



Improving agent optimisation and efficiency

A independent White Paper by ContactBabel

No. 3 in a series of 4 investigating the solutions to the pain points experienced by the UK contact centre industry, commissioned by

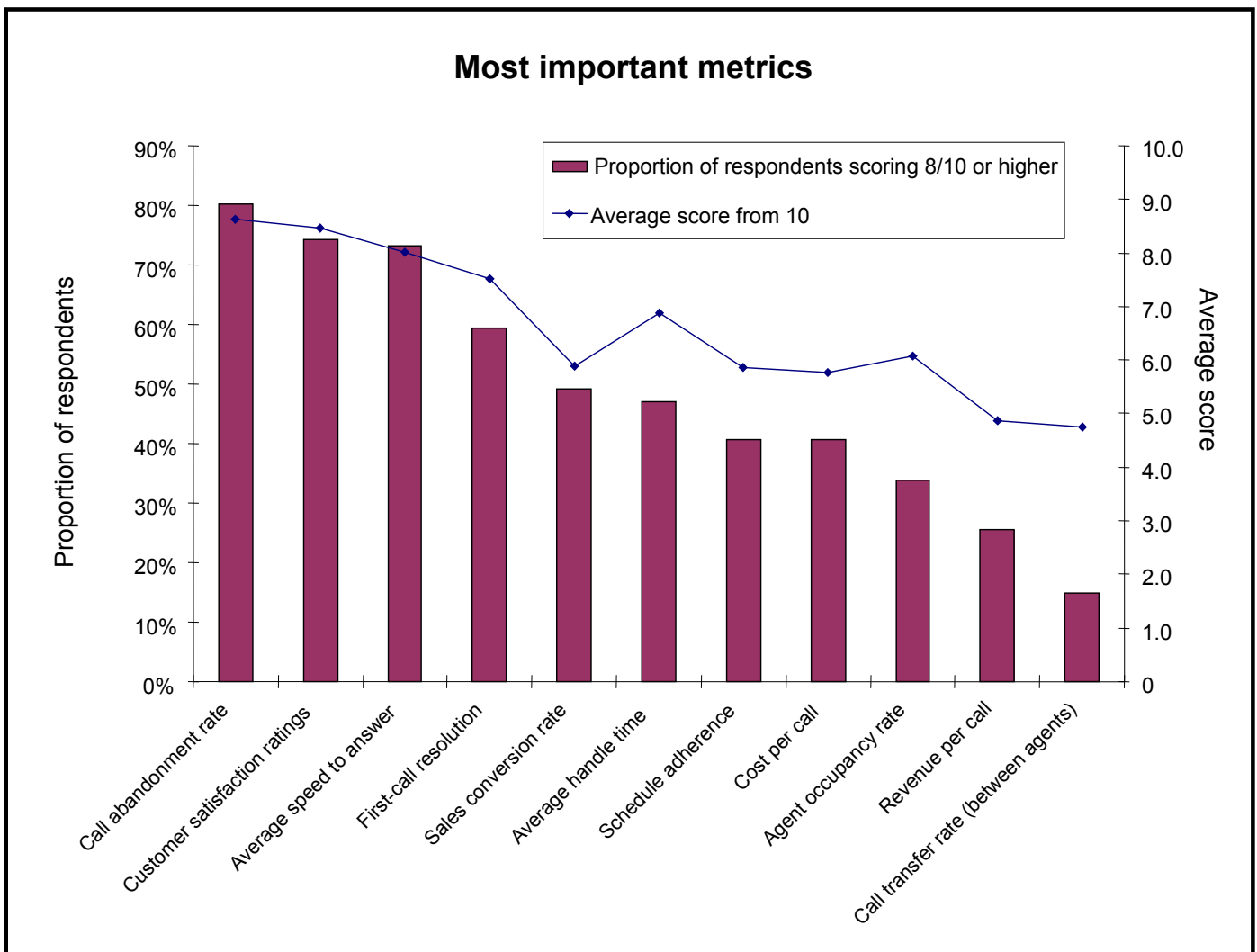
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INTELLIGENT COMMUNICATIONS

