

SUCCESSFUL MULTICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRE INTEGRATION – WITHOUT THE HIDDEN COSTS!

The strategies to adopt and the pitfalls to avoid for sustainable multichannel integration

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INTRODUCTION

Many managers of mid-sized, multichannel contact centres find it hard to meet the key performance metrics set for their business area. On the one hand they are under pressure to reduce operating costs, and on the other, customers expect to be able to contact the business at any time, using any device or channel.

Senior management are forcing the introduction of new channels other than voice. They recognise that the handling costs per unit are lower and that this should lead directly to a reduction in overall operating costs.

The reality is that some methods of channel integration result in significant hidden costs to the business. This paper identifies those costs. It then proposes a sustainable approach to multichannel contact centre integration which delivers high quality customer engagement with a low operating cost profile.

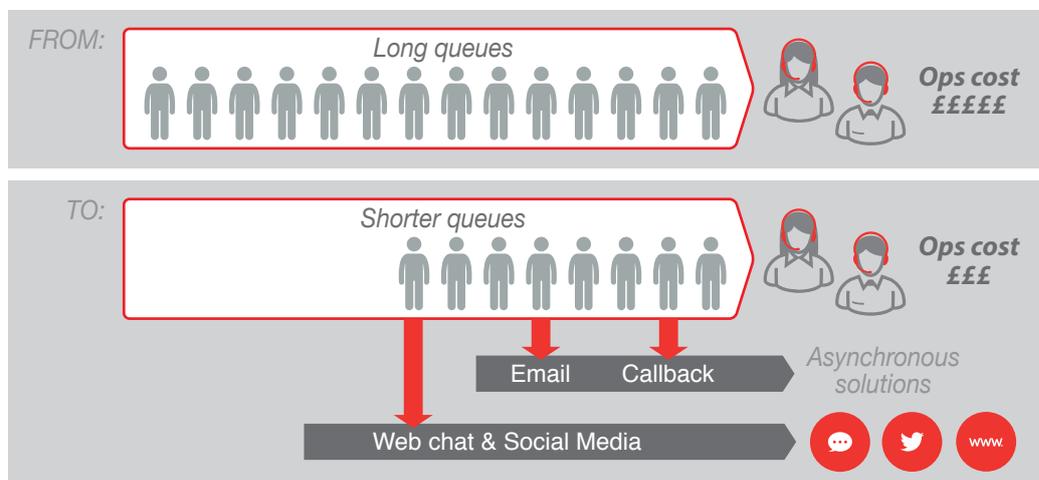
THE PAIN FACING MULTICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRE MANAGERS IN THE UK

- Growing preference for channels like email and web chat over voice
- Channels other than voice tend to have lower operating costs
- Complexity introduced when new standalone systems/channels are integrated
- Poor integration strategies can lead to increased operational costs

Most managers in charge of UK contact centres or customer experience programmes are facing a difficult time. Customers expect to be able to contact the business any time of the day, using any device or channel of their choosing. Voice is no longer the only option. Many customers now prefer to use email, web chat or social media instead.

More to the point, as the per unit handling cost of these new channels tends to be lower than voice, senior managers are imposing the implementation of channels like web chat and social media into the contact centre in an effort to drive down overall operating costs, a process often referred to as channel shift.

THE CASE FOR CHANNEL SHIFT



This channel shift strategy, of diverting voice traffic to email, web chat or social media, is a logical response when you are under pressure to reduce costs. The problems surface when you try to physically implement these new channels into day-to-day operations.

It's rare for contact centres to be able to throw out their entire communications infrastructure and replace it with something new overnight. Arguably, it's a high risk strategy too. More typical is that contact centre managers have a mix of legacy equipment, at various stages of depreciation. When they are forced to implement a new channel like web chat, they are obliged to add that application as a standalone system. This builds complexity into the whole operation, increases risk and compromises productivity. It all comes down to how well each new channel is integrated.

When adding a new channel to your existing infrastructure, the primary focus is to allow existing agents to handle new types of customer interaction using the same agent desktop screen. Whilst this is a logical and pragmatic approach, poorly engineered integration can, in fact, lead to even higher operational costs, and can negatively impact the customer's experience.

