Key Considerations for the Selection of Contact Centre Technologies

By Rod Jones   Version 8.0 Revised 1 May 2017

Call centre managers or executives or General Managers responsible for the operations of the organisation's call centre or contact centre are under extreme pressure. The directives coming from the boardroom are loud and clear: *"Cut or reduce Operating Costs. Increase Efficiencies. Increase Revenues. Reduce Business Risk. And drive a dramatic improvement customer satisfaction and loyalty."* But the call centre or contact centre is struggling to deliver on these expectations. In many cases the operation is using old or inappropriate technologies and the may be reliant on a great deal of open source or home-grown applications that simply can't deliver the functionality that the operation and the customers demand.   Staff are frustrated. Customers are frustrated. And the overall customer experience suffers badly. In the contemporary business environment, this cannot be tolerated.

For many contact centre mangers there are usually other factors driving these frustrations. The executive powers are also probably demanding that the organisation establishes several significant competitive advantages and interventions that will drive market share growth and increased revenues from new and existing customers. In many environments, there is a backdrop of the realities relating to staffing and labour; there are additional pressures to ensure significant improvements in operational productivity, whilst at the same time, there may well be headcount freeze.

These realities clearly indicate that to achieve operational excellence, competitive advantage and simultaneously achieve optimum Cost-Benefit for the contact centre, appropriate new technologies will be required.   The myriad of offered solutions, options and alternatives can become incredibly confusing and the decision-making processes could become another series of nightmares; but not if the organisation follows a logical, phased approach.

The starting point of a project to reassess or to plan for new contact centre technologies is to form a cross-functional team made up of relatively senior representatives drawn from Marketing, Sales, HR, IT, Finance and if appropriate, Retail, Logistics and other business units. The team will be required to consider all the implications of the latest corporate strategies, policies and specific business targets and goals and to interpret these in terms of the contact centre's real operational requirements.

Defining the actual technical functionalities that will be required by the contact centre presents the next set of challenges. Functionality must be clearly defined in terms of what will be needed immediately, in the mid-term (12-24 months) and in the longer term, 24+ months. Simultaneously, the team will need to clearly define what will be the non-negotiable "must haves" and the "nice-to-have" features and functions.

The contemporary customer contact centre has evolved to become an incredibly complex ecosystem of People, Processes, Technologies, Data and Knowledge, largely driven by a number of powerful external influences. These external drivers range from global and regional economic and financial realities, labour practices and legislative issues, fluctuating social pressures, market demands, the competitive landscape and generational issues and idiosyncrasies. But fundamentally, when considering new or enhanced or upgraded contact centre solutions, it will boil down to the selection and deployment of a combination of a total of between eighteen and twenty-five different technical functions or applications that will make up the consolidated customer service tool set; the fully integrated contact centre.

The 'must haves' for most contact centres will definitely include a powerful **Automatic Call Distributor** (ACD) capable of handling multiple channels including voice, email, fax, SMS/MMS, chat and not-too-distant-future, video. The ability to configure the ACD to route all types of virtual interactions (Voice, eMail, SMS/MMS, Fax, and Video) to the most appropriately skilled or trained agent is vital. **Outbound dialing** functionality appropriate to the operation will also be an imperative. Particularly if you are considering outbound telemarketing or telesales, debtor management or debt collection as some of the strategies to increase revenues or manage cash-flow, then more sophisticated dialing technologies such as predictive dialing, will be a 'must have'. **VoIP/SIP** architecture, ease of configuration, integration, reporting, scalability, reliability, vendor and support partner credentials are certainty prerequisites when it comes to the selection process for your foundational contact centre platform.

Continued ▶ .

Second in the list of priorities for most contact centres or service-orientated organisations seeking to deploy effective contact centres, will be an appropriate CRM (**Customer Relationship Management**) or CX (Customer Experience) application or solution that will enable contact centre agents to provide an acceptable level of customer service.

Call and Interaction recording is mandatory for any aspiring contact centre to provide the basis for compliance, risk mitigation, quality management and effective coaching and training. The capacity for many contemporary recording solutions to simultaneously record screen and all other contact and customer interaction activity is proving to add significant value to many forms of quality and risk management and these 'high-end' feature should be seriously considered. Be careful to bear in mind that in today's contact centre environment it is necessary to ensure that multi-media recording capabilities are procured. (In addition to telephone/ voice interactions this will include, for example: Screen, Web Chat, Text, Social Media, Video etc.)

Increasingly sophisticated **Quality Assurance** applications and solutions are rapidly becoming essential elements within the contact centre environment as organisations grasp the vital importance of truly listening to the voice of the customer, and using the insights gleaned in this manner to bolster the depth of information required to provide true business intelligence. QA applications also form a vital aspect of training, coaching and staff incentives and motivation.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR), whilst considered by many in a negative light, when configured correctly this powerful tool can provide an extremely positive customer experience. Under certain circumstances IVR can play a significant role in reducing the 'live' call load on the contact centre and consequently, reducing the number of agents and the cost associated with staffing. IVR also plays a major role in the development and deployment of customer self-help and after hour's services. Given the accelerated growth in the level of sophistication and practical applications in natural language speech recognition and voice biometrics it is also important to consider the ability of your chosen IVR platform to integrate these leading-edge technologies.

