Should You Remote-Enable Your Contact Center?

There's a popular depiction of contact centers, and you've probably seen it in films and TV – the tightly packed, high-pressure, windowless room where agents are frantically juggling incoming calls and pounding the keypad to make countless outbound dials, all while racing the clock.

While this makes for great "boiler room" drama, some modern contact centers look very different – and deliver superior outcomes for agents, for their managers, and ultimately for the business itself.

IMPROVING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE VIA AGENT ENABLEMENT

It is true – despite the occasional Hollywood exaggeration – that traditional contact centers require agents to be in relatively close quarters. That's due to on-premise contact center systems, which operate on the assumption that the agents using the system will be within a certain range of the infrastructure.

Contact centers that have embraced the "remote-enable" paradigm, however, aren't bound by the same geographic restrictions. Cloud contact centers can have agents not only in different rooms – but in separate buildings, cities, states, or even different countries.

The customer, of course, will have no indication that your agents are remote. Menus and greetings, self-service options, and call routing all continue to function seamlessly, whether your agents are in the office or connected from the other side of the country.

If anything, the customer experience may in some cases be improved by adopting a remote contact center scheme. There is ample data demonstrating that remote workers – properly managed, of course – can be happier, better-balanced, and ultimately more productive. The productivity enhancements arrive via several vectors:

- Daily idle time for remote employees, at 27 minutes, is almost 30% lower than the in-office figure of 37 minutes.

- Remote agents may be better at "recharging." They work the time equivalent of an extra 16 days per year – an amazing figure that suggests the slightly longer break times ultimately work to the benefit of both employer and employee.

There are times that a distributed agent workforce is beneficial not only for customers, but for your agents as well. Travel restrictions, illness, or challenging commutes can create scenarios where a close-packed room of employees is undesirable or even impossible.

In situations like these, the remote model delivers benefits including increased agent availability, reduced stress, sharper focus, and even improved physical health. The remote model attains these enhancements thanks to decentralized infrastructure and multiple connectivity options. Agents can log in to receive and place calls from an Internet browser, running a web-based version of the contact center software; a desktop or laptop computer running a local version; and of course, a mobile phone.

Regardless of their connection mode, remote agents can use the contact center software to: stay prepared for calls, chats, and e-mails, while leaving enough time between each to make important notes and enter classification data; maintain awareness of other agents and how many colleagues are currently assisting customers; and keep an eye on overall daily performance via shared wallboards accessible through their browser.

MODERNIZED MANAGEMENT VIA REAL-TIME DASHBOARDS AND METRICS

Speaking of wallboards and dashboards – the next group to derive major benefits from the remote model is managers and supervisors. At first, this seems surprising: how can managers stay connected to the action when employees are remote?

The reality is that a cloud contact center model delivers exceptional visibility to managers, with both high-level and granular data constantly flowing in from all functional areas of the team. That data is presented in a manner that's highly visual and accessible, without sacrificing depth.

Rather than working in close physical proximity to a given agent – which may mean being too focused on one case and missing the larger picture – the software offers real-time dashboards that constantly monitor performance in the moment, as well as trends over time. As a result, managers and supervisors can consistently maintain the "view from above."

To help shape customer experience in the moment, supervisors can use an array of monitoring and assistance tools, including:

- Real-time dashboards: updates on key statistics, such as: how many calls have we been receiving today? Is the trend changing? How long are my customers waiting? Are any customers giving up because they're waiting too long? Overall, how well are we adhering to our service level commitments?

- Executive summary views: These dashboards strip out complexity, and skin the data down to the essential metrics for the day's activities. Executive dashboards are perfectly for passing along to senior officers and management, who know the value of the contact center but may not wish to get caught up in the granular details.

- Live monitor, whisper, and barge-in: When agents are currently speaking with a customer – whether via voice or chat – supervisors can not only monitor the conversation, but take action as needed. Some agents need only a digital whisper in their ear (which only the agent can hear), while others might need a supervisor to directly participate in the conversation. Either can be accomplished in seconds, with just a few clicks.

MULTIPLE BUSINESS BENEFITS

Distributed agent workforces also offer enhancements to recruiting. The ability to work remotely greatly lowers the logistical barriers that a promising new recruit might be facing. If your new hire needs to make relatively few lifestyle changes (or even none), she's far more likely to join your team. That appeal keeps your company near the top of the employer list – and you can thus hire from a much larger area, focusing on finding the right people rather than the perfect physical location.

Employee onboarding also sees a boost. Office proximity ceases to be a mission-critical metric and is replaced by considerations like optimal device configuration and Internet connection – which are much easier problems to solve.

Modern call and contact center managers who embrace the remote working model may also retain those employees for a greater duration of time. Inc Magazine reports that remote agents are notably more likely to stay in their jobs for the next five years.* Surprisingly, those same employees were also far more likely to put in longer hours than their office counterparts – 43 percent more likely, according to the report. While employees can clearly benefit from better work-life balance and improved focus, the company itself receives perhaps the greatest boon – a loyal, happy, productive agent workforce that's more likely to stay with their employer for the long haul.

Handling the ebb and flow of business also becomes more manageable. Businesses that see seasonal spikes and downturns are often excellent matches for the remote-control model. A few examples:

- Accounting, wealth management, and tax service businesses can plan for busy seasons. They have cost certainty because there's little or no hardware outlay, and month-to-month seat pricing lets them taper off subscriptions as the summer arrives.

- Retail companies could add seats in advance of a major new promotion. When the marketing campaign starts driving inquiries, the company can use the reporting tools to stay ahead of the game. They can gauge whether their current contact center levels are adequate or in need of expansion.

- Educational facilities can use remote contact center to better handle student inquiries as the fall enrollment arrives. This might include watching demand levels in real time, offering self-service options to handle common requests, or proactively reaching out at scale to inform students of a program change.

While there are many elements to the customer experience puzzle, it's becoming increasingly clear that a remote contact center structure puts companies in a strong position to connect the pieces – and ultimately dominate the board. Learn how Intermedia Contact Center can help.

*Inc Magazine: https://www.inc.com/brit-morse/remote-work-survey-owl-labs.html

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