The impact of poor integration shows up in the high level metrics which senior management use to monitor the performance of the contact centre. Yet the underlying causes of sub-par performance are often difficult to identify or quantify because of the various layers of complexity involved.

This paper exposes some of the hidden costs associated with poorly integrated contact centre deployments. It will go on to show how contact centre managers in mid-sized companies can achieve an optimised customer engagement environment with a low operating cost profile.

THE MULTICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRE DILEMMA

- Web chat and social media volumes set to grow by more than 30% pa
- Voice becoming the main channel for complex and sensitive interactions
- 39% of mid-sized companies reducing operating expenditure in 2014
- Adding new standalone channels can negatively impact agent productivity

Today, anyone taking responsibility for a contact centre or customer experience programme enters a challenging environment. They will probably inherit a technology solution consisting of various applications bolted together with perhaps a legacy telephony platform at its heart.

As a minimum, they will have to manage customer interactions from voice, letters in the post and email sources. Increasingly, they are being forced to accommodate customer requests from new channels such as web chat and social media. Table 1 highlights the share of interactions by channel, and the extent to which proportions will change as we head towards 2017.

	2011	2014	2017
CHANNEL	%	%	%
Voice / Telephone	79	73	68
Email	10	14	16
Web chat	<1	2	6
Self-service	4	6	5
Social media	0	1	3
Letter / Post	2	3	2
Other	4+	1	0
	100	100	100

TABLE 1: SHARE OF CUSTOMER INTERACTION BY CHANNEL
(Based on data from: ContactBabel, "UK Contact Centres in 2014 – The state of the industry")

It is expected that web chat and social media will experience compound annual growth rates of 37% and 32% respectively between 2013 and 2017.

Email will grow at 6% per annum, whilst the volume of voice calls is expected to decline over the period to 2017. However, where voice is concerned, it is anticipated that average call length will increase as it will become the channel of choice for handling more complex customer interactions.

Organisations appear to be structuring their technology investment plans accordingly. Some 43% are planning a move to an IP-based communications platform¹ that will make it easier to integrate applications such as web chat and social media.

It is clear that most contact centres recognise the inevitability of a multichannel environment. What is less clear is if they understand the consequences of the integration strategy they intend to adopt.

This is all the more important for medium-sized businesses in the UK where resources continue to be stretched. Indeed, some 39% of medium-sized companies with a call or contact centre are expected to reduce operating expenditure in 2014. For 18%, the capital expenditure budget will shrink too¹.

How are contact centre managers expected to cope?

Most accept the status quo and force agents to navigate between the user interfaces of each different application. The supporting infrastructure is a mix of dedicated servers and individual cloud-based solutions, each requiring separate administration.

Every standalone channel application adds another layer of complexity to the main communications system. This is more likely to slow down agent performance and directly impact on the quality of customer management. Indeed, a poorly conceived multichannel integration strategy can provoke a host of other hidden costs that will thwart plans to reduce operating costs and frustrate attempts to improve productivity. The next section describes the areas to be aware of.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF POOR MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATION

Beware of:

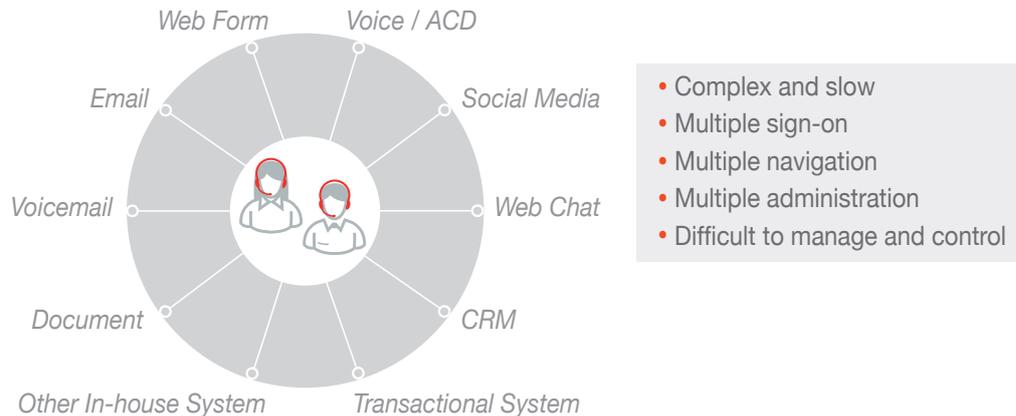
- Excessive agent training time
- Incomplete interactions and information
- Compromised agent capability
- Poor analytics and reporting