Introduction

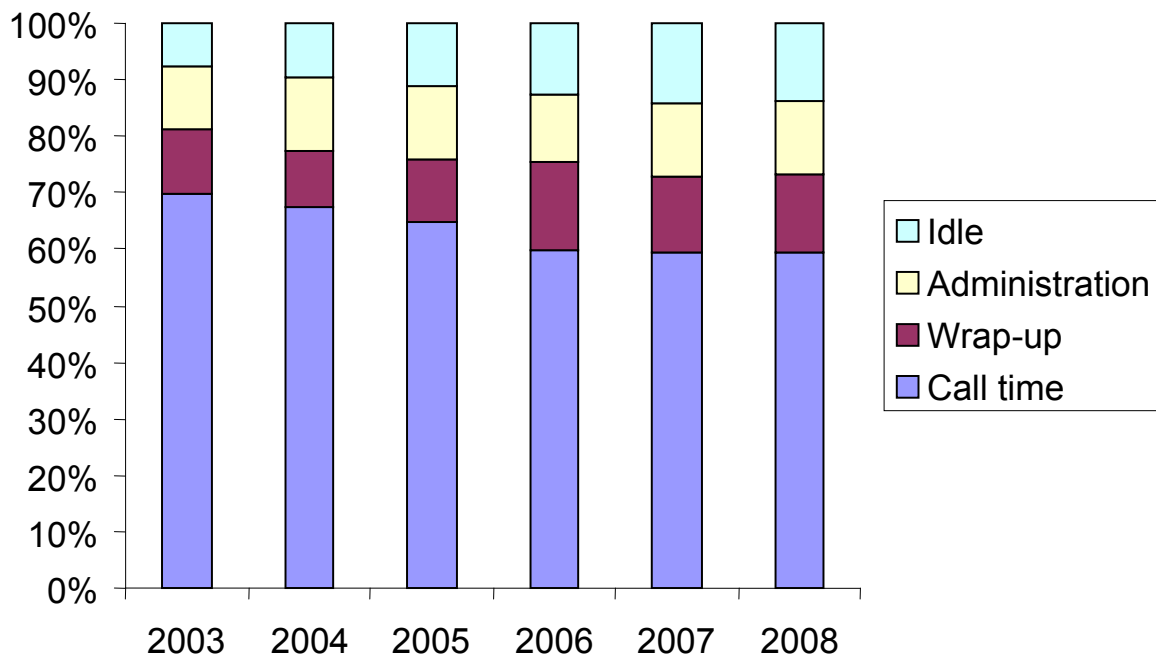
Since its earliest days, the contact centre industry has been built upon a foundation of efficiency. The success of an operation has usually been calculated by metrics such as call handling time and speed to answer - statistics which are based upon the quantity of calls rather than how they are actually handled. In some ways, these are useful measures, as businesses do have to balance the quality of the customer experience with the number of customers who are actually spoken with in a reasonable timeframe.

Recently, there has been a good deal of talk about measuring the quality of the interaction as well as taking a traditional macro look at call throughput. Statistics around first-call resolution and customer satisfaction are now much more important and widespread than they were a few years ago.



