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VoIP Contact Centers

WHEN SMALLER BUSINESSES MUST OVERCOME BIG CHALLENGES

By Jeff Nolte

Companies of every type and size face three interrelated challenges in today's competitive marketplace – improving business processes, enhancing client relationships, and sustaining communications under a variety of disaster scenarios.

To accomplish all this more companies are turning to voice-over-IP technology; specifically, IP phone systems. Not only are they flexible and highly scalable, they provide integrated applications such as a web-based management, telework support and call center capabilities – all of which add value and layers of protection to your business.

What was once affordable to only the largest enterprises is now being deployed by smaller firms. Even contact centers are being routinely added by small firms, justified by more sales, happier customers and protection from disasters.

ADVANTAGES OF IP PHONE SYSTEMS

Taking advantage of the Internet Protocol (IP) for voice calls provides a unique opportunity for businesses to increase productivity and improve customer support. Such systems reduce costs by allowing voice and data traffic to be shared over the same network connections. Companies can also save on local and long distance charges between their office locations.

An IP phone system plugs into the same data network that connects all the PCs and printers in your office. Voice calls between employees in different office locations simply traverse your internal data network or a Virtual Private Network (VPN), while "off-net" calls are automatically routed to the public telephone network.

Since separate voice and data lines are no longer necessary, the overall cost of telecommunications for your business is greatly reduced.

These systems also deliver new time-saving applications, such as unified messaging that puts email, voice messages, and faxes into a single email inbox. Other add-ons for IP Phone system include contact center and telework applications.

HAPPIER CUSTOMERS

You can take control of incoming calls by adding affordable call handling technology to your phone system, enabling your staff to turn calls into sales and improve customer relations. With your own contact center, serving as few as 10 agents, incoming calls are routed automatically to the most appropriate person or location – the first time, every time.

The key component of a contact center is the automatic call distributor (ACD). This software distributes calls to the next available agent. Callers who require expert assistance are positioned with the next available specialist. Those who want to make a purchase are routed to a salesperson, while those who require post-sale support are routed to the technical support team.

The way to handle increasing call volume without losing calls and potential sales is to keep callers in queue with some basic management techniques, such as:

- Notifying callers of expected wait time.
- Inform callers of a web page location to get information.
- Allow customers to leave a phone number for callback.

When too many calls are in queue, they can be re-routed to staff working remotely until the call backlog is reduced. This goes a long way in protecting client goodwill. With total control over allocating inbound phone inquiries, staff can be rostered efficiently across time zones, with calls automatically sent to the best person, regardless of their location. This allows you to offer much more flexible working conditions to staff, handle call volume surges more effectively, and sustain high productivity.

BETTER PERFORMANCE

ACDs provide management tools that enable you to stay on top of your contact center operation. You can easily

measure contact center performance against service level objectives, and tweak operations for improvement.

Real-time monitoring capabilities allow an administrator to track the performance of individual staff members and provide feedback, as well as respond immediately to changing traffic volumes and queue conditions.

In relationship-driven industries such as travel consulting, a company can devote small teams to each customer rather than operating a large, impersonal contact center. With a telework package added to the IP Phone system, remote travel consultants are provided access to all the features and functions of the corporate office, while giving personalized service to clients.

Priority routing is used for customers who prefer to work with one specific consultant, while that individual remains available to take overflow calls within their team. This approach evens out the office workload, mitigating peaks and valleys, resulting in consistent service delivery for clients.

And instead of flying agents to a particular office to help fulfill seasonal demand, your company could use the telework solution instead. By linking all of its locations together, backup agents would be on standby and ready to work without having to travel to a distant centralized call center.

STAY IN BUSINESS DURING A DISASTER

One of the compelling advantages of IP phone systems is how easily they can be configured for decentralized operation, which makes them better suited to disaster recovery than the traditional centralized PBX architecture. There are several effective ways to use VoIP to back up a business and its contact center.

A telework program can keep critical business functions going even if your office building becomes inaccessible when disaster strikes. Incoming calls into office phones can be remotely redirected, allowing staff unaffected by the disaster to continue supporting customers, closing sales and providing essential services until your building reopens.

Some IP phone system manufacturers offer unique features, such as Mitel's remote hot-desking capability, which allows visitors to a remote office to securely log in to any telephone and use that extension as if it was their own.

Mitel also offers the ability to network multiple office locations using redundant paths, providing businesses with the opportunity to continue operating during the worst of scenarios. If one communication path is knocked offline by a local disaster, calls are rerouted to another location over a different communication path.

When contact agents are distributed over multiple locations, the agent can stay connected during a link or phone system failure. The network will automatically re-home the call to the backup system to which they have been pre-registered. When the primary link or system is restored to service, the agent is automatically returned to that resource.

VoIP systems offer new cost saving backup capabilities. In the event of system failure a single ISDN PRI link can be automatically switched to a redundant controller. This allows your business to remain in operation − without the cost of a second PRI link.

If your other locations have not transitioned to IP and are still operating with older phone systems, those locations can still handle rerouted calls from the main location. The IP phone system's support for legacy protocols supports interoperability with traditional PBXs.

In addition to routing "off-net" and 911 calls to the public switched telephone network (PSTN), IP phones can be set up to automatically switch over to the PSTN in the event of a WAN failure.

IP has made it easier to manage multiple sites during a disaster. A web-based management system makes it easy to configure IP Phone systems in various locations. In fact, tasks that formerly required an expensive visit by a vendor's technician are now routinely handled by in-house staff.

BOTTOM LINE

Contact center technology was once affordable to only the largest enterprises. Smaller firms simply couldn't cost justify the investment. That gap is now closed. Now businesses of any size can increase sales, expand their customer base and protect themselves against disaster with contact center technology and telework solutions added to their IP Phone system. ■

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