

Beyond Toll-Free Numbers: Using Unified Contact Centers for Better Government

Not so long ago, a contact center meant a group of agents in one location, answering phone calls. Now the agents might be scattered in any number of locations, including home, and can also interact with citizens and employees using Web chat or e-mail. "If good government means increasing service while lowering costs, the contact center is a clear success story," says Russ Plain, product sales specialist for unified communications, Cisco.

More Choices for Citizens

New government unified contact centers reflect changing citizen expectations. "Many citizens and employees have grown up with Web chat, video, and instant messaging and expect these options when they interact with government," says Kathy Ditto, federal unified communications marketing manager. In fact, studies show that citizens age 55 and under visit the agency's Website first when they need information. "Even if citizens go to the Web just to get the agency's phone number, agencies can seize the opportunity to deflect inquiries to a self-service channel," says Plain.

A good example of a Website that entices its visitors to use self-service options is www.irs.gov, which gives visitors a choice of getting answers by voice, Web chat, or e-mail. Offering choices that include the phone makes the Website more attractive as a starting point, which can lead to an increase in self-service.

Providing a choice of interaction methods also lets agencies assign their agents to the contact channel that best suits them, improving service quality. "Agents with strong written skills and lesser verbal skills can work on the e-mail or chat queue," says Ditto, "while agents with strong verbal skills and excellent service personality can be placed in an inbound voice queue."

Increased Satisfaction

Unified contact centers empower the government workforce to increase citizen satisfaction and first-call resolution with new capabilities such as presence. When agents need to escalate a call, for example, they can check real-time presence information to find an expert who is currently available and how to contact them. And in some contact centers, agents can save still more time by seeing the caller's desktop. If a caller is having difficulty filling out an online form, for example, seeing the problem rather than relying on a verbal description can significantly reduce average handling time.

Savings Opportunities

In addition to improving citizen service, unified contact centers can save money by combining separate physical contact centers into one virtual contact center. As an example, consider a government department with 30 agents working in three separate contact centers. The agents handle 300 calls hourly with an average queue time of 13 seconds, and need 36 incoming trunks. When the three locations are blended into a single virtualized contact center so that agents are less likely to be idle, the same number of agents can handle 370 calls hourly with an average queue time that's 10 seconds shorter. Handling more citizen transactions in less time increases government effectiveness, and also reduces costs for incoming trunks.

Another source of cost savings from IP-based contact centers is that agencies can include work-at-home agents, often retirees, who get access to the same call queues and service tools from a home broadband connection. Telework helps agencies support their green emission targets. It also reduces costs: an agency that lets all or some agents work from home experiences ongoing savings from increased capacity utilization, lower sales agent turnover, and real estate savings.

Continuous Improvement Through Better Information

Finally, unified contact centers provide information and analytics capabilities that help agencies continuously improve their service and cost structures. “A wealth of important customer information streams into agencies every day through the contact center,” says Plain. Cisco’s Customer Interaction Analyzer software captures that information so that agencies can better understand citizen needs and respond appropriately.

Business Transformation

Perhaps the most exciting impact of unified contact centers is their role in helping agencies transform their business models:

- The Internal Revenue Service consolidated its separate contact centers into one virtual contact center with shared call-handling rules. “Consolidating separate contact centers has helped the IRS to deliver a consistent customer experience,” says Pete Gastelle, consulting systems engineer, Cisco. “Applying the same rules to every customer interaction is enabling some agencies to process calls 35 percent faster.”
- The U.S. Census Bureau consolidated its internal help desks and will be able to use the same platform to set up for-profit outbound contact centers that collect demographic information for other organizations.
- The Veterans’ Administration originally purchased small distributed contact center solutions based on Cisco Unified Contact Center Express and is now consolidating them into a single unified contact center that provides consistent service. The original equipment is still in use, providing survivability in the event of a network outage.

“Unified communications knocks down boundaries between locations and contact channels,” says Plain. “The end result is to deliver better government service for less money.”

For more information on Cisco Unified Contact Center, visit: www.cisco.com/go/cc.



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