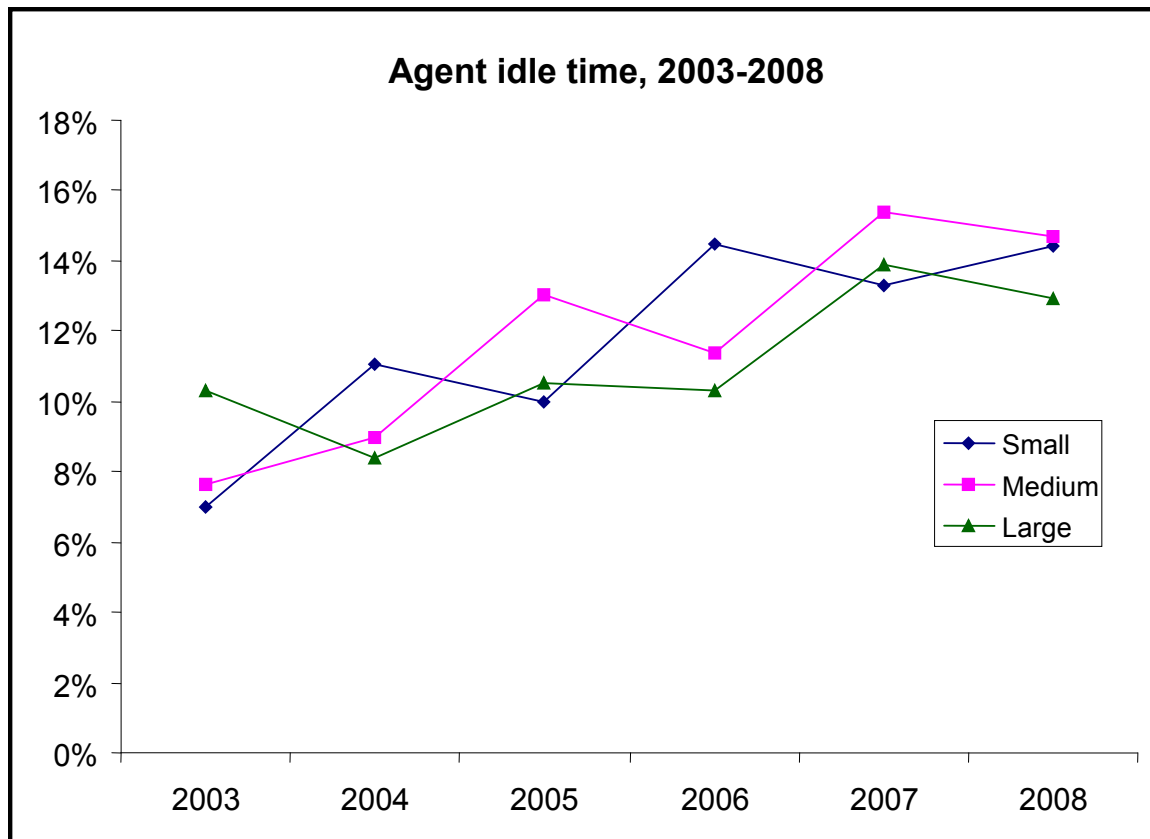
The previous chart shows how highly such metrics are rated by those who run contact centres. Yet we cannot assume that this movement towards customer-focused measurements means that the war to maximise efficiency has been won

- that we have entirely optimised the agents' performance and now we just need to improve the quality of interaction. The following graph shows that the proportion of time that an agent actually spends on calls has decreased since 2003, from almost 70% to just under 60%. The decline in talk time has been most noticeable in smaller, sub-50 seat operations, which have decreased to around 55% talk time. Large operations have stabilised at around 65% talk time, with medium (50-200 seat contact centres) at around 60%.



As call time has decreased as a proportion of time, so after-call wrap-up has increased, from around 11% in 2003/4, to almost 16% in 2006 before falling back towards 14% in 2007/8. As the following graph shows, idle time has risen even more sharply, with the rate in small contact centres more than doubling from 2003 to 2008.

The finance sector is similar to the UK contact centre industry's average for call time, having 59.8% of agent time spent on calls, with 12.5% as after-call wrap-up and 10.9% as administration. The finance sector does have a high idle time, of 16.9% - over 10 minutes in each hour.



The reasons for the increased level of wrap-up - around overly-complicated agent desktops and non-optimised procedures - will be discussed in further detail later in the White Paper. The dramatic increase in idle time is more difficult to explain: longer training times, longer breaks, and more focus upon call quality rather than simple throughput in recent years have been offered as possibilities. There is also the possibility that the systems and applications in place today are more likely to offer contact centres - especially smaller ones for which measurement has been previously difficult - the chance to gauge themselves more accurately, spotting idle time which previously had been unnoticed, even though it had actually been present.

There are other trends that emerge over time which suggest that staffing and running the contact centre is getting to be a more difficult job to do efficiently and effectively.

For example, the proportion of inbound work that is email has risen steadily from 2003 (when it was only 3.6%) to 8% in 2008. For some operations, multimedia blending is a strategic decision which has been invested in with the right levels of technology and training being provided; for others, it is a mismatch of poorly thought-out processes with little integration with the main telephony work of the contact centre.

The finance sector uses email less than most other vertical markets, perhaps as a result of the difficulty of guaranteeing security and confidentiality over email, legislation limiting the information that can be divulged using this channel, and



customers' requirements being more complex. The result is that only 4.3% of inbound interactions to finance companies are via email, up from 1% in 2003.

