

Demonstrating value through successful adoption of technology in contact centres

**A report by Paul Scott
Business Development Director
Dimension Data UK Limited**

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Everywhere you look contact centres are under attack. Whether it be customers dissatisfied with the service they are receiving or senior management who see little value and only cost, or staff who feel unwanted and commoditised or the media who see contact centres as analogous to battery hens as a working environment or even worse, contact centres abroad as a breeding grounds for crime and fraud. It's not an industry positive PR right now.

Individual contact centres and more particularly their management have varying degrees of control and influence to each of these factors, but underlying all these perceptions is a belief that contact centres are not performing as they should.

Every part of business today is under pressure to perform, to deliver more with less and with very few exceptions these required gains are being delivered through process improvements and the deliberate application of technology to support change. Contact centres haven't escaped the march of technology, but worryingly the results from applying technology have not been universally successful. Concerns over the impact of automating customer contact, the threat of job losses and control over quality are often reasons given for delaying or avoiding technology investments.

Seventy percent of the cost* associated with contact centres is bound up in its people, so naturally contact centre management spend a proportionate amount of time managing and shaping this resource to try and optimise performance and output. However only 9% of the budget* in contact centres is in technology, yet it is this area which holds the potential for not only achieving the greatest gains in terms of operational efficiency but also improving customer experience and subsequently revenue and profit performance.

Recently a major mobile phone company automated its customer registration process over the phone and not only achieved a return on its £500,000 investment in 16 weeks, but also managed to improve the all important first contact resolution rate and customer satisfaction at the same time. They are not an isolated case, although the numbers of companies who have adopted natural voice self service – the type of application used in the mobile example – is only 9%, whereas the number of companies planning to adopt voice self service next year is 17%. Is this enough? And why, with such compelling return on investment results, aren't more companies adopting technology to improve their effectiveness and customer satisfaction ratings? Perhaps they feel unsure of the potential for them.

Until quite recently, technology found its way in to the contact centre was via the IT department. Someone employed by IT would be tasked with finding out what technology solutions were available for call recording or call routing. The contact centre operations team had little or no input to the initial selection and only a passing interest in the final decision. Because the processes were seen as generic to contact centres, what was the point of engaging contact centre

management in the specification? Surely it was simply a process of procuring best of breed for the application area, and that normally meant taking whatever the telephony switch vendors recommended for their propriety platform. Things have changed.

Firstly, technology for the contact centre has grown up. It's a mature market, with multiple vendors, systems integrators, niche software application providers and open systems architectures. Secondly there is now a growing movement in contact centres to seek out best practice in technology, through benchmarking, testing, and case studies. And thirdly and more importantly, contact centre managers have acquired commercial skills to be able to specify, assess and decide upon their own technology solutions supported by IT.

This may sound like an idealised transformation, one in which contact centre management grasp control and become masters of their own destiny. For those who have made this transition the rewards are clear: better control and an ability to deliver performance and growth targets, an improved operational cost base and better customer retention, satisfaction and sales. For those unable to grasp control of their technology, there is still an obsessive focus on operational drivers and the conflicting challenges of needing to handle more customer calls with less staff and shorter talk times.

So how can contact centres who fit into this latter category make a start? There is no magic wand but there are some fundamental questions to be asked before embarking on a joined up technology strategy in the contact centre:

- One size does not fit all – technology providers would have you believe that there are only one potential solutions to any contact centre technology requirement. This is very unlikely. Start by asking yourself: what should this solution deliver from a customer perspective? This not only ensures you really do have a technology requirement, but also that the focus for design, build and implementation is always framed with a customer experience perspective. If in doubt say: 'So what's this going to do for our customers?'
 - Oceans rarely boil – technology vendors are experts at selling the big picture: 'Buy this from us now and you'll never need to change the technology architecture again.' If only this were true. adopting an enterprise wide workforce optimisation solution and seeking to deploy it in one go may seem attractive from a resource scheduling point of view, but the risks if you haven't done it before far outweigh the benefits. Workforce optimisation as an example, is complex and fraught with difficulty. It's better to start small and scale, with a proven business case to back up deployments. Chose a group of agents or a customer group, apply the technology there, learn and then think about deployments elsewhere. Vendors will also be willing to demonstrate their solutions have a short ROI, use this to your advantage and you dramatically reduce risk
 - What does 'good' look like – benchmarking provides a consistent way of tracking development of your contact centre, but don't fall into the trap of thinking that achieving benchmark measures constitutes success. Remember benchmarks are just that, averages, not best practice. In deploying technology, select specific KPI's you want to affect, look at your scores versus the benchmark and determine what you believe is a reasonable improvement. This then becomes the basis for your business case.
 - 'Don't just call me when you have a problem'. Parents whose children have left home will know that they usually only get a call when their offspring need money. How refreshing it would be to have regular dialogue that was not just about money? In a similar way, its vital contact centre
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management build a communication strategy with their board which informs and educates them as to the value of the contact centre. Ask yourself these questions:

- How many times a year does the Board, see an actual contact centre?
- How many board members regularly listen to calls from customers?
- How many times a year do you share detailed performance reviews with the board and other management stakeholders such as sales, marketing, collections, or channels?

If you're going to adopt technology to change performance, it's vital the board know and experience for themselves the difference this makes.

In summary the call to action for contact centre management is to make technology your weapon of choice when it comes to improving contact centre performance. Take ownership and demand the best.

1 Automate as many simple transactions as possible, freeing up your agents to do more meaningful and rewarding tasks

2 Understand your business strategy in terms of channels and integration. This will form a key part of the next phase of your development.

3 Take ownership of technology adoption. Build a roadmap for the development of your contact centre which puts technology at the heart of it

4 Engage the board in your vision and plan. Determine who on your board is responsible for customers, invite them to be your sponsor and engage them in your development process. They need to be the oracle for communicating your results and achievements, lobbying for support and advertising your successes and development.

The contact centre industry has had poor PR for too long. It's time the visibility of results that are delivered by correctly deployed technology has full visibility in the board room and throughout your organisation.

* References from the Dimension Data Merchants Global Benchmarking Report 2005



Paul Scott
Business Development Director
Dimension Data UK Limited