Most multichannel contact centres consist of little more than a disparate collection of standalone applications which can be viewed on an agent's desktop. Agents still need to access each individual application in order to complete an interaction event end-to-end. This has a number of implications:

Excessive training time:

Agent training tends to be specific for each application. As each new upgrade or workaround is published, time is required to train agents on the changes. The more applications involved, the higher the potential for application conflicts, and the greater the time required for training.

MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATION WITH STANDALONE SYSTEMS



Quantifying time spent on agent training is fairly straightforward. The hidden costs tend to be around the support processes. Good training programmes require a considerable amount of planning. For example, IT management need to update systems and software whilst contact centre managers need to introduce subsequent compliance procedures to ensure the training has been effective.

The total support hours involved are often allocated under an overhead cost centre and can be considerable. They will show up as departmental cross charging during annual budget negotiations.

Incomplete interactions:

The various layers of complexity arising from multiple applications make it difficult for agents to follow pre-scripted procedures. A one-off training event is rarely successful. Agents tend to learn how to implement a procedure correctly over a period of time. This results in a high incidence of incomplete or incorrect interactions during the on-the-job learning period. Not only will this have a direct impact on customer satisfaction levels, but it will also result in incomplete and inaccurate data being entered manually on internal systems, effectively storing up problems for future customer engagements.

Quantifying the impact of this is very challenging. It will only manifest itself during a future interaction with a customer. Such engagements will take longer to resolve and are more likely to be frustrating experiences for the customer. Assigning costs to each of these aspects is very difficult, but the impact on productivity is undeniable.

Restricted views of critical information:

With most integrated multichannel solutions, it is rare for agents to see the full history of interactions and account transactions without having to navigate between multiple screen views of standalone applications. Each application screen will have a different layout and workflow. Agents must become familiar with each one.

In the heat of a call, agents will tend to adopt a coping strategy that will make the most of the situation they are encountering. They are likely to push administrative and compliance requirements into wrap-up. Obviously, the more applications that need to be updated, the longer the wrap-up time involved. This clearly impacts agent availability and, consequently, queue length, not just for voice, but for most other channels.

Identifying the cost to the business for this is a challenging exercise. Simply assigning a cost to an abandoned call only recognises part of the problem. The business is incurring a cost in lost productivity in agents having to learn and navigate different applications. This can be a difficult figure to calculate.

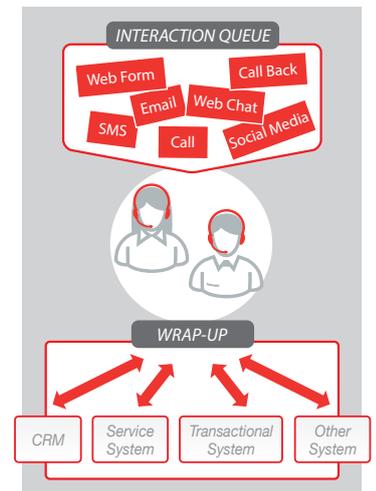
Furthermore, the complexity of having multiple applications open can impact system performance and cause instability of the whole agent support system. This has knock-on implications. Significant effort is required from the IT department, not just in terms of operational support, but also for the complex planning needed to deliver the upgrades and workarounds associated with each of the different applications. The financial cost will only become apparent during the annual departmental budget negotiations.