There is no generally-agreed upon method for answering such enquiries. Some contact centres operate multimedia as a siloed application, with dedicated email agents dealing with all such enquiries. For others, agents are encouraged to answer emails in slack call times, without any sort of formal approach, whereas others schedule time for agents to deal with email, often operating a universal queue. Smaller operations - which may not have sufficient email volumes, or the investment available to formalize the blending - are much more likely to deal with emails on an ad-hoc basis, which does little for productivity statistics.

Added to this, the work that agents are doing seems to have become more difficult or at least, more time-consuming, with the average service call now being slightly over 5 minutes in length, compared with under 4 minutes in 2003. Perhaps as a result of this, call abandonment rates are sneaking up year-on-year, with small annual increases beginning from 2004 (4.7%), leading to a rate of 5.8% in 2008, which is the fourth consecutive annual rise. Again, linked with these statistics, average speed to answer has jumped from 17 seconds in 2003 to over 30 seconds in 2008.

These figures make a strong case for the hypothesis that the average call today is a more complicated procedure than it was five years ago, with a significant proportion of short, transactional calls now being dealt with via self-service (6.5% of calls are handled in such a way today), with many more calls been avoided altogether by the use of web-based self-service applications.

There also seems to be a greater issue today with the handling of call spikes - service level targets have improved since 2003 - and some of the increase in idle time may come as a result of overstaffing at certain times of the day in order to deal with traffic peaks at other times (25% of respondents to the ContactBabel 2008 survey agreed with the assertion that overstaffing was frequently a problem - although periodical understaffing was said to be more of an issue).

To summarise this statistical overview of how the contact centre industry has changed since 2003, there are some definite patterns emerging:

- Call time has reduced as a proportion of agent time
- Idle time and wrap-up time have increased proportionally
- Call lengths have increased, as have call abandonment rates and average speed to answer
- Call spikes are a major issue, and is getting bigger
- Agents now have to deal with far more non-telephony enquiries.

The finance industry has also changed since 2003. Online banking is now widely-used, both as a result of increased trust from customers and also as a practical result of the massive increase in broadband usage, meaning that many of the simple, transactional types of interaction are now handled outside the contact centre. Insurance companies have also pushed customers and prospects to websites for quotations - which can be very lengthy and expensive for the business (especially if unsuccessful) - as well as the rise in price comparison sites taking away many of these quotation requests. The result is that many of the calls that financial services contact centres now take are of a more complex



nature than previously, meaning that specific skills and knowledge may be required to handle them correctly.

While it is true that traditional 'production line' methods of running contact centres have been seriously questioned, efficiency and effectiveness are still as important to the contact centre industry as they ever have been. The contact centre has taken over from face-to-face contact as the main way in which many organisations and people communicate with each other, and the onus is upon businesses to improve the quality of customers' experiences with the contact centre, while keeping their costs down and getting the most from the investments that they have made in their contact centres.

Improving agent optimisation means cutting the amount of time that is wasted in the contact centre by improving processes and cutting call lengths without sacrificing quality. Agent optimisation does not mean slavedriving, however. Much of the idle time consists of chunks of 30-60 seconds in slack call times when agents are waiting for the next call. Such a small delay has a big impact on statistics, but does not allow the agent to take a real break, or do anything useful such as an at-desk training course, or even answer an email - in fact, it is often boring and frustrating for the agent, impacting negatively upon attrition, quality and morale.

Methods to improve agent optimisation

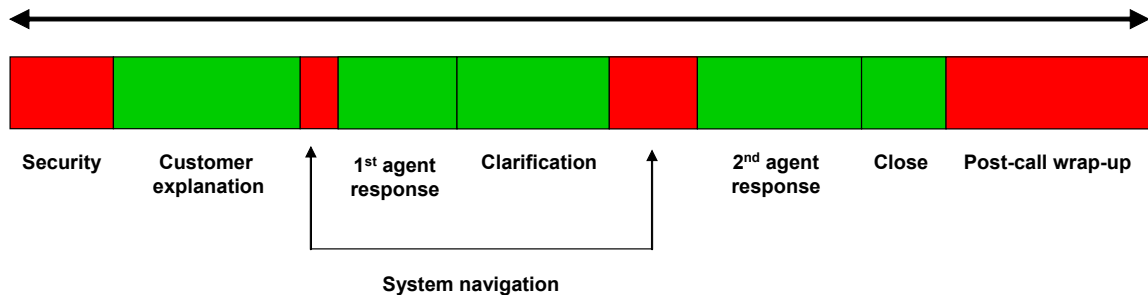
Shorter calls (and shorter queue times)

