

Applying UC to Contact Centers

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Over the last couple of columns I've been writing about unified communications and its effect and influence on how contact centers will work in the future. One area of unified communications functionality is ways to integrate voice capabilities into other forms of communication. The concept behind unified communications is simplified access to individuals through whatever media is best suitable and available at the time. Clearly real-time voice communications is one highly desirable mode of communications, so unified communications is making great attempts to integrate "voice" seamlessly into the picture.

For most internal business processes and workflows, voice has remained a separate function. Knowledge workers are at their desks working on a mortgage application, or processing an insurance claim, or tracking progress on a project, or whatever their job is. When they need to speak with someone, they literally stop what they are doing, turn to a different device (the phone), and call (and sometimes reach) whoever they need to speak with. Road warriors are often inaccessible through standard means of communications, but that isolation heightens the urgency of communication when it's needed. One of the motivating concepts of unified communications is to do a better job of integrating these voice communications requirements into business processes and workflows in a more seamless, more effective way.

Contact centers, on the other hand, have always used voice as the principle means of linking customers to resources who can assist with sales and service questions. Despite growing use of effective self-service (web and IVR), voice remains the principle means for getting business done between internal staff and external customers. Whatever workflows or processes are needed are added into and integrated with the call flow application through CTI or CRM linked to the telephony event. Therefore, the contact center managers look at the unified communications announcements and wonder "What's in it for me?"

Disaggregation of the Telephone Equipment Industry

A little history is in order to set the stage. The recent unified communications announcements are just another, major step in the disaggregation of the telephone equipment industry. This is following a pattern established in the computer industry decades ago - a movement from centralized, monolithic, proprietary, vertically-integrated systems to ones that are decentralized, standards-based, and horizontally layered.

While the origins in telephony disaggregation may be traced to the 1968 Carterphone decision and the 1984 AT&T breakup, the pace has accelerated. Softphone technology eroded the industry's value chain by reducing the need for proprietary, expensive, and profitable fancy desk sets. And increasingly stable software-based telephone systems running on standard platforms coupled with ACD functionality moving to separate servers continued the trend. Vonage, Skype, Googletalk and other peer-to-peer, internet-based services are siphoning off

greater chunks of the market. QoS availability on private networks means these types of solutions will be increasingly suitable for business applications as well.

Unified communications is poised to continue this trend. By baking high quality, real-time, voice communications into everyday business applications, many workers will no longer need to place many of their calls through the PBX. Need to talk to the author of a document? Right-click on her name and select the most appropriate communications channel based on up-to-the-second presence information.

Most contact centers aren't going to be on the forefront of this change for two important reasons. First, many of the systems out there have been customized for their specialized requirements, so they already have an integrated voice communications-business application environment. Second, the criticality of the contact center to many businesses means that their management will be risk averse, delaying widespread adoption of some of these innovations. Still, the changes that unified communications will bring will have an important long term impact, and it's important for contact center managers to understand these underlying trends.

Need for Collaboration

Much of the current hype about unified communications surrounds a simplistic notion of personal productivity. Isn't it neat that you can hover over the author's name and contact them immediately? So much faster. What a great concept to access someone by their name, without having to go through the intermediate translation to their phone number, an email address, or an IM pseudonym. What could be easier?

As I pointed out in an earlier column, while these are slick ideas, my guess is that the CFO won't be interested in paying much more than zero for them, if that is all that unified communications brings. And, in my opinion, the vendors are making a mistake by touting this kind of functionality as the next wave of "productivity savings".

Collaboration, however, is a key capability that will drive the use of unified communications, both inside the contact center and throughout the corporate world. In his seminal book, *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman notes: "In the flat world, more and more business will be done through collaboration within and between companies... The next layers of value creation - whether in technology, marketing, biomedicine, or manufacturing -- are becoming so complex that no single firm or department is going to be able to master them alone."

This need for collaboration is the business imperative that will drive the adoption of unified communications. We can already see the requirement in contact centers. For example, contact center managers increasingly realize the importance of first call resolution. Three things happen when you can solve the caller's issue the first time that he calls in, and without transferring him to four different people trying to get resolution. First, you get a satisfied customer, who, after all, just wants an answer to his issue. Second, you lower costs by avoiding call-backs and the inevitable phone tag that leads to multiple calls. Third, you reduce cycle time and time-to-resolve, which are increasingly important metrics for measuring contact center performance.