Compromised agent capability:

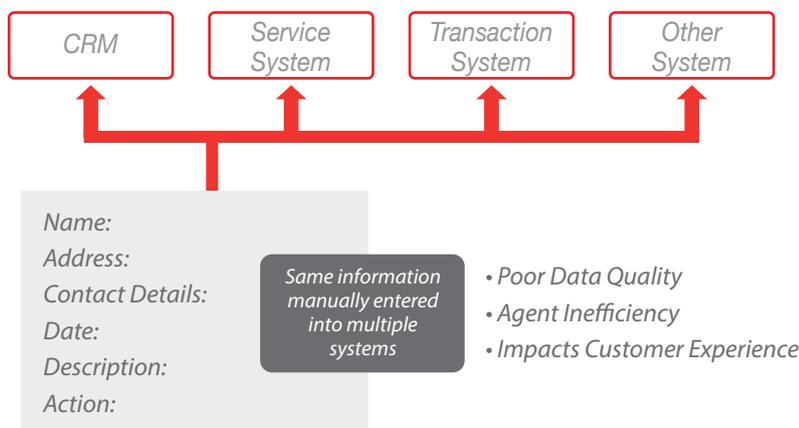
With agents pressured to complete activities to defined target levels, the ability for them to upsell and cross-sell is likely to be limited. Setting standards for performance is obviously important for any contact centre. However, complex multichannel integration can frustrate the business unit's ability to meet those targets.

For example, a simple customer change of address request may need to be manually entered onto multiple systems, but, given an operational peak in demand, the request is left for a quieter moment in the day. However, not dealing with the request straightaway increases the risk that it will be forgotten altogether.

PRESSURE ON AGENTS



RISKS OF STANDALONE SYSTEMS



Another significant risk is that manual data entry can introduce errors into internal systems. The cost of this only appears during the planning and implementation of subsequent customer campaigns. These tend to be subject to delays due to poor data quality. In some instances, poor data quality could compromise other routines such as the invoicing cycle.

Considerable additional time and effort is then required to cleanse the data, and of course, delays to key business initiatives will have a consequential impact on sales performance. These indirect costs are difficult to quantify but undoubtedly accumulate as a cost to the business as a whole.

Poor reporting, analytics and planning:

For many mid-sized businesses where the contact centre solution has evolved piecemeal, so too has the reporting capability. Typically, core data is extracted from individual standalone applications and then manually manipulated to create the desired reports using spreadsheets. More often than not, the data is adjusted to compensate for quirks associated with each application.

It is not uncommon to have one or more individuals producing manual reports on a full-time basis. These individuals become experts in the complex series of steps required to manipulate the data. Losing such an expert can present a contact centre manager with a real headache.

Another consequence of manual reports is that activities like workforce planning will be based solely on historical models rather than real-time activity. Without effective integration, it will be difficult to manage demand spikes in any of the inbound channels.

Perceived issues with legacy technology:

Many managers feel limited by the telephony infrastructure within their business. Migrating from a traditional PBX / voice telephony system to an IP-based platform, will certainly make the adoption of web-based applications easier to deploy. However, relying on platform migration is not a solution in itself.

Some contact centres built on legacy telephony platforms are nothing short of mission critical. Managers feel further channel integration will be too complex and expensive. Instead, their customer management plans are wholly dependent upon a major investment project to churn the whole communications and contact centre infrastructure in one go.

Such projects can tie-up significant amounts of cross-functional resources and can involve numerous external consultants. These projects need to be meticulously planned and implemented. Not only are they complex and expensive, but the rip-and-replace nature of such projects carries enormous risk to business continuity. Exploring an overlay contact centre solution, which can work on a legacy or IP-based platform, or even part hosted in the cloud, is arguably a less risky option for the business.

Furthermore, the longer a company takes to allow customers access to the contact channel they wish to use, the more likely brand perceptions will be tarnished. This is another cost that is difficult to quantify but is undeniable in its impact.

Migrate at your own pace:

These are just some of the hidden costs associated with complex and poorly integrated multichannel contact centres. Senior managers need to consider these in addition to the more obvious contact centre issues such as longer call durations, uncontrollable queue lengths and negative customer satisfaction.