Average call lengths have crept up since 2003, and are now over a minute longer on average than they were then. It is very likely that much of this is due to many of the simpler calls being dealt with via voice or web self-service, leaving the more complex queries to be handled by an agent, which makes sense. However, even within a call that has to be handled by an agent, there are ways to shorten it that can actually benefit both caller and contact centre.

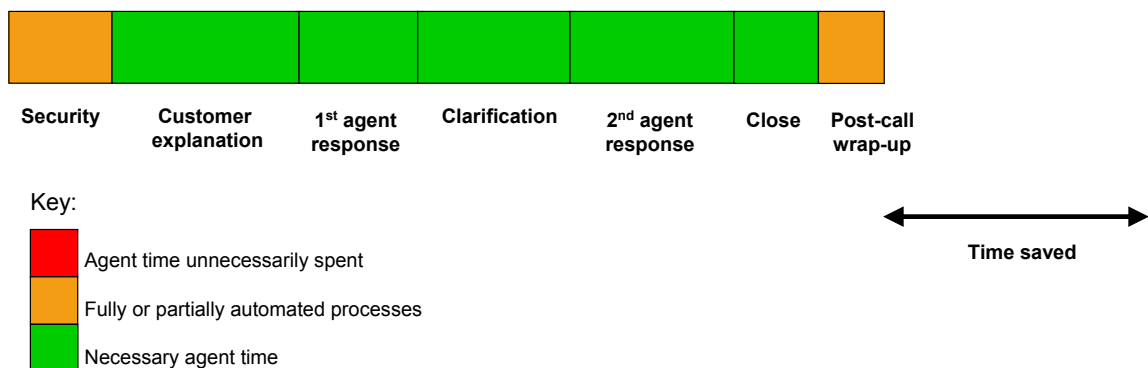
In many service calls, the first 30 seconds is spent establishing the identity of the caller (40 seconds in the case of the finance industry), and there may be periods of silence as the agent finds the caller's history, navigates through multiple systems and fills in details within numerous desktop applications.

The first part of following diagram shows a typical call, complete with manual security checks, pauses to search for information or to navigate between multiple applications and with a considerable time after the end of the call to update databases and kick-off the relevant processes manually.

Typical call in non-integrated environment



Shortened call with unified desktop and automated identification



The lower part of this diagram shows the difference that a unified desktop and automated caller identification makes to a call, saving time at the beginning, middle and end of a call - which of course translates directly into shorter queue times as agent availability becomes much better.

A **unified desktop** approach comes as a reaction to many of today's contact centre environments, which use complicated, multiple applications, often only loosely-linked, which require skilled and experienced agents to navigate, let alone to manage interaction with customers successfully at the same time. This is particularly the danger in finance contact centres, where legacy systems are still very much used, and agents usually have to find their way around multiple screens and applications, trusting to their experience not to make mistakes. Even after the call is completed successfully, each system may need specific inputs from the agent in order to start the required back-office processes, or to keep each database consistent with the others.

Agents are trained to switch rapidly between applications, relying on their experience to make sure they don't forget to do everything. This requirement is even more noticeable in businesses where the role is generally more challenging, perhaps as a result of the technical complexities of the role, the legislative requirements or any other business-specific reason for delayed agent competency. In the case of the finance sector - which is renowned for its complexity - new agents take more than a month longer than average to become fully-productive, and some contact centres even state that it can take more than a year. The sector's contact centre agents deal with an average of 5.2 applications within the call, and 4.6 in the after-call wrap-up phase, both figures being significantly above the contact centre industry's average.

The necessity to navigate manually between different systems can have severe primary and secondary effects:

- Increased training costs
- Higher staff attrition caused by inability to complete tasks successfully
- Inconsistent data caused by keying errors or missed procedures caused by manual wrap-ups
- Increased call handling times
- Lower customer satisfaction caused by long queues and unnecessarily long calls
- Missed opportunities to cross-sell and up-sell
- Multiple open applications on the agent desktop can lead to system instability and lower performance.