Given that between 65% and 75% of the average contact centre's operational cost will be consumed by manpower, it's not surprising that operations having upwards on 50 agents are leaning heavily on system-based **Workforce Management** applications. The increasing incidence of contract, temporary and short-shift workers is placing increasing reliance on WFM solutions.

CTI or Computer Telephony Integration, even in its most basic form, will link the operation's voice and data networks to bring vital information and knowledge to the agent desktop to support all manner of service activities. The faster and more accurate the information flow to the contact centre agent, the better will be the quality of the customer interaction. First contact resolution and fast resolution are key drivers for customer satisfaction and significant cost reduction through dramatically improved efficiencies.

The impact of the **Social Networks** on society is self-evident, just as its impact is being felt in the contact centre and customer service environment. The tactics, techniques, tools and technologies to manage this massive social and economic phenomenon is certainly a major consideration when planning the development, deployment or enhancement of today's customer contact centre.

Together with the social network phenomenon is the reality that **Smartphone and Tablet Technologies** are having an incredible impact on the fundamental relationships between service providers and their customers. Having an 'App' is no longer a nice-to-have, but rather a business imperative for any company or organisation intent on maintaining viability and competitive advantage going forward. When architecting your new contact centre technologies, the ability to interface with leading edge mobile technologies will be an imperative.

There are clear indications emerging from North America, Europe, Australasia and certain regions in the East that **Web-based Customer Self-service** and self-help are and will be accounting for an ever-growing percentage of total customer interactions. Whilst it is unlikely that the customer service industry will see a significant decline in voice calls in the foreseeable future, the astute contact centre solution architect will take cognizance of the fact that significant growth in web self-service and web-chat are realities that need to be embraced.

Only a few short years ago, the concept of **Process Automation** was fraught with practical, logistical, and essentially, financial challenges. It used to be an intricate and costly exercise. However, today's contact centre platforms provide incredibly cost-effective process automation solutions. It is process automation that will play a key role in driving down operational costs whilst driving up efficiencies and customer satisfaction. It is imperative when planning a new contact centre solution set that process automation tools form an integral part of the system.

In tandem with **Interaction Analytics** engines, process automation tools can deliver incredible customer experiences whilst simultaneously reducing many expensive human interaction elements, the prohibitive cost of errors and rework and lost opportunities.

Whilst **VoIP (Voice over IP)** is rapidly becoming de facto in most contact centres, together with **SIP (Session Initiation Protocol) and 'Presence'**, these features combine to also enable the contact centre to move into the realm of enterprise-wide 'collaborative' customer service; the ability for an agent to bring colleagues with specialized knowledge or expertise into the problem-solving of information-providing equation and to deliver true first contact resolution.

Other specialized applications giving additional functionality and effectiveness to the contact center's ability to deliver exemplary service will include a raft of tools including agent coaching, scripting, performance management, customer surveys, email response management, knowledge management, speech analytics, web self-service, outbound campaign management and many more.

One of the primary tasks of the project team will be to thoroughly investigate these options and to make decisions as to their appropriateness and of equal importance, when in the business life cycle these technologies will become strategic imperatives. (For example: In my opinion, integration of all contact centre functionalities into the mobile environment has today become a Strategic Imperative.)

Continued ▶

This done, a great deal of thought and much brainstorming and discussion will be needed to address various options such as 'Build vs Buy', 'On- Premises vs Cloud', 'Integrated single suite vs Component-based best-of-breed'. Other issues such as 'Customise vs Configure', Outsource, Co-source or hybrid Build-Operate-Transfer models, or Strategic Sourcing Partnerships will need to be considered and evaluated together with the eternal 'Opex vs Capex' debate. To this end it's really only a formalized weighted scorecard methodology that will provide value in this early phase of planning.

Rather sooner than later, the project team will be well advised to bring all the financial realities to the fore. Early on in the project there's going to be a battle for budget in the boardroom and in that domain there's only one phrase that will hold any water; **'Return On Investment'.**

Before even starting out to plan for the proposed new contact centre technologies, the team is going to have to take a significant back-step; one that's going to need a great deal of energy and effort. In today's harsh world, it's the economics of business that's the real driving force.

In order to justify any form of investment in new or expanded technologies, the project team will be well advised to re-visit the existing call centre or contact centre and really get to grips with the all the factors that currently make up the operation's costing model. It's going to mean investigating operational costs down to the smallest granular level. It is imperative that the team has the ability to present financial models that will give incredibly accurate and credible cost-per-minute (or per second) calculations relating to every conceivable aspect of the existing contact centre. This exercise will have to take into account all manner of customer contact types and channels. As there are well over 400 individually identifiable cost drivers in the average call centre or contact centre, this is no easy task. However, specific call centre costing tools are available from specialist consultants.

Continued ▶

Whilst cost-per-contact (by call type and by channel type) is critically important, cost-per-process is equally vital to the project. The financial realities of 'errors and rework', customer churn, staff turnover, cost-of-training (cost to competence) must also be taken into account.

The bottom-line is that many of the new generation technologies can and will provide practical solutions to most of the day-to-day challenges in the operation, but the fact of the matter is that these solutions will come at a cost; quite a significant cost. To be able to justify these costs, the project team will have to rely on their ability to present rational arguments, the majority of which will be based on ROI.

Cellphone: +27 (0)82-568-9976
eMail: rod@rodjones.co.za
www.rodjones.co.za

RE-PUBLICATION

My articles and white papers are available for re-publication in part of full subject to written agreement. Contact me for more information