Our experience suggests that no matter what technology platform is involved, and whatever stage of the multichannel lifecycle a business is at, steps can be taken to reduce complexity and improve customer engagement.

What's more, effective options can be deployed for relatively little cost with payback in a matter of months. More structured solutions can be phased in at a pace that matches a company's development. The next section explains how.

IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATION STRATEGY

- Strategies for multichannel integration driven by unique business needs
- Integrating standalone systems may not represent best long term solution
- Lowest total cost of ownership (TCO) is derived from single suite of applications

Given the dynamic nature of a contact centre environment, it is not really feasible to be prescriptive about strategy. Each contact centre will have its own unique set of call patterns and level of application maturity.

What is important is to identify the components of a strong multichannel integration strategy and then select what is right for you. Whilst adding each new channel as a standalone application seems like the obvious integration plan to adopt, it's worth stepping back to consider the longer term picture.

Our experience, which is consistent with the views of Gartner analysts², suggests that the most effective contact centre infrastructure solutions are those delivered by a single platform. Such solutions integrate a range of channel applications as a single entity, and require the management of a single vendor.

Keep these options in mind as you assess which multichannel integration strategy is right for you. Your search is likely to start by addressing the urgent before the important. Urgency for most contact centres is responding to queue lengths. Consider the following tools and applications:

Rapid routing:

The start point is to consider the fundamental approach to call management. The triage approach makes sense in most instances. Borrowing from the healthcare industry, the aim is to prioritise calls according to the urgency of the caller's need.

This means asking key questions up-front, capturing the relevant information into a system that can be transferred with the call, and then routing the call to the agent with the relevant skills. The importance of not having the caller repeat key information can be a critical factor for metrics such as Customer Effort and the NetPromoter score.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

<i>URGENT</i> <i>(Queue Management)</i>	<i>IMPORTANT</i> <i>(Sustainable Solutions)</i>
<i>Rapid Routing</i>	<i>Workforce Management</i>
<i>Automated Call Backs</i>	<i>Universal Queue</i>
<i>Pre-Emptive Activities</i>	<i>Single Sign-on</i>
<i>Flexible Agent Pools</i>	<i>Seamless Navigation</i>
<i>Self Service Alternatives</i>	<i>Application Pricing</i>
	<i>Deployment Options</i>

Interactive voice response (IVR) is an obvious starting point for initial call handling and information capture, providing the options are not excessive. Another option is to use advanced speech recognition or an automated switchboard. Not only can these options route voice calls to a department, but some can successfully route calls directly to a named individual or indeed, a complete automated process. It means calls can be successfully routed without an agent getting involved at all.

It is also worth exploring prioritised routing options which can identify high value customers and re-prioritise their place in the queue or divert the call to a specialist team.

Call back:

For voice calls, an automated solution can capture the caller's core contact information before professionally closing the call (and so reducing the queue). The system will then use business rules to automatically connect the next available agent with the appropriate skills to the original caller. Call back solutions typically reduce agent costs by ten percent and can achieve a rapid payback.

For callers who may also be active on your website, consider displaying a call-me-back feature. This is essentially a web form which captures contact details and can then be streamed alongside voice calls in an agent's universal queue. It can also be used to capture enquiries made outside of normal office hours. Careful phraseology can ensure a customer's expectations are successfully managed. It also means they do not have to make another attempt to re-contact the centre. Instead, a contact centre agent will get in touch when the office re-opens. Web chat is another option which is discussed below.

Pre-emptive activities:

Understanding the type of calls in your queue can help you to deploy call avoidance tactics. Routine inbound enquiries can be prevented by sending out reminders in advance by voice, SMS or automated email. It may be possible to set up web-based or automated speech solutions for many routine functions. This allows inbound traffic to be diverted from the queue, via an announcement in the IVR or automated switchboard.

Flexible agent pools:

This aims to match the pool of available agents to the peaks and troughs in queue volumes.

The first option is to ensure contact centre staff are multi-skilled enough to handle additional types of interaction. It will then be easier to blend calls, emails, outbound and so on, avoiding the situation where one agent group is overloaded whilst another group is less stretched.



