

## **The Nitty Gritty of Operational Support**

IP gets lots of press as an innovative, complex, and glamorous technology. But one aspect that isn't covered is what happens after you implement an IP based telephony infrastructure. Think about it - who manages and supports the system? What are the new processes and policies to ensure seamless and reliable service? What are the impacts and changes to the contact center? These are some of the issues we address in this article, and can start your thinking about what's needed to support IP in your contact center.

I won't spend lots of time discussing changes to telecom and IT organizations. This really depends on the skills of your existing resources and corporate structures, as well as the level of support provided by your contact center equipment and service providers today. Ideally, telecom and IT consolidation should be based on strategic organizational decisions made before the evaluation and piloting phases of IP Telephony initiatives. Once implemented, we typically find that there are enough new IP Telephony support tasks that the net workload is about the same, although there may be reductions in headcount for multi-site implementations. Support costs tend to be reduced in the arena of vendor services, rather than internal headcount.

### **Day to day support and troubleshooting**

Let's start with the basics. Now that you have an IP contact center infrastructure in place, who do you call when there's a problem? In many companies BIP (Before IP), you would report the issue to someone in Telecom or the Help Desk. They might try some basic troubleshooting before involving the vendor(s), the technology suppliers, and/or the network carriers. Is this how it still works? If the internal support determines that it is a LAN/WAN issue, what happens next? Are there procedures and internal service level agreements in place to ensure a timely response? I once had a contact center manager tell me, "I can live with the LAN being down temporary, because I can still answer calls and probably resolve many of them." But in the IP world, a LAN or WAN outage can mean that the contact center is out of business.

### **Ongoing Maintenance**

How is the health of your IP network maintained and monitored? As part of implementing the IP Telephony infrastructure, proactive monitoring of the network should be designed and implemented. Resources (both personnel and technology) should be allocated to this function as part of the "cost of doing business" with this new infrastructure. And while we're on the subject, make sure to perform a thorough network assignment (and implement upgrades), *before* any IP Telephony rollout.

Change management and control is another component of ongoing maintenance procedures that needs to be reviewed. By definition, IP Telephony is more data centric than a traditional telecom environment. Network and server hardware must be continually maintained (via patches and upgrades) so that the IT organization gets needed equipment vendor support. The question is, how and when are these routine updates rolled out? Is it when the contact center is closed? If not, what does that mean for the IT support organization (more overtime costs, additional resources, etc.)? Has this been included in any budget?

Of course, maintenance schedules need to be coordinated between IT and the contact center. If a change is performed over the weekend when the center is closed, what testing or checks are performed before all your agents sign in on the phones first thing Monday morning? Who will perform the testing and ensure that everything is running correctly from a contact center perspective?

Today, we see situations in which some minor IT changes are even made during the day. If this causes a temporary “blip”, users are unaware or are momentarily inconvenienced. We’re all heard, when purchasing something on the phone, “Oh, the computer just went down for a moment.” But for IP networked contact centers, such “blips” will be unacceptable, if the calls are lost.

### **Support Changes Within the Contact Center**

If there is only one contact center in the organization, changes to both the CSR and management organization are minimal. Remember, in theory, IP Telephony is really just different plumbing. Yes, there are benefits in terms of multi-channel contact routing, and quality monitoring and call logging are greatly simplified, but for single site contact center agents and management, this is largely transparent. The real changes come with multi-site and home agent/remote agent IP configurations.

Once you move into a multi-site IP Telephony configuration, you can create a true, single, virtual contact center. How is supporting this new environment different?

- Management reporting. Do you have resources dedicated to creating and distributing reports at each location? Does someone (or some group) spend time consolidating reports across the entire organization? These tasks are greatly reduced or eliminated with a virtual contact center.
- Workforce management. Today, scheduling is probably done on a site-by-site basis. IP allows you to create network-wide schedules and forecasts, eliminating the need for dedicated scheduling resources at each site.
- Quality monitoring and call logging are also greatly simplified and centralized with IP.
- Overall contact center performance. Now that you’ve created a virtual contact center, you will need to evaluate how overall performance is being measured across the centers. Previously, you might have had a director at each who that knows what “their” site is expected to do and staffs, manages, and reports accordingly. With a virtual contact center, some responsibilities and tasks may be consolidated. How will this be handled?

If you have Home Agents, make sure you have procedures for providing them with technical support. If they are local, does the IT organization dispatch internal resources for initial setup and training? What if the agents are in another city or state -will an IT outsourcer be able to provide this support?

### **Summary**

IP brings a host of support, organizational, and process changes that are often overlooked. If you’ve implemented IP, review to ensure that you have all these resources in place. And if you’re just starting your IP implementation, take the time to set up processes and procedures *now*. Good luck!

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