

insight On:



What Contact Centers Can Teach the Rest of the Organization about Unified Communications

(And where performance optimization solutions come into the picture)

The business world is on a quest to break down information silos, and for good reason: when more people have access to critical knowledge, they can collaborate, work smarter, and react faster to market and business changes.

But what if the silos aren't just around the information - what if they are around the people themselves? What if the entire communications infrastructure, instead of connecting people, creates a fractured, inefficient environment for getting things done? Experience has shown that the more systems required to establish contact, the harder it becomes to actually pin someone down for collaboration or knowledge sharing. Having tools that can help identify when those types of interactions are required based on past customer and call volume history, monitoring the quality of those collaborative interactions and ensuring that the right resources are available to handle those interactions are imperative.

Unified communications (UC), the worthy successor to unified messaging, is the enterprise's way of removing the silos around its people. For this reason, many companies are beginning to adopt wide-scale UC strategies, and major software vendors like Microsoft have lent credibility and stature to the effort. Creating an enterprise-wide UC strategy is as much art as science, because it forces every company to ask (and answer) critical questions about internal business processes and workflows. Unified communications allows a company to build a structure for connecting people through the adoption of presence- and availability-awareness tools. These tools meld each individual's capability for communication with the availability to communicate and the specific knowledge that person holds.

It does not, and cannot, stop there, because there are two key variables implicit in building a creative UC strategy that many companies overlook. One is the customer, along with the tools the customer uses to connect to the company. The second is the contact center, where agents can use the UC infrastructure to boost and extend the effectiveness of the customer experience. Beyond the contact center itself, the extension of presence awareness to other employees represents a chance to use the company's larger employee base as a reservoir of knowledge that contact

Unified communications (UC), the worthy successor to unified messaging, is the enterprise's way of removing the silos around its people.

center agents can use in real time. People with relevant expertise, outside the contact center, can become part of the knowledge pool that can be tapped during the customer interaction. This is where performance optimization technologies, long a staple in the contact center, present a unique opportunity to extend UC best practices enterprise wide.

Hidden Contact Center Benefits

As it turns out, the basic elements of what we now call unified communications are part of standard operating procedures for any contact center. Unlike traditional office workers sitting at desks, contact center agents sign in and out of their phone system. The automatic call distributor (ACD) has always included a "state management" function that tracks whether the agent is on a call, between calls, available to take a call, or logged in but unavailable. These are clearly analogous to what we see in modern instant messaging and presence tools, which are the core of unified communications.

When we extend what's already being used inside the contact center with tools that are becoming widespread in the rest of the enterprise, we find common elements and synergies that were unforeseen.

This valuable relationship between the company's subject matter experts and the contact center is often overlooked. UC strategies typically focus on the productivity benefits of communications technologies. It's just as important (and valuable) to include the tangible and intangible benefits that accrue to the organization and its customer relationships when enterprise knowledge workers fall within the contact center's sight lines.

UC can be used to provide contact center reps with an expert base they can call upon for specialized information during the customer contact, not after the fact. A customer might call with a problem not typically encountered

by the service center. After searching the established knowledge base, the agent needs a contact center set-up that can seamlessly interoperate with UC applications to identify potential experts within the organization who can quickly provide guidance, such as a suggestion to ask the customer a key question or other useful bits of advice. In a support environment, this can make all the difference between escalating a case (and taking hours or days to close it) and solving the problem on the first call.

Simply put, the UC strategy has to include more than just presence and availability. It has to reach a bit further, to include some element of meta-information about each person's skill set and knowledge base. That is what makes each person in the organization potentially relevant to the customer interaction on an ad-hoc basis.

A successful UC strategy will yield measurable improvement in key contact center performance metrics like first call resolution, increase sales, higher collections rates and customer satisfaction. These are accompanied by intangible benefits that accrue to the company overall, such as reduced customer churn, that are not necessarily a normal part of the UC deployment strategy.

