

Normal Human Contact

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Collaboration capabilities are being reinvigorated through recent unified communications announcements. Currently, these announcements are focused on communications among a company's employees. Over the long term, however, this functionality will also have an important impact on how contact centers will do a better job of connecting with their callers. The opportunity is for an enhanced ability of our systems to foster what I call "normal human contact". For many companies, this is the key to getting to the next level of customer intimacy.

Collaboration concepts have been focused on internal communication – from one staff member of a company to another. The idea is to create ways to speed information flow, reduce cycle times, and a number of other positive benefits. As I pointed out in a previous column, one of the impacts of unified communications will be to bring collaboration capabilities into the contact center. But before we get into these examples, let's look at some of the challenges of collaboration in general.

Collaboration and Productivity

Over the years, the vendor community has introduced a number of productivity tools aimed at how workers, especially knowledge workers or road warriors, get things done within our organizations. Over the past decades of being an industry observer, I have seen many of these tools come and go. Some work well; many don't. Since an important part of my consulting business is how to make collaboration work, I frequently talk with people about the workplace tools that they have. What's been the experience?

What I find is that the simplest barriers, the lowest hurdles, often mean that a tool designed to ease communications won't be used. We'll settle for a telephone call because we can do it from our desks, rather than get up and move to the videoconference room that would enable a richer interaction on some important issue. We won't use a whiteboarding capability, even when it would further a discussion, because it means launching a separate application, or because drawing on a PC "whiteboard" with a mouse is a very different and more challenging experience than drawing on a pad of paper or a whiteboard in a conference room.

I have a friend who works in a large company as head of the Project Management Office. She is constantly in meetings, coordinating the activities of a number of projects. The company is decentralized, with staff in offices scattered around the world. For each meeting, a conference room is booked, and there is a conference bridge so remote participants can call in. Guess what? The people who are local generally call in, too. It's simpler not to get up from the desk, even if a face-to-face meeting would likely produce better results.

One of the reasons for the explosion of email is that it's so simple to do – few barriers. And its informality means that we don't have to get all fussed about the niceties of a letter. Do you, too, get annoyed when you **can't** easily send an email to make a simple inquiry of a company you want to do business with? And now, IM is supplanting email, because it's is even more informal, a buddy list makes addressing even easier, and it's real time.

But the astonishing thing to me is this: people will have long, interactive IM sessions with someone when they are clearly both available in real time. Why not have a telephone conversation? No one I know types faster than they can talk. And speech offers richer ways to communicate nuances. True, some IM happens where one or both of the parties are in some boring meeting, or because they are carrying on multiple chats simultaneously. But enough IM happens with both parties sitting at their desks to suggest that there is something else going on. I suspect that it's just that knowledge workers are so wedded to their keyboards that making the shift to a phone call is just too much of a hurdle. Maybe that's also why voice mail never took off as a messaging medium, and has been relegated to telephone answering. That little hurdle – picking up the phone, calling the system, recording and addressing a message – was just too high.

Simplicity

Every presentation I've seen about unified communications by Microsoft, Cisco, and others, starts out with the explosion of nicknames and avatars and pseudonyms that each of us has – phone numbers (plural), email addresses (plural again), voice mailboxes, and on and on. An overriding theme is how simplification is absolutely necessary. That's one of the core messages in Microsoft's unified communications announcement in late June – a single, person-centric way to reach any of our contacts. And, one of the most interesting parts of Microsoft's announcement is the way that they have designed how you access someone else. You don't dial a number; you select their name from a buddy list. Simple. This simplicity is an important step in getting to “normal human contact” concepts.

Look at how a lot of collaboration gets done today. Sarah walks by Joe's door and he says, “Hey, I've been working on this project plan. Can we spend a few minutes for me to get your reaction to a couple of ideas?” It's that kind of easy, informal communication style that we have been struggling to emulate with all our industry's fancy tools. There have been lots of great ideas, but many just miss the mark. A little too complex, a little too involved, not quite simple enough. Look at IM, on the other hand. It's become a virtual “knock on the door”. “Are you available for a few minutes?”

What we need to do is get closer to this simple idea of normal human contact. No separate steps; no translating into a new mode of thinking. It has to be trivially simple to reach out and engage someone. Just like catching someone walking by your office. IM is an important step closer.

The recent unified communications announcements bring us some powerful tools to move toward that objective of normal human contact. What's especially interesting in these announcements is that voice communication capabilities are now extending beyond telephony and are becoming embedded directly into applications. For example, when I'm reading a Word document and want to talk to the author, we will be able to see (through presence) that he is

available, and then be able to access him from within the Word application, without having to go to a different application or mode of communications to find him. I don't even have to pick up the telephone and dial his number, or another hurdle, switch to my Outlook Contacts to look up the number. Simple.

Applications in Contact Centers

Contact Centers will continue to be primarily about telephone calls. But looking forward, we can see that management is trying to shift contacts to other channels. One major driver is cost. Shifting communications to self service channels, or even to near-real time channels like email, can significantly improve the cost-performance of our customer contact. Of course, this shift must be done in a way that provides the customers with at least as good an experience as they could get from direct contact with an agent who can help, or else customer satisfaction may be impacted.

The trend, however, is to enable customers to complete more and more routine transactions and communications through automated systems. The contact center agents will increasingly focus on exceptions and on building customer relationships. And this is where collaboration capabilities will come into play. Increasingly, we will see companies extend the sorts of collaboration options to encompass their customers' availability, too.

In the near term, this means that a customer on a website will be able to get immediate access to someone who can help. Not just to a contact center agent, but linked through him to an available (through presence) expert. Or, someone sending an email with a complex problem can be called directly. The phone number is accessed through the email address, and called from within the email application.

In the future, a customer's presence information may enable more direct and immediate contact with agents or others in the company. Initially, these capabilities will be deployed in business-to-business applications, likely in complex sales or technical environments. Consumer applications such as financial services to high net worth individuals will be another early adopter.

Over time, we will see more and more adoption of these capabilities by companies in many industries which are focused on superb customer interactions. The goal will be to enable the same sort of easy communication environment as when Joe would ask Sarah to stop in for a chat. This concept of normal human contact and removing barriers will be at the heart of this emerging market.

On the supplier side, the winners will be those who can take these tools and craft ways to achieve the difficult task of being really simple. The also-rans are the ones who will make it too comprehensive and too involved, and miss the elegance. On the user side, the winners will be those companies that plan and create a customer interaction strategy that best incorporates these advanced communications capabilities and the processes that support them.