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## Contact Center and IT Survey: Understanding the Latest Technology Trends

By Christine J. Holley

In mid-2007, business communications software developer, Interactive Intelligence, conducted a survey of its 2,500-plus global contact center and enterprise customer base to provide insight into what technologies they were evaluating and why. These technologies included enhanced call routing, quality monitoring, Voice over IP and others.

The 44-question survey targeted both contact center and IT managers and resulted in a respondent sample size of 70. Of the total number of respondents, the largest portion (17.4 percent) represented the financial services industry, followed by insurance (11.6 percent), then computer services/hardware/software (10.1 percent). The rest were diversified among multiple verticals.

Of the survey sample size, 90 percent were based in North America, with the balance representing Europe, Middle East and Africa.

### Impact Factors

To make sense of the technologies being deployed today, it's critical to know what business trends have most recently impacted contact centers. According to the survey, the majority (34 percent) said "increased pressure to improve customer loyalty." This was followed by "increased compliance requirements" (28 percent), then "increased pressure to provide work-at-home/remote options" (15 percent).

### The Hottest Technologies Today

It's not surprising that the most commonly deployed technologies today directly address the business trends impacting contact centers. Chief among these technologies was "enhanced call routing" (67.7 percent), which includes functionality such as multimedia and skills-based routing. Also significantly deployed was "quality monitoring" (63 percent), followed by "Voice over IP" (62 percent).

All of these popularly deployed technologies help to address the business trends of increasing customer loyalty, improving compliance and expanding the number of remote agents; and this is all part of an overarching trend cited by many industry analysts as the move from efficiency to effectiveness in the contact center.

### Enhanced Call Routing

"The evolution of a contact center from an enterprise cost-center obsessed with measuring operational efficiency to a revenue-producing center responsible for driving customer loyalty, repeat business and competitive differentiation necessitates a retooling of key performance indicators," said Yankee Group analyst Ken Landoline. "A good example of this is basic call routing. A typical efficiency-focused KPI is 'average speed of answer.' To drive loyalty, however, it's critical that customers not just get connected quickly, but that they are connected to the agent best equipped to answer their unique questions. So, today, an effective-focused KPI is 'first call resolution,' which requires technologies such as multimedia routing to provide consistent service across customer touch-points, and skills-based routing to best match customers with agents."

### Quality Monitoring

The ability to monitor the quality of customer-agent interactions is also clearly part of the move to contact center effectiveness. What's particularly interesting, however, is a secondary trend that signifies a move away from stand-alone quality monitoring tools to end-to-end suites.

"A major trend we're seeing today is a decisive move toward end-to-end suites, particularly among agent performance optimization tools," said Frost & Sullivan analyst, Keith Dawson. "Specifically, quality monitoring as a sub-set of the APO market, has moved decisively past its roots as a compliance and verification technology to provide enhanced analysis of the content of the call that vendors can provide. This broader offering, when delivered as part of an end-to-end suite, is of particular value to smaller contact centers with less existing infrastructure to re-haul. With smaller budgets, they also get the added benefit of cost-savings associated with less integration."

### VoIP

Finally, with more than half of respondents already using it and the remaining indicating they plan to deploy it by the end of 2008, VoIP can no longer be called an "emerging technology." This statistic is reinforced by many industry reports, including Gartner Inc.'s latest contact center market share report, which cites shipments of IP-based agents to rise rapidly, exceeding time division multiplexing ones in 2008 (Source: Forecast: Contact Centers, North America, 2002-2011, Gartner Inc., Dec. 17, 2007).

Like enhanced call routing and quality monitoring, VoIP is also very much part of the trend toward improving contact center effectiveness. Particularly, VoIP is helping effectiveness measures such as agent loyalty and customer retention through its ability to support remote agents.

## The Hottest Technologies Tomorrow

So what's next on the list of "hot technologies" for the contact center? According to survey respondents, "decision support/data mart" and "video" were technologies most likely to receive investments in 2008.

