out at night and respect 'do not call lists'.</p> <p>Detailed reports are available.</p>
VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol)	<p>VoIP transmits voice over the Internet or any other computer network. Since VoIP data is in a very similar format to computer data, VoIP devices have enormous data processing capabilities and come at a much lower cost than traditional copper-based phone systems.</p> <p>Managing VoIP is simpler than a PBX exchange of similar capability. VoIP allows voice applications to connect to company databases with ease and CTI (computer telephony integration) becomes possible.</p> <p>Since VoIP calls can travel over the Internet, contact center agents can work from anywhere. Remote work becomes possible, help desk experts need not be confined to a fixed location but can attend calls from anywhere they can get an Internet connection</p>

<p>Hosted applications suite</p>	<p>Contact centers can license applications from a third party that can run these applications in the cloud or on their own servers. There are several advantages of this approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low initial costs, since you pay a rental and do not purchase the software. This allows companies with smaller budgets to take advantage of features they would not have been able to afford. • Low cost of maintenance: the vendor is responsible for setup, upgrade and provide security, etc. • Continuity: the vendor maintains multiple instances of the application, so that the availability of the application is very high. Often it is far higher than what an in-house team can achieve. • Flexibility, add and remove modules as you wish. The numbers of seats are dynamic and this ensures that there is no under or over provisioning of licenses.
<p>Typical hosted applications</p>	<p>The popular applications users often opt for are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosted IVR system: allows the management of incoming calls and supports routing to specified contact centers or agents based on certain preset parameters. • Teleworker support: the system supports contact center agents who work from home and besides routing calls to them, it ensures complete management and reporting, so that the company is assured that it is getting value. • Management tools: these provide a comprehensive set of tools to handle agent scheduling, reporting, call recording, measurement of customer satisfaction, and so on.

Computer Telephony Integration: Enhancing the Contact Center Performance

One great advantage of a VoIP-based contact center (and practically *all* new ones are VoIP based) is that it connects beautifully to the company's software applications. This is because all VoIP data is digital in nature and embedded with the voice: as a consequence, there are other bits of information, such as the caller ID, menu option selection by the customer, and so on, that can trigger the software to perform certain functions. Computers also monitor the traffic continuously and can use the idle time fruitfully. All of this is Computer Telephony Integration (CTI). This section covers CTI functions.

Feature	Brief discussion
Screen pop ups	This is the most popular CTI function. Based on the caller ID or on the menu options selected by the customer in the IVR system, the software fetches the relevant customer data from the company database. By the time the agent answers the call, her computer gets a screen pop up with the information she needs. This can easily shave off 10 to 15 seconds of unproductive time from a call.
Ensuring complete data entry	After the call, CTI ensures that the agent enters relevant information into the database. Unless this is done, the agent will not get a fresh call. This ensures updated data at all time.
Soft phone functions	The soft phone replaces the physical phone with a phone running on the agent's computer. This allows better management of the center since more information about agent performance can be collected.
Improved reporting	CTI collects information about the call from initiation to end. It records waiting periods, customer menu selections, agent information, data used by agent, call transfers, and so on. This rich data can be used to improve contact center efficiency.

Screen transfers	CTI allows an agent who has been speaking to a caller to transfer the data on his computer screen to another agent. This is often done when the answer to a customer query requires a more detailed reply and this information is available with a more qualified agent. Screen transfer ensures that the customer does not have to repeat any information she has already given, the second agent gets all the information that has been collected so far. As can be seen, this minimizes customer frustration and saves call time.
Call routing	Because the CTI engine is connected to the company database, it can often make better call routing decisions than the automatic call distributor. It can identify the issues the caller is likely to raise and give the call to an appropriate agent.
Dynamic scripts	Because the CTI system recognizes the caller, it can present the agent with a customized script based on the caller's preferences. It can even suggest a specific call handling plan to the agent.
Call blending	The CTI system monitors incoming and outgoing call load and dynamically shifts agents from incoming to outgoing and vice-versa. This further improves efficiency of the contact center.
Training in idle time	CTI can monitor gaps in agent performance and when it senses a low period in contact center workload, it can send appropriate training material to specific agents. People get additional training when they are free. There is no loss in agent effectiveness because training is suspended as soon as a call is handed over to the agent being trained.
Performance monitoring	Many calls are recorded and tagged so that the team leader can listen to selected calls at will. She can also listen in on an ongoing conversation. Besides this, the system also records a number of parameters such as call time, transfers, data accessed by the agent and so on, so that the performance of the agent can be improved further.

Linking CRM to the Contact Center

People sometimes feel that Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is for sales and marketing and that it does not have a role in the contact center. This is incorrect, if only because the agents in your contact center can sometimes be your best marketing ambassadors.

