

## **Preparing for a Pandemic**

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As you scan the news these days, there are a lot of dire predictions about the coming avian bird flu epidemic, and periodic reports of people becoming infected. The worry is that the virus will mutate into a form that can be transmitted from one person to another. In Asia recently, the SARS epidemic, also caused by a virus migrating into human population, caused major economic disruption. Yet with the coming of this potential health crisis, very little preparation seems to be taking place.

This column is the first of a two-part review of some of the options available to contact centers and suggestions about what they should be doing now to get ready, to be prepared if this develops into a major health crisis. This column and the one next month focus on establishing effective remote agent capabilities, including IP's role in helping to enable them. Several companies' products are mentioned. These are just examples of some of the capabilities available, and no endorsement is implied.

**Background.** Most of the experts say that it's not a question of "if" but rather "when" the bird flu virus that makes the trans-species leap to humans. This is the prediction made by the World Health Organization last November. Once that happens, the forecast is for it to spread across the globe. What is less clear is whether it will continue to be as virulent as it has been in avian populations. The Congressional Budget Office issued a report in December projecting several scenarios for the United States with mild to severe health and economic effects - 100,000 to 2,000,000 deaths and 1.5% to 5% GDP drop.

Undoubtedly, a pandemic will have a greater impact on countries with less robust sanitation systems and healthcare infrastructures. But, there could be significant impacts on all countries. The World Health Organization and other bodies are issuing guidelines and suggestions for how individuals and businesses should prepare for this upcoming potential situation. A lot of the measures suggested relate to minimizing physical contact with others.

Businesses will have to react to both the perception and the reality about this flu, when it arrives. The reality is that people will likely cut back on discretionary travel, and conceivably there will be requirements for employees to work from home. And, companies will want to take steps to continue to be able to operate, irrespective of what happens.

Beyond any official restrictions, there is a good likelihood that people will become very, probably overly, cautious, by sequestering themselves in their homes, etc. We've seen this type of reaction in recent situations - the anthrax scare caused people to discard mail from unknown senders without opening it; airline travel plummeted following 9/11; last year's SARS outbreak prompted working from home throughout many Asian countries. Here in the USA, we seem to have a history of ignoring potential threats until we are in the middle of a situation, then overreacting.

The reality is that businesses will have to react to the public perception. You will want to have in place ways to continue operating with less direct person-to-person interaction. Hello! Isn't that what contact centers are all about? So, dust off your plans for back-up capacity, additional agents, perhaps even new processes to handle a shift in how customers interact with you.

Beyond that, businesses will want to make plans to continue to operate while assuring the health of their employees. For lots of reasons – official pronouncements, personal preferences, or just the imperative of maintaining a healthy workforce – companies may need to find ways to support agents working remotely, in homes or in smaller remote facilities. Gartner and other research organizations have issued recommendations that companies become prepared to enable knowledge workers and other staff to work from home for long periods of time.

Of course, many suppliers today offer solutions to support remote call center workers using traditional TDM-based equipment. But IP offers even more capabilities, and frequently can deliver these capabilities more cost effectively.

**Solutions Using the PSTN.** Many legacy telephony suppliers have ways to accommodate remote agents with TDM-based solutions. Frequently, this involves “nailed-up” connections between the home agent and the switch. In most solutions, remote agents call into the ACD over the PSTN, establishing a full-time connection back to the switch. The ACD software treats these connected agents as it would any locally available agent, following routing rules to send call to them indifferent to their remote status. While this approach provides a solution, it does mean tying up ACD ports, incurring network and termination charges, and doesn't do anything directly to solve the problem of getting remote agents access to data needed to answer calls. Depending on capacity in place, this may not be something that can quickly ramp up to support large number of agents working remotely.

With the growth of data connectivity options, new solutions are emerging from most of the suppliers. And some of these don't require much lead time, once the initial planning and provisioning is completed, although companies should check whether installed capacities are appropriate and sufficient to meet a sudden ramp up requirement.

