

VoIP in the Contact Center

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This issue of VON Magazine launches a new column, to be written by me and others at Vanguard Communications. We're delighted to be here, and to join Richard and Maury's team.

By way of brief introduction, Vanguard is an independent consulting firm that focuses on helping clients achieve their business goals through better customer interactions. For many companies, that means traditional call centers, and we do a lot of work there in business planning, technology assessment, process design, and operations. We also work extensively with self-service capabilities – web, IVR, and speech recognition. Now, with the emergence of IP, there are many new opportunities, as well as new challenges, for the call center manager, for the CIO, and for others managing the network.

Hence this column. We'll explore many facets of the use of IP in contact centers – benefits, costs, risks, and opportunities. We'll sort through the hype and the reality, and offer suggestions for navigating these waters. And, we're always interested in your feedback.

We'll certainly look at business issues: Where is the payback? What are the applications that will drive effective implementation? How do you plan for and manage a migration from where you are today to where you need to be in the future? And just what *is* that future, and how will it likely arrive on your doorstep?

Some of our columns will be on the technology: What are the differences among the various architectures and vendor offerings? How does the implementation of IP affect adjunct systems such as quality monitoring systems and IVR? Some will be on organization: When someone has a problem at his desktop, do you send the voice tech or the data tech? Will these remain separate teams with their different historical perspectives, or have companies figured out how to merge these groups? And, we'll present some case studies – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Speaking of clichés, the mantra of IP migration has become one: “It isn't a question of *if*, but *when*!” I hear that trumpeted by the vendors, and intoned from the speaker's rostrum at conferences. Like a lot of clichés, it's mostly true. Three decades ago, the world moved from analog to digital PBXs, following the lead of upstarts like Rolm. Today, we're in the middle of a similarly fundamental sea change for voice communications – from circuit switching using time division multiplexing (TDM) to packet switching over IP data networks. This time, the upstarts are established data players like Cisco and 3Com, and a variety of new companies seeking to take advantage of this emerging market.

Traditional telephony suppliers will continue to support their TDM-based products for many years to come, even as all of them have announced smooth migration strategies. But most of their new R&D money has shifted over to IP. From a contact center perspective, the migration to IP involves more than just the switch. And the issue of voice quality becomes even more important.

As this magazine has discussed extensively, voice can be packetized and transmitted over any IP-based network, whether private or public. However, the quality will vary. The early appeal of free communications over the public internet was compelling to, for example, students who felt there were better ways to spend discretionary funds. For businesses, the balance between cost and quality shifts, and when it comes to contact centers, most managers insist on “toll quality” voice communication. Therefore, most business IP communication today uses controllable transmission links, where the equipment is known and quality, volumes, and latency can be better monitored and adjusted. At the same time, there are new systems and new services that offer increasing quality over a variety of links.

Does all this mean that the time is now for contact centers to make the jump to IP? For many centers, of course, this is a move that will happen in the context of broader, corporate-wide plans. Still, benefits in the contact center can drive the decision in some companies, especially in situations where multi-site centers should be coordinated and working as a single virtual operation. We’ll talk more about that opportunity in our next column.

What factors should lead CIOs and call center managers to get together and plan for the TDM to IP transition? Here are some of the triggers that we see in our consulting work. For many companies, the trigger is replacing depreciated equipment, or systems that are at end-of-life. While following their current supplier’s migration path may be a great answer, we see companies using this as an opportunity to investigate migrating to a new architecture as well.

Another trigger is a decision to operate a truly virtual environment, with many distributed contact centers all working as a single, centrally controlled entity. The goal could be greater operational efficiency, new applications capabilities, or as a way to seamlessly blend in new locations, home agents, or newly acquired companies.

Companies that haven’t started their migration to IP need to start building their strategy now. Those that have begun the migration should be certain that the special needs and opportunities within the contact center are carefully considered.

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