Today, contact center systems are increasingly focused on first call resolution. We've designed knowledge management systems, tiered response teams, extensive websites, and more to help address this issue. But, if Friedman is right, more and more collaboration is going to be needed to address increasingly complex everyday business situations.

Many centers will be fine with today's technology and approach. But more companies will find it attractive to bring in experts outside the contact center, where appropriate, rather than building increasingly complex systems to sort through and present increasing amounts of complex information to increasingly harried agents. As a separate trend, we will likely see a shift to greater use of contact centers to solve more and more complicated issues with customers and with business partners. The concept of a contact center is simply a more cost-effective way to deal with a range of business interactions than having field support teams, or direct access ways to reach the expert buried in the Engineering Department.

In the past, companies have been very effective in devising work-arounds to the difficulty of reaching the most appropriate person to get something resolved. But there haven't been effective ways to really link up with experts outside the contact center, who can be available at a moment's notice to resolve an issue. Unified communications represents a transformative opportunity for companies to literally change how they do business. As we have seen in many cases before, such opportunities are frequently the catalyst for a leap to a new plateau in productivity and effectiveness. That is the point of the Friedman quote above.

Some Contact Center Examples

We're starting to see contact centers use instant messaging functionality to identify the availability of experts who might be available to help on some particularly thorny issue. Frequently today, agents will communicate, through IM, with supervisors while they remain on the phone with the caller. Pretty good answer to solve first-order issues within the contact center.

When agents need the expertise of someone in the company but outside the center, things get dicier. There are a couple big issues. First, the experts outside the center have other work to do. While they could be constantly updating their IM status, but that is neither likely to happen, nor very efficient. Second, IM buddy lists are lists of people. The agent on the phone doesn't need to talk with Susan. He needs to talk with an expert in underwriting a particular risk category. Looked at from a different perspective, what we're really talking about is extending the contact center functionality outside the center to encompass a pool of skill-based experts, who are in "available" or "not available" states. And, they may be available in different ways (channels) and to different people depending on the situation and timing.

These are unified communications concepts build into a contact center environment.

Here's another one. Increasingly, according to Friedman, collaboration will be needed with those outside the company - supply chain partners and customers. Today, we have a lot of mechanisms to try to reach each other, including phone calls, voice mail, email, websites, and more. And, companies have done a good job of making the limitations of these solutions not too onerous. But as the need for collaboration grows, these existing solutions will be increasingly inadequate.

What unified communications potentially promises is the ability to have visibility into whether and how communication is possible with individuals or functions across company lines. This is the notion of presence information shared among different systems through schemes called “federation”. Conceptually, this has enormous potential to reduce cycle times, and improve collaboration with partners and customers.

Such capabilities are likely to emerge first in situations where timelines, complexity, close interaction between firms, or similar collaborative needs are strongest. In most cases, this will be situations where the transaction value or importance is highest. Supply chain oriented B2B applications or B2C situations involving, say, high net worth customers, are examples.

Hurdles

There are some hurdles to get over, of course. Effective presence capabilities will be a big one. As discussed previously, the present conception of presence functionality is a shadow of what would be really effective. What’s needed is automatically updated, context-sensitive information, alterable based on who is seeking the information. And for some of these applications, it has to be shared across corporate boundaries.

Some of the problems will relate to suppliers jockeying for supremacy – the tendency to exchange richer presence information with other devices that they also supply. Other issues relate to very real concerns about privacy, security, and conceivably regulatory compliance in some industries.

Opportunity

Despite the challenges, unified communications provides an enormous, transformative opportunity to businesses, even as it helps foster telephone equipment industry disaggregation. Contact centers will clearly be one of the beneficiaries in the coming changes. But, while there are excellent opportunities there, we are likely to see faster adoption in areas where internal collaboration is critical.

Still, contact center managers need to be aware of the changes that unified communications is bringing to the marketplace. In some cases, early adoption of these capabilities could transform the results that their centers can achieve.

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