Bridging the Communications Gap Between IT and Contact Centers

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1  
How to Fix the Problem ................................................................................................... 1  
Overcoming the Obstacles .............................................................................................. 2  
Final Thoughts ................................................................................................................ 8  
About Knowlagent .......................................................................................................... 9  
About DMG Consulting.................................................................................................... 9
Introduction

In far too many organizations, contact centers and IT groups do not speak the same language, resulting in distrust, poor service, and a great deal of frustration. Surprisingly, the underlying cause of this long-standing communication gap appears to be justifiable, even though it’s not acceptable: IT and contact center leaders have divergent goals that tend to put them at odds. The contact center’s top priorities are to improve productivity and keep costs down, to maintain service quality, and to provide an outstanding customer experience. IT’s main goals are to keep systems up and running, keep technology costs and complexity down through standardization and simplification, and to use technology to provide a strategic advantage. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Divergent Goals of IT and Contact Centers

Fixing the Problem with a Shared Vision

The easiest and most expedient way to address this internal conflict is for senior executives to introduce a new, unifying goal for IT and contact centers (and all other departments, for that matter). All internal and external-facing departments should prioritize external customers. The wording may vary, but essentially, all departments should “provide external customers with an outstanding customer experience.” The relative importance of this goal will differ based on the function, but if it were at least the
fourth most important objective for all departments, and managers had a portion of their bonus riding on its success, they would figure out how to make it happen. As importantly, this approach would be instrumental in helping senior executives achieve this goal, which many now claim as a top corporate priority.

**Overcoming the Obstacles**

Since the “fix” is obvious and achievable but is not happening in most companies, there must be dynamics that are hindering its implementation. Significant impediments include cost as well as the inability to accurately measure how each internal and external-facing department impacts and contributes to the customer experience.

When senior executives ask managers to change their goal structure, their response is usually to quantify the cost and effort required to achieve the new objective. While delivering an outstanding customer experience should be a priority for all corporate functions, some groups, including IT, have been cut to the bare minimum and are struggling to meet their current goals with existing resources. What this means is that in order to get IT to share the corporate goal of delivering an outstanding customer experience, the effort needs to be partially funded or at least facilitated by senior management.

Figure 2 provides best practices that will improve cooperation between contact centers and IT groups and, in doing so, result in improved service and, often, reduced costs. For example, making timely changes to an interactive voice response (IVR) will decrease call volume and increase customer satisfaction.

**Figure 2: Contact Center/IT Best Practices for Collaborating**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact Center/IT Best Practices for Collaborating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior executives from IT and the contact center should meet quarterly to review each other's performance and to share their plans for the next quarter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and dollars should be set aside as part of the annual budget process to support unplanned contact center changes.</td>
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</table>
IT should create a balanced scorecard that shows its service level performance in areas that matter to contact centers, including system uptime, application response time, responding to planned and unplanned routing and IVR changes, time required to complete troubleshooting, etc.

Contact center leaders should work jointly with IT to establish the performance metrics that are important to them. (Contact centers require service level agreements (SLAs) that are different from other departments).

Severity levels and guidelines for escalating problems should be created especially for the contact center. (Contact centers need to be highly responsive in order to optimally represent the enterprise to its customers. If this costs more, build it into the budget).

Formal processes and policies should be set up and followed for various departments to notify each other of operational and performance issues.

When problems that impact customers are identified, IT should immediately notify the contact center and give realistic time frames about when the problem will be fixed.

IT and the contact center should each assign liaisons or point people who are responsible for interacting with one another on a daily basis to understand what is happening and pass along information to the impacted parties.

IT should relay information to the business in layman’s terms.

If IT helps to solve a customer-facing issue, they should share in the rewards.

Currently, their differing goals constantly put IT and the contact center at odds: contact centers strive to deliver an outstanding and differentiated customer experience while IT is being asked to standardize and simplify the technical and operational environment for the corporation. Both groups need to acknowledge the conflict and find a common
ground and language that will help them work together. Shown in Figure 3 below are a few examples of the issues and challenges that contact centers and IT often face when working together. This Figure also suggests ways to overcome these issues, based on the best practice guidelines presented in Figure 2.