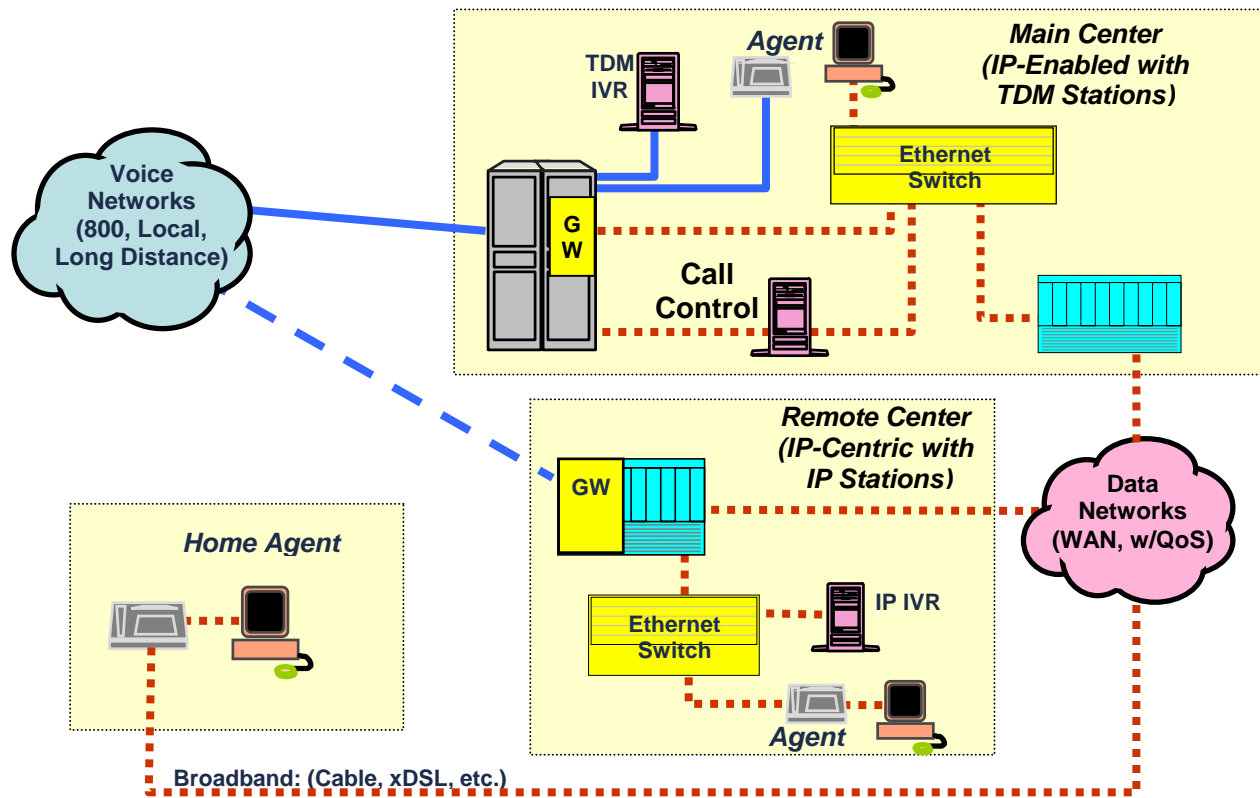
An Interactive Intelligence solution, for example, allows an employee to launch a softphone client on a home-based computer, establish a VPN connection back to the office, and log in. The application asks for a phone number and the employee specifies a home phone, cell, or second line. Control is handled through the softphone, and the audio path is over the PSTN.

Nuasis's recent 3.0 announcement includes the ability to connect agents through the existing telephony infrastructure, offering an alternative to their VoIP-based architecture. When users log into the system, they specify a phone number, which could be a PSTN or cell number, or a softphone VoIP connection over a data network.

Avaya, Nortel, Siemens, and other legacy solution providers have similar application suites available.

Where the PSTN is used as the audio path, there is sometimes a “lesser of two evils” choice. Either there is a nailed-up connection to the agent, or a separate call is made each time an agent is connected. In the former case, you are paying for the communications link even when there is no traffic; in the latter, each caller experiences additional hold times as the connection is being made. Some solutions offer only one or the other approach.

**Augmenting Traditional Solutions.** IP telephony opens alternatives for getting audio to remote agents while providing pathways for data access as well. Suppliers have adopted several strategies to support IP access. One approach is to IP-enable traditional TDM-based switching systems. In these solutions, suppliers add an IP gateway to their legacy TDM switch so that both TDM and IP-based phones and other end points are supported.



The diagram shows a typical IP-enabled solution. The main location switch has added a gateway to support IP connectivity. Under the control of the centralized call control module, each call is routed to an agent at the main site, to a remote center, or to a home agent. In this configuration, the audio path for both the remote center and the home agents route over a data network. If these facilities are controlled by the company, they can be quality-of-service enabled. Depending on the facilities available from carriers, this QoS functionality may or may not be available to be extended to home offices.

Solutions such as this enable agents to work remotely, often with full connectivity to customer data, knowledge management tools, and all other capabilities available to agents sitting in the main call center location. Moreover, these agents can be part of the regular quality monitoring scheme, and their performance statistics are accumulated along with those of other agents.

**Other Solutions.** In [next month's column](#), we will talk about a number of pure IP based solutions for remote agent functionality. And, we will discuss some alternatives using outsourcing and hosting companies. Finally, we'll look at some of the ways companies are overcoming the inherent quality issues with using the public internet for remote agent connectivity.

The bottom line is that there are ways businesses can cope with a potential pandemic. Prudent managers will look at their current environment and make some decisions about what's needed to enhance the abilities of their contact centers both to handle more traffic and to support a large group of their call center agents operating remotely. Now.

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