Another option is to enable contact centre events (calls, emails, web chat and others) to be routed to staff outside of the contact centre when demand spikes. This means being able to access staff in other departments, other company sites or even those working from home.

Key enablers for this will be virtualisation technology, effective workforce management tools and the ability to provide queue visibility to the back-up staff pool. To maximise the potential benefits, new business process management (BPM) tools can enable systems such as CRM, content management and skills-based routing, to link to each interaction. This blending of technologies will help to make flexible agent pools a sustainable reality. More about this below.

Self-service alternatives:

It is now relatively straightforward to implement a range of self-service options for customers. They allow enquirers to achieve their needs without waiting in a queue. The real effort comes in educating customers that these self-service options are available.

Automated speech-based agents can be very effective in diverting inbound interactions directly to the tools and options customers want. Customers may simply wish to check an account balance or find out about an upcoming event. Automated speech applications have proved very effective in this area. Alternatively, an automated speech agent can divert an interaction away from a queue to an online application.

Typical web-based examples range from store locators to account status visibility and even secure online payments. Look for specialist contact centre vendors in this area as they can deploy proven solutions quickly and securely.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE MULTICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRE

Routes to sustainability:

- Workforce management
- Universal queue
- Skills-based routing
- Streamlined workflows and system integration

Once you have dealt with the urgent task of managing your queue, you will want to ensure your ability to control performance is sustainable into the future. We're moving from the urgent to the important!

This requires the deployment of more sophisticated technologies which can be truly transformational for the business. What you might find surprising is that deploying these technologies can be very quick and relatively inexpensive with payback in a matter of months in some cases. Here are some examples to consider.

Predictive workforce optimisation:

Your workforce management (WFM) application should do more than just estimate the ratio of staff to customers at different periods of time. Being able to access data for interaction activity can also help with optimising workforce allocation across multiple channels. Soon, it will be possible to use workforce tools to develop plans to cater for web chat and social media as well as the traditional voice and email traffic.

That same workforce planning tool could also help to drive agent adherence initiatives. Using post-call survey results, contact centres can drill down to identify the relevant recorded calls and associated performance and quality metrics. This is a very effective way to identify specific instances affecting the customer's experience. Managers can then target training to change behaviour, improve processes and enhance agent productivity.

These inputs also help contact centres to be more predictive about traffic patterns in real-time and can use this information to dynamically manage agent pool optimisation. WFM will typically reduce agent costs by ten percent for any site, and achieve payback in less than twelve months for sites with thirty or more agents.

Engineering smooth customer interactions:

Some of the key problems to overcome with multichannel contact centre integration are the delays and conflicts that occur from having standalone applications glued together. One way to address this is by introducing a universal queue. This is the ability to present customer interactions from every source in one common queue view. So, an agent will see a voice caller alongside a web chat or social media enquirer.

Interactions can be prioritised in real-time based on urgency, and use skills-based algorithms to route the interaction to the most appropriate agent. For example, workflows can be arranged to reflect that some agents are more competent at speaking rather than writing. It means you can ensure all customer interactions are being tracked consistently, and according to the business rules you set. It also makes reporting much easier as data is drawn from a single engine rather than a multiplicity of others.

With a single view in place, you can focus on interactions of the first-time-fix variety, with minimal subsequent follow-up calls. It will be possible for customers to use any device they choose to make contact and not have to repeat details of their enquiry.

To enable this you will need to ensure the appropriate information in the CRM system can be presented to the relevant agent. Agents need to be able to see all recent interactions, from all channels, as well as associated transactional history. Simply engineering a unified agent desktop screen will not solve the underlying problem of complexity. Agents will still be required to navigate multiple systems one after the other. Instead, with a universal queue, all interactions are funnelled in real time through a single system and interface. This is easier and faster for agents to navigate.

**A SMOOTH CONTACT
CENTRE EXPERIENCE****KEY COMPONENTS:**

- *Universal queue*
- *Prioritisation by urgency / importance*
- *Skills-based routing*
- *Real-time multichannel monitoring*
- *CRM & other system integration*
- *Context driven information capture*
- *Synchronised workflow*

Ideally, the interaction can be classified in such a way that agents can easily follow a pre-defined process. In other words, the agent is prompted to ask all the relevant questions without the customer having to repeat information already on the system.

