

Multi-Site Contact Centers: The “Killer App” for VoIP?

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In our visits to clients' contact centers, we see some very sophisticated use of technology and processes to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Many companies successfully use the capabilities of their systems and the network to get calls and critical information to the best agent. While these approaches can work – frequently with excellent results – they aren't always simple or inexpensive. VoIP provides some interesting alternatives, especially for multi-site centers.

When multi-site companies leverage VoIP over a QoS enabled network, the flexibility to quickly route that call to any place on the network supports new applications, or at least enables easier or less expensive implementation. This article discusses some of these application opportunities.

Centralized Equipment, Management and Control. VoIP enables companies to consolidate hardware, software, and personnel to a smaller number of locations, even if there are agents at many sites. This could be a single hardened hub center, or a few redundant ones. Centralization means more effective use of fewer personnel for planning, programming, administration, and maintenance.

Many organizations now seek to simplify their communication architecture and to reduce and consolidate the number of servers. This notion goes beyond simply combining voice and data over a single network. The opportunity is to reduce complexity while achieving significant cost savings from less hardware and fewer license and maintenance requirements.

Frequently, call center adjunct equipment – such as IVRs, work force management systems, quality monitoring, reporting, and analytics – can also be consolidated. Today, these adjunct servers are often scattered throughout many locations in an organization's network. With a VoIP-based implementation, the overall architecture is simplified, and the staff needed for maintenance and configuration management can be centralized. This is both more efficient and leads to consistent practices across the company.

Virtual Capabilities. In addition to cost savings, distributing calls on a VoIP-based network lets companies run all their call centers as a single, virtual operation. The ability to have a single point for enterprise-wide call control and routing decisions means lower costs and better matching of available agent skills to customer requirements.

Today, many companies have the same functions being performed by agents with similar skills across multiple sites. Calls coming into the network cloud will be “pre-routed” to a particular site. Sometimes this decision is made by looking at the current (or approximately-current) queue lengths; more often the decision is made by some overall rules based on call origin or a percentage allocation. Inaccuracies in the predictive algorithms mean that a call isn't always

directed to the best location. In some cases, after a call is directed to a particular site, it's redirected ("post-routed") to another center.

The VoIP-based alternative operates as a single, virtual center with one call routing server. An incoming call is queued wherever it enters the company network, and is held there until the next appropriately skilled agent is available to answer the call. The routing decision considers all the agents available at all sites at that moment. This changes the system from predictive-based routing to a true "best available agent" routing algorithm.

Flexibility and Agility. VoIP can readily accommodate a variety of environments, linking different sites with IP-enabled and IP-centric switches, remote offices, and home agents. This is important as call centers become more strategic to a company's business. And, with an increase in merger and acquisition activity, new business units can be more effectively integrated with existing facilities. Today, such integration may be difficult, especially if the acquired company has a different supplier's equipment.

In addition, outsourcers and offshore operations can be more completely integrated. One of the challenges in using external or remote resources is being able to manage and monitor their performance. Conceivably, being part of a VoIP-based environment means that a call could be answered in another part of the world while being monitored at the main corporate call center site. This ability, to access a single call in multiple locations simultaneously, brings new application opportunities and management control.

Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity. These are prime topics today for many call center executives and technology planners. In many cases, a VoIP-enabled infrastructure enables more rapid recovery and redeployment in case of a network or site outage. If the primary call control and routing site goes down, another hot standby site can take over. Agent phones and other devices can be preconfigured to re-register automatically on an alternative server with only a brief delay. If a network link goes down, calls can be re-routed on alternative data paths, or even voice paths, if necessary.

In summary, we find that VoIP provides new application opportunities for contact centers that are often more effective and efficient than their TDM counterparts. By taking advantage of VoIP's characteristics, desirable new functionality can be implemented cost effectively. As your company looks to implement a VoIP-based infrastructure, look to the call centers for a source of excellent business case value and justification.

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