### Decision Support/Data Mart

The increasing popularity of decision support/data mart technologies in the contact center is yet another indicator of the move from agent-focused efficiency gains, to customer-focused effectiveness gains.

Decision support helps contact centers move beyond simple reporting to generate real prescriptions for improvement. For instance, instead of a static report that simply indicates "agent X" was unavailable from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m., decision support can help bring in additional data that indicates why the agent was unavailable. By identifying the root cause, decision support can help optimize contact center performance to improve customer service.

"Data marting" specifically focuses on knowledge workers' need for information from diverse production systems, all consolidated to reflect a more holistic view of the enterprise in order to best serve customers.

"In addition to integration of data -- some of which will originate in the contact center, some of which won't -- an organized way of delivering the information, along with prescriptions for change and improvement are critical to a successful deployment," Dawson said.

Dawson adds that one reason data integration is becoming so important is because the voice of the customer is a lot louder than it used to be. "With the rise of 'social networking' customers have an unprecedented ability to amplify the noise of their dissatisfaction beyond traditional boundaries," he said. "This makes it increasingly important for enterprises to create a mechanism to integrate everything they do know about customers to head-off public and often damaging displays of dissatisfaction."

### Video

According to the survey, "videoconferencing" was ranked second highest behind "decision support/data mart" as most likely to be deployed in 2008. Videoconferencing's rise in popularity has been due, in part, to the proliferation of IP that's resulted in improved network usage and voice quality, as well as the adoption of SIP, which allows for improved interoperability and device access regardless of the medium.

Videoconferencing has also been fueled by the increasing interest in desktop collaboration applications, which today are moving from a "silo" model to a more encompassing "unified communications" strategy.

Videoconferencing's growing popularity, again, reflects the move today of contact center efficiency to effectiveness by deepening customer relationships through more personal interactions.

Adding a face, gestures and other physical nuances afforded by videoconferencing help make customer interactions more intimate. In addition, agents can use videoconferencing to demonstrate solutions that might otherwise be difficult to conceptualize.

Another creative use of video is "super-mail," which delivers video instructions via multi-media messaging service (for mobile devices) or e-mail (for fixed-line devices). This gives customers the ability to replay a video message. Agents can even push these video clips to customers, on-demand.

### A Final Word: Evaluation Criteria

Regardless of the technology being adopting, survey respondents indicated certain common evaluation criteria that were most important. Top among them were "open standards," "unified architecture" and "interoperability."

With the rapid convergence of networks, applications and systems, it's no surprise that these evaluation criteria were top-of-the-list for contact centers. Open standards and interoperability are pre-requisites for a converged infrastructure. In addition, findings show that a unified, "organically-grown" product architecture provides a more cost-effective and manageable model for achieving convergence than multi-point solutions resulting from mergers and acquisitions.

According to at least one study, the total annualized cost per agent for all-in-one solutions averaged less than half that of multi-point solutions (Source: A Cost Comparison of All-in-One versus Multi-Point Solutions in the Contact Center Sector, BenchmarkPortal, Aug. 2, 2007). This same study showed that the total cost of installation and integration for all-in-one solutions was 15 percent lower compared to multi-point solutions. In addition, the study revealed that the average annualized system administration cost per agent for all-in-one solutions was 60 percent lower compared to multi-point solutions.

But contact centers should be wary when comparing unified architectures. The popularization of the term "unified communications" has resulted in major confusion for end-users. Some vendors have taken advantage of this confusion by offering poorly implemented, consumer-oriented technologies to lock business customers into proprietary "UC" product lines offering soft ROI at best. So be sure to ask specific questions about the level at which a UC solution incorporates open standards such as SIP. Are there any required "connectors" needed to interface to other systems and if so, how much do they cost? How many servers are required? Are additional database licenses required?

By delving deeply into a vendor's architectural approach to ensure it's truly "unified," contact centers can rest assured that the investments they make will be well-protected into the future. Equally important, it will give them the holistic, enterprisewide view they need to migrate from the efficiency model of the past, to the effectiveness model of the future.

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