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The top five reasons to simplify your customer service desktop

Hint: Whether you have 1 application or 25, you are still dealing with complexity. Let Cindy Curtin, Director of Global Product Marketing & Communications at Jacada, help you and your agents make your lives a lot simpler

Desktop Complexity is a relatively new problem. As little as ten years ago, the typical customer service desktop was not so complex; maybe one or two green-screen applications and a phone sitting next to the computer was all an agent needed. Today, we see desktops with five, 10, 20 or more applications. But complexity is not only dictated by the number of the applications, and many agents are confused by a single application with cumbersome screens – getting in and around the application to get the data they need is akin to brain surgery. What's more, agent 'productivity' tools like email, chat, soft-phone, scripting, and the like only add to the chaos.

In fact, some contact centres have tried to solve this problem by giving each agent two or three monitors!

Desktop complexity presents one of the biggest obstacles to success in the contact centre and it resides on nearly every agent's desk and pervades every call. Given contact centres' ongoing focus on cost reduction and their hesitancy to change existing applications and systems, the problem continues to worsen.

What does it mean to clean up or simplify the desktop? It means setting up your systems and applications to support the agent; implementing a unified service desktop, which gives agents access to anything they need to successfully complete a call within one simplified view, is the smartest way to get your desktops in order. A unified service desktop enables the agent to access process-specific tools and is a single point of access to all the mission-critical applications and tools required to effectively complete a customer interaction.

A unified desktop solution should sit 'on top' of your current applications; it should not be necessary to "rip and replace" your existing applications. Systems that support call flows can make contact centre agents happier, increase efficiencies and customer loyalty, reduce costs... basically improve your performance against all of the metrics you are already measuring. In no particular order, here are the top five reasons you should clean up your customer service desktop. And the sooner, the better.

Cost: Time is Money

There is a reason you are already measuring average handle time (AHT). Naturally, if you can shorten the length of customer service calls, you can service more calls, thereby increasing efficiency and decreasing costs. If you save time, you save money.

But you already knew that. However, you'd be surprised how many people don't realise just how costly desktop complexity is in contact centres.

Agents spend an incredible amount of time navigating through disparate applications or screens. As they say, time is money; that really adds up. Simplifying the desktop and aligning applications with the flows of customer service calls drastically reduces AHT. Further more, the simpler the desktop, the easier it is for agents to learn, thereby reducing the amount of ramp-up time needed to get agents fully productive, which of course translates into further cost savings.

Loyalty: Agents can focus on the Customers or the Systems – You Decide

There are those who argue that the focus on AHT is misplaced and that more earnest focus should be placed on loyalty and satisfaction. But AHT is clearly a cost and efficiency measure that is a) Not totally without merit and b) Not going away, even if you think it is.

But let's think about AHT differently. An agent can have a five-minute call with a customer that is comprised of five minutes of navigating through systems to service the customer and wrap-up the call. Or an agent can have a five-minute call with a customer that contains three minutes of dealing with the systems and data and two minutes of nurturing that customer relationship, building rapport and loyalty or cross-selling products and services. I'd argue that's time well spent.

Even if you don't reduce your total AHT, you can increase your customer loyalty by changing the quality of the interaction, which is made possible when agents are able to focus on the customer, rather than clunky systems. Don't forget that one bad interaction with a contact centre agent can destroy all the customer loyalty your company has worked to earn. And no customer wants to have to provide his or her phone number or account number four times in one call because an agent has to search for him in the billing, inventory, CRM and order management applications, none of which are integrated which leads us to...

Agent Satisfaction: Happier Agents Means Happier Customers

Life as a contact centre agent is not easy. The pay is not (typically) great, the security measures can be overbearing and, as has been reiterated throughout this article, the systems and applications are cumbersome. Agents are often set up to fail rather than succeed.

Of course it's not easy for the contact centre management either. It's been widely reported that contact centres spend between 60 and 70 per cent of their budgets on agent salaries. Training and ramp-up time to get an agent fully productive can take many weeks. Add to that the difficulty in keeping good agents, once such an investment has been made in recruiting and training them, and it's many months before the contact centre sees a return on that investment. This is why in a recent report on contact centre priorities, improving agent retention ranked as the third highest priority (54 per cent).

According to Ventana Research, a major reason that agents resign from their jobs within six months is the difficult systems and technology they must work with to do their jobs. It's pretty clear that simplifying the desktop will have a huge impact on agent satisfaction, and by extension, customer satisfaction. Given the direct correlation between agent satisfaction and customer satisfaction, making your agents happier is a very smart move.

Compliance: Complex Systems and Processes = Exposure

Security has been a concern in the corporate world for some time and contact centres are increasingly faced with compliance and security challenges, as agents must access sensitive customer data. If your agents are navigating back and forth through a number of applications or they are looking at 50 or 60 screens per call, how can you be sure they are following your security policies? How will you mitigate the security and compliance risk presented with outsourced or home agents, when they are not physically in the same building as you and you cannot see them and monitor their behavior?

Cluttered desktops and complicated systems and processes present a real challenge to ensuring that compliance policies are being followed. The desktop and systems should support you in your compliance and security efforts, not thwart them. A unified service desktop allows you to present to your agents with only the data they need to see and nothing else. Further more, optimising the processes within the applications that are part of your unified service desktop will ensure that certain screens are displayed and processes are followed.

Flexibility: Embrace the Latest Contact Centre Trends

Eliminating desktop complexity gives you the freedom to explore some of the interesting new trends in contact centre operations. Outsourcing, off-shoring, virtualisation, home agents, universal agents... these are all hot concepts and they all offer a number of appealing benefits. However, if you want to implement any of these concepts in your contact centre you must first simplify the desktop or risk negating all of the benefits that made them attractive in the first place. There is no point embarking upon any of these initiatives only to shackle your agents with chaotic desktops and laborious processes, which will quickly eat up any efficiency gains you were hoping to realise.

For example, let's assume you are planning to implement a universal agent programme so your agents will be able to handle any call type at any time from any place, eliminating the need to silo them into particular groups or specialties. This creates obvious efficiencies. But unless you streamline the application processes and combine your systems into one, easy-to-navigate desktop, the improvements in agent utilisation that you gain by implementing a universal agent model will be eliminated by the inefficiencies that will result from process and application overload.

So what's the bottom line? You can make lots of changes and implement lots of software in the name of improving your performance against your contact centre metrics. Maybe a new soft-phone will cut down your AHT by a second or two and maybe new, more comfortable chairs and headsets will increase your agent satisfaction score by a few points? However, simplifying your desktop can, in one step, improve your performance in many important metrics for efficiency, effectiveness and corporate governance.