The Role of Performance Optimization Applications

In addition to straightforward UC tools, there are ways to leverage existing contact center applications to enhance the overall enterprise UC strategy. When you begin to understand how many of today's best practices in enterprise UC already exist in the contact center, you start to appreciate how all sorts of performance optimization practices benefit from, and improve, overall business communications. And it is these applications that can provide the difference between the success and failure of a company's UC strategy.

What makes the contact center so uniquely positioned to propel the deployment of UC outward is the concentration of performance optimization technologies already in use.

They can complement a unified communication strategy and help the contact center effectively schedule knowledge workers across the enterprise, determine availability to support customer interactions, or monitor these interactions to drive improvements in customer care.

The three agent-facing applications most directly involved are:

1. Workforce management
2. Contact recording and quality management
3. Performance management

Workforce management provides direct, real-time awareness of whether agents and subject matter experts are where managers have planned them to be. It allows for recalibrating the tasks allotted to agents based on how their presence and availability relates to the presence-state of the customers. It also provides a framework to direct specific types of customers towards specific agents

- an example of the contact center's being ahead of the enterprise because it already has the processes and applications to make this happen seamlessly. And workforce management software creates a template for extending that practice to the rest of the enterprise and to other kinds of knowledge workers who perform similar kinds of allocated tasks that depend on real-time awareness of external contexts. And, workforce management plays a key role in scheduling these experts in short timeslots, based on expected call volumes, which helps reduce the overuse of knowledge workers who are still trying to do their "day job" - a big concern of any UC strategy.

Quality monitoring and recording, speech analytics, and performance management tools function in a similar way, although they have a somewhat delayed effect because their results are not usually handled in real time. Nevertheless, by integrating their aggregated knowledge of skill gaps and expectations, along with near-real-time reports of actual performance-to-goals, these tools provide a way to use presence in the contact center to extend quality management across the enterprise and ultimately ensure a positive customer experience.

Contact center tools are in the midst of a historic period of integration, which seems to be happening in parallel with the development of UC-related applications, largely based on the common need across the enterprise and the contact center to reduce complexity and costs. In conjunction with this trend, many of the systems that keep track of agents and customers are having their data streams pooled together and analyzed for the first time. This is helping companies identify patterns to understand why customers call and how best to control the interaction to make each connection as helpful (and profitable) as



possible. And, these tight integrations between the various contact center applications are making it easier to manage agent behavior through more careful oversight of individual performance. Connecting training to workforce management allows agents to improve skills in specific areas - at precisely the moment when taking training doesn't interfere with customer assistance.

Without fanfare, the contact center has evolved into the real-time test case for unified communications strategies. Any UC strategy should incorporate established best practices for improving performance in contact centers, and apply that existing knowledge to workers in other parts of the business.

Most of all, let's not forget the customer! In a world where customers have many contact channel choices with the business, the contact center has to be prepared to cope with understanding the presence and availability of agents who can match the mode of the customer: email to email, chat to chat, voice to voice. UC has to be a carefully deployed strategy, not an ad-hoc collection of whiz-bang tools.

In the very near future, the term "unified communications" will be redundant. All communications will be unified and seamless throughout an organization. Our present concept of UC is one in which we link together disparate streams of connectivity through clever ideas like visual voice mail, text-to-speech emails, instant messaging, and collaborative Web conferencing.

In the end, the most critical aspect of this evolution is that it needs to be managed so as not to create a higher tech version of the isolated individual worker, totally plugged in and yet working solo. The ideal strategy is to use the contact center as the test case for making UC practical and transparent. With its vast experience in connectivity, presence, and availability management, and its established knowledge of performance best practices, it sets the bar and provides the metrics for deployment company-wide.

About Aspect Software

Aspect Software, Inc. founded the contact center industry and is now the world's largest company focused solely on unified communications for the contact center. Our all-in-one, IT-ready solutions help two-thirds of the FORTUNE Global 100 and a variety of small and medium enterprises to communications-enable their customer service, collections and sales & telemarketing business processes. For more information, visit www.aspect.com.

Aspect Software
Corporate Headquarters
300 Apollo Drive
Chelmsford, MA 01824

978 250 7900
978 244 7410 fax
www.aspect.com