Once again, there has to be a strategy behind the CRM initiative. Many contact center employees have been trained to manage call durations and to keep their customers happy. They need to understand that they have a role in selling as well. This could take some training and a change in attitude. Here is a checklist of what CRM can be used for in a contact center.

Feature	Brief discussion
Build richer customer detail	CRM applications can link customers together (same family, same company, etc.) and put their purchase history, preferences, status of outstanding orders and complaints all in one place. The contact center agent can take advantage of this information to perform her work more effectively.
Use CRM application to create a list of customers likely to leave	Proactive steps can be taken to reduce customer churn.
Use CRM to create better opportunities to cross sell	By using data available in the CRM application, the contact center agent can offer options that are closely tailored to customer preferences and needs.

Allowing Remote Workers

Modern contact centers enable agents to work from home. A large number of contact centers allow their agents to work remote. It reduces rental costs, allows contact centers to expand and keeps workers happier. In the US, the predicted numbers of virtual agents, as they are sometimes called, was 330,000 in 2011. In Canada, nearly 25% of contact centers use virtual agents and many more are considering it.

Here are the reasons why you may want to seriously consider offering some of your agents the option to work from home.

Key advantages

Allows smoother management of spikes and troughs in contact center work load. Companies offer home-based agents the options of flexible hours. They can then use the agents to handle unexpected load or log them off during low load times.

Reduces the churn in manpower by giving agents options to work from home in the event of a family relocation, long commutes and a new addition to the family, etc.

Improves the hiring pool because companies can hire quality personnel in far-off locations, for example a company might need a person who speaks a certain language fluently but cannot find such a person nearby.

There are major cost savings to letting people work from home. Companies save on rentals, electricity, furniture, and so on. Typical savings are 30% of the costs of maintaining an agent seat in the contact center. If 20% of agents can work from home, this translates to a saving of 6%.

Better business continuity: even if the contact center suffers a major catastrophe, the home-based agents can continue to function.

Lower number of absentees during periods of extremely bad weather.

However, a number of precautions need to be taken before home-based work is permitted. Besides setting up the necessary infrastructure in the homes, enhanced security precautions have to be set up. Some of these are given below.

Security precautions

Disallow home computers to copy and paste data or to save data on local hard disks.

Ensure that home-based PCs are secure, virus protected and patched. Extend enterprise security to home networks as well.

Enforce strong passwords and security policies.

Allow remote access for technical support personnel.

Ensure that agents cannot misuse confidential data. Mask sensitive data such as credit card numbers, etc.

Ensure that agents log in using a biometric method to prove that it is the agent at the console and not someone else.

Block all non-essential internet traffic.

Educate agents about red lines that cannot be crossed.

There are a number of issues related to home-based work besides security and technical issues. Agents can feel isolated, unsupervised and can take longer to train. The key point that is being made is that work from home has to be a well thought out and planned option rather than an arbitrary decision.

Improving Contact Center Processes

Contact center processes cannot be static. What works today may not work tomorrow. Continuous process improvement is the only way to keep growing. Below, we list a few typical process improvement steps that are undertaken by progressive companies.

Feature	Brief discussion
Constant improvement in call handling methods	Businesses seek to reduce call length, costs per call, costs of running the contact center, number of seats required. They also take great pains to improve customer satisfaction.
Effective scheduling	Managers look to ensure scheduling of agents matches contact center load.
Optimize off-phone activity and overheads	Managers improve all processes that do not directly contribute to the agents' effectiveness in the contact center. This brings down the cost per call substantially.
Improve the IVR	The interactive voice response system must be improved based on experience and results. Businesses attempt to minimize the occasions when the caller needs to speak to a live agent.
Improve CTI inputs to agents	The computer telephony interface can always be improved, made more useful and intuitive. A good CTI shaves off many seconds from a call.
Know why customers call	By analyzing calls, companies can ensure that data customers seek is made readily available. Increasing self-service options improves customer satisfaction and lowers costs.

Conclusion: What Makes a Great Contact Center

It is easy to assess whether a contact center is merely doing its job or a *great* job. A great contact center will have the characteristics listed below.

Characteristics
Sharp focus on business goals
Contact center is seen as a source of strategic advantage for the business
A source of competitive value for the business, adds to the revenue stream
Rapid response to calls and mails
High levels of employee morale
Very high ratio of first call resolution of issues
Customer satisfaction scores measured regularly and action taken promptly to resolve issues. High satisfaction scores.
Performance data collected and shared so that agents are aware of their performance
Efficient operations. Little or no follow up is required to ensure tasks are completed
People are busy but not over burdened
Processes improved continuously as the organization learns

The bottom line is that a great contact center does not come about by accident.

References

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