Even with perfect planning, business changes and unexpected events or problems happen. When business requirements change or challenges arise, the goal should be to work collaboratively to resolve the issues as quickly as possible in order to minimize their impact on external customers. See Figure 3. Just because an event is not planned does not mean that it is unimportant. And when external customers become a priority for support groups, including IT, an additional benefit is that their internal client, in this case the contact center, also gets better service and support.
**Figure 3: Closing the Communications Gap between Contact Centers and IT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Contact Center Managers Say</th>
<th>Contact Center Meaning</th>
<th>IT Reaction</th>
<th>How To Work Together</th>
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<tr>
<td>We need to change contact center routing.</td>
<td>Due to a change in the business, the current call routing is not working well, resulting in sub-optimal service. It is also generating incremental calls, increasing cost, and producing unhappy and angry customers. It needs to be changed yesterday, if not sooner.</td>
<td>This is not a priority because there is no service interruption; calls are being processed. The request should be placed at the back of the queue with other unplanned tasks because: 1. There are more important tasks to be addressed where a user is down 2. It is not planned or budgeted 3. There are limited telecom resources and no one is available to help (because this is unplanned)</td>
<td>The contact center liaison should immediately notify their counterpart in IT of the issue via a call or email explaining what needs to be done to correct the routing issue. This should be followed up with the standard IT change request form and include a high-level test plan or script so IT can validate the changes after they are made. IT should identify and allocate resources as quickly as possible. IT’s liaison should notify the contact center representative about when the changes will be made. The contact center and IT should jointly test the changes, if this is feasible.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<p>| We need to enhance the IVR and add a new option. | Adding a new IVR option (or modifying an existing one) will reduce the volume of calls to live agents; time frame – the sooner | Same as above, plus: The contact center should have planned and budgeted for this | Same as above. Additionally, the contact center should provide a high-level estimate of the number of calls that can be avoided and |</p>
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<td>We want to modify the agent servicing application (customer relationship management application) to speed up processing time.</td>
<td>the better.</td>
<td>activity.</td>
<td>the potential cost avoidance or savings, so that IT understands the impact on the company’s bottom line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application response times are too slow; it’s taking too long for agents to pull up a screen.</td>
<td>Yay! We figured out a way to reduce agent manual processing in order to decrease agent average handle time and processing errors.</td>
<td>Customer service is claiming benefits that are anecdotal and too small to make a difference to the company. There is no reason to modify the entire development schedule to help them. It can wait until the next budget cycle when we’ll consider it.</td>
<td>Follow the same steps as the call routing example above. Also, build a “quick and dirty” business case that justifies the change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A change is needed immediately.</td>
<td>Agents are bogged down waiting for systems to respond to requests – it’s taking 1 to 3 seconds more than expected. This is throwing off our forecasts and resulting in bad service levels and customer dissatisfaction. Customers are angry about having to wait, and they’re yelling at agents, who are struggling to fill the delays with chit-chat.</td>
<td>On average, according to our tracking systems, the response times are fine. No one else is complaining. If you can actually prove that your response time is degenerating, we’ll look into the issue.</td>
<td>IT needs to appreciate the impact of these performance slowdowns on the contact center. IT should investigate and identify the underlying reasons for the system delays and fix them. The quicker it is corrected, the better it will be for everyone, particularly external customers.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Now, now, now.</td>
<td>We’ll review it and get back to you about if and when we’ll be able to fit it into our current schedule. Resources have to be freed up,</td>
<td>Contact center managers need to communicate with IT and explain the required change and its benefit to the contact center and, possibly,</td>
</tr>
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## Table Examples for Contact Center Meaning:

- **Activity:**
  - Customer service is claiming benefits that are anecdotal and too small to make a difference to the company. There is no reason to modify the entire development schedule to help them. It can wait until the next budget cycle when we’ll consider it.

- **Yay:**
  - We figured out a way to reduce agent manual processing in order to decrease agent average handle time and processing errors.

- **Now, now, now:**
  - According to our tracking systems, the response times are fine. No one else is complaining. If you can actually prove that your response time is degenerating, we’ll look into the issue.
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<td>and it has to go through the change control process. No promises.</td>
<td>the enterprise. Contact center leaders also have to build a business case to justify the investment, which means that IT needs to provide cost estimates on a very timely basis. If the benefits of the change do not justify allocating IT resources to it, contact center managers should hold off and combine it with a different change at a later date. If the benefits of the change exceed its cost to IT, it should be prioritized and made immediately.</td>
<td></td>
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Final Thoughts

Contact centers operate in real time, with customers breathing down their necks. IT operates behind the scenes and does not appreciate the pressure of being the voice of the enterprise to customers. IT needs to “see the bigger picture” and the contact center needs to understand that everything cannot be done yesterday, particularly in the world of internet protocol (IP) where there are vast interdependencies between voice and data applications.

The growing emphasis on providing an outstanding customer experience means that contact centers are finally getting some recognition within enterprises. IT needs to accept that they cannot simply continue with business as usual; they need to build a strong and positive working relationship with the service and sales arms of their company. Establishing a common goal – prioritizing the external customer experience – is a good first step, but it's not enough. IT and contact centers also have to accept that because their primary departmental goals put them at odds, they must build formal guidelines and SLAs that enable them to work together, particularly when things are not going according to plan. The fact is that IT and contact centers need each other.

There are many cloud-based contact center infrastructure and application vendors who are willing to respond to constantly changing contact center priorities, sometimes for less than this would cost internally. Not all contact centers want to use cloud-based infrastructure and applications, but all want an IT group that partners with them, speaks their language, and moves quickly when business needs require it.
About Knowlagent

Knowlagent is the leader in intraday management solutions for contact centers. Its patented RightTime software increases agent performance and productivity by making idle time useful, enabling agents to work on personalized and prioritized activity queues consisting of training, coaching, communication and other off-phone activities. Knowlagent’s solutions are on-demand, easy to use and require no capital expenditures. More than 375,000 agents and managers around the world use Knowlagent’s solutions every day. For more information, call 888-566-9457 or visit us online at www.knowlagent.com.

About DMG Consulting

DMG Consulting LLC is an independent research, advisory and consulting firm that provides strategic and tactical advice to enterprise and contact center managers, vendors and the financial community regarding the contact center, back-office and analytics. Our mission is to help clients build world-class contact center and back-office environments by leveraging technology, processes and people. We provide insight and guidance to assist management in optimizing performance by increasing operational efficiency, providing an outstanding customer experience, enhancing loyalty, and increasing sales and profits. DMG devotes more than 10,000 hours annually to researching various segments of the contact center, analytics and back-office markets, including vendors, technologies, best practices, solutions and their benefits and ROI. More information about DMG Consulting can be found at www.dmgconsult.com.