New data should only be entered once. The software should then automatically populate all the associated databases and internal systems. As a consequence, interactions will be handled more efficiently and resolved first time – an experience that will delight customers and agents alike!

Such solutions are already in use and offer mid-sized businesses a real opportunity to transform the customer experience. The process starts by aligning content and document management systems with CRM and transactional databases. Whilst this sounds complex and expensive, the reality is that advanced business process management tools can now set up these workflows in a matter of weeks. What's more, once the processes have been mapped and tested, it is relatively easy to adjust them afterwards to accommodate changes in business rules.

BPM tools like this can facilitate scenarios where agents have controlled access to an almost unlimited range of supporting assets to help satisfy a customer interaction. The real benefit of using BPM tools in this way is that it avoids the layers of complexity inherent within standalone applications which have been bundled together.

So, for example, apart from the view of a customer's account status, an agent can trigger an email of a technical document to a customer by just ticking a single box on the agent screen. The backend processes are all automated and details of the interaction will be automatically recorded where required.

Pricing as a sustainability factor:

One of the drawbacks of having multiple standalone applications operating in a contact centre is that most are priced on a per agent / seat basis. Some vendors allow businesses to flex seat volumes on a monthly basis, but in most cases firms have to commit to a minimum number of licences at the outset.

Quite often, when a vendor produces an enhancement to its product, it will charge additional add-on licences too. The effort in managing the licence arrangements from multiple vendors can itself be significant, let alone the collective cost to the business.

FIXED PRICING FOR FLEXIBLE OPERATIONS

Which option would you prefer? (Example: managing variable licences)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Standard Ops (Licences)	80	80	80	80	OR	A FIXED PRICE FOR ALL CHANNELS AND APPLICATIONS <i>(the freedom to flex your resources)</i>			
Special Projects (Licences)	0	30	65	50					
TOTAL	80	110	145	130					
Cost: (qty x rate)									

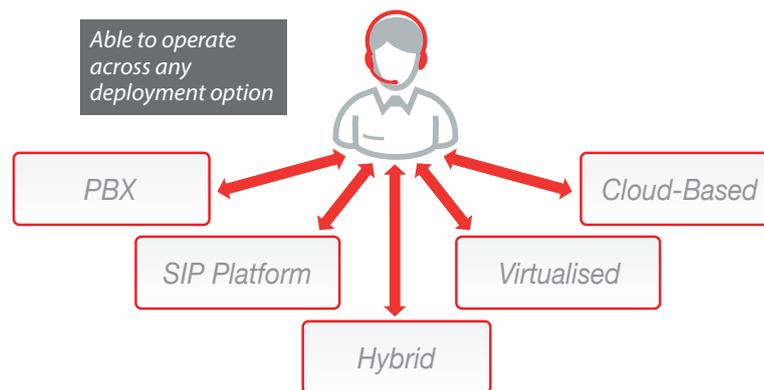
Enlightened vendors now offer more flexible solutions. Some provide an annual fixed price for a full suite of multichannel contact centre solutions. The price is determined by the expected annual capacity rather than the number of queues or agent seats. Alternatively, some features can be purchased on a per minute basis so customers only pay for what they use. This flexible approach to pricing makes budgeting much easier and allows the contact centre far greater freedom to utilise different channels to suit changes in customer interaction trends.

Deployment options for sustainability:

A further point to consider is deployment. Contact centres should be able to accommodate all types of customer interaction, including web chat, social media and video, from any fixed-line or mobile device.

EFFECTIVE MULTICHANNEL CONTACT CENTRES

Deployed according to business need



Contact centres can be deployed on traditional PBX or up-to-date IP communications platforms or even delivered as hybrid or cloud-based solutions. With 37% of UK contact centres operating within multi-site enterprises, virtualisation becomes another deployment option to aid sustainability.

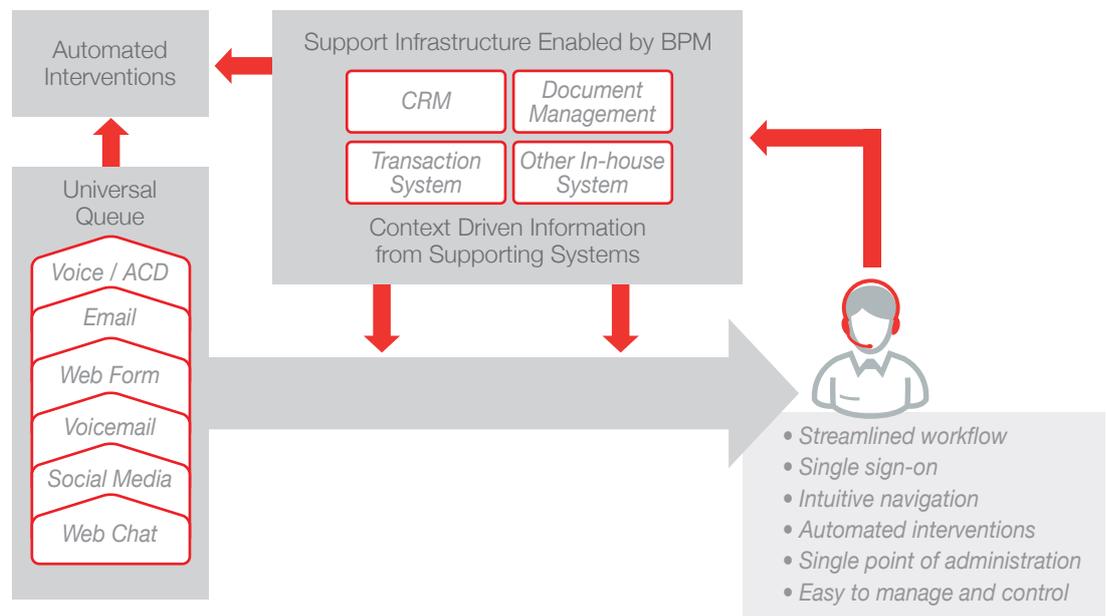
Recent research¹ has identified the benefits of virtualised contact centres to include:

- 90%** handling spikes in traffic
- 89%** improving availability of skills
- 58%** reducing call costs
- 46%** offering longer opening hours

This last benefit is particularly useful to firms with consumer customers, since smartphone use appears to be driving increased call volumes during non-working hours.

To conclude, the elements most likely to form part of an enduring multichannel contact centre integration strategy will be a mix of the areas identified in this paper. No one magic formula exists. However, sustainable contact centres are increasingly taking the form of a single platform with streamlined workflows rather than a collection of standalone systems.

BASIC STREAMLINED MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATION SOLUTION



Contact centre managers will need to identify the most appropriate options for their company, based upon their individual business goals, organisational capability and available budget. The key is to minimise complexity. The solutions offering best value and the lowest total cost of ownership tend to be those where the channel applications have been designed and engineered as part of a single suite solution.

Instead of trying to manage multiple vendors and systems, you just have one. Administration, monitoring, reporting and agent navigation becomes easier and there will be no more hidden costs to consider either.

Partnering with a specialist multichannel contact centre vendor, with proven experience supporting your size of business, will provide peace of mind, and help you to develop your contact centre strategy and solution faster and with confidence.

For more information please read our Multimedia product sheet.

References:

1. ContactBabel, "UK Contact Centres in 2014 – The state of the industry"
2. Gartner, 2013 "Critical Capabilities for Contact Center Infrastructure"

Netcall is one of the UK's leading providers of Customer Engagement Solutions.

Netcall's product suite delivers compelling solutions for end-to-end customer engagement, incorporating Intelligent Contact Handling, Workforce Optimisation, Enterprise Content Management and Business Process Management.

Netcall's customer base contains over 700 organisations in both the private and public sectors, including 40% of the UK's top 50 customer service companies, 70% of the NHS Acute Health Trusts, major telecoms operators and leading commercial organisations across many sectors.

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