A unified desktop approach means that the presentation layer of the contact centre solution is developed separately from the underlying applications, re-using existing logic and interfaces rather than replacing them. The agent works with a single desktop application which is tailored to their specific needs, pulling in only the right data and applications from disparate systems and presenting them on a single screen. In the background, business rules and workflow make sure that the right back-office processes happen without agent intervention, thus reducing wrap-up costs and improving agent optimisation and utilisation.

Right at the beginning of the call, **voice biometrics** offers a secure, cost-effective method of identifying and verifying callers, without using an agent's time. Half of all calls require a caller to prove their identity, and currently, 93% of these use an agent to carry out at least part of the process. A contact centre taking 10 million calls per year would spend almost £3,000,000 asking callers their name and a security question.



Voice verification systems use spoken words to generate a voiceprint, which can be compared with a previously enrolled voiceprint to verify a caller's identity. The most sophisticated systems are not affected by factors such as the caller having a cold or using different types of phones, or aging, and voice verification systems are now delivering levels of accuracy and security that have proven robust enough for use by banks and insurers.

The benefits to voice verification are multiple - the business saves money, callers are less likely to have to queue (as agents are spending less time on each call), and secure automated identity verification means that callers can then be offered a broader range of fully-automated self-service options.

Another method of shortening a call is to encourage continuity by trying to match callers with agents that they have spoken with in the past. **CTI** applications collect information from the caller (the number that they are calling from, or an account number, for example, along with a simple question about whether they have spoken about this particular issue previously), which can then be placed with the relevant agent. In many cases, the agent should not have to wade through all of the call notes from a standing start, but just refresh themselves with the main points. A cynic might also suggest that if agents knew that they were probably going to have to deal with the problem until it had been resolved, they might try harder to solve it first time.

Fewer unnecessary calls

Optimising the agent's time is more than just making them deal with as many calls as possible. Contact centres also have to consider whether each call would be best dealt with by an agent or some other means offered by the contact centre. A step beyond this is to consider ways in which customers or prospects queries can be entirely satisfied before the contact centre gets involved in any way at all.

Reduce low-value live calls

Firstly, we should note that the phrase 'low-value' should be treated with extreme caution. It is the customer that has to decide what a low-value call is - not the business - and this differs not just between customers, but also depending upon circumstances. For example, what will be a low-value, routine issue for a customer on one day (such as checking train times) can become vital the day after, when the train in question will be taking a passenger to a wedding, for example.

One of the most effective ways to avoid unnecessary live calls is to implement **self-service**, either through voice, web or a mixture (Voice Portal), which places a voice layer over an existing web application, letting both channels use the same underlying functionality. Currently, almost three-quarters of voice self-service is dealt with through traditional touchtone IVR rather than speech recognition, which limits the functionality of the interaction as well as negating the possibility of using biometrics to validate the caller's identity.

Table 1: Self-service and business types

Self-service activity	Typical business type which would offer this form of self-service
Problem reporting and resolution	IT helpdesk
Account access	Banking
Product information	Retail
Online registration	Any
Order entry	Retail, travel
Balance enquiry	Banking, credit cards
Dealer or store location enquiries	Car sales, retail
Ticket booking	Cinemas, other entertainment
Real-time punctuality checks	Airlines, trains
Status checks	Retail (esp. online), IT helpdesk
Address changes	Subscription services, utilities
Form filling	Any
Brochure request	Travel, retail
Password reset	Finance, IT

Not all calls are suitable for self-service, as they may require multiple requests within the same call, be of a complex nature or be from a caller who feels that they need to speak with a human agent. Additionally, some small businesses may have such a low volume of calls that it is not cost-effective to implement self-service. Even amongst those which offer self-service options to customers, there is a general feeling that the majority of calls are not suitable for complete automation, as they may require expert ability, be emergencies, multiple requests or the customers themselves may not want this.

The finance vertical market is more positive about self-service than many, with banks being particularly keen to offer simple account balance information via telephony self-service. However, web self-service (e.g. for online banking) is particularly prevalent, with many insurers also offering account management via their own websites.

Table 2: Proportion of incoming calls that are suitable for self-service, by vertical market

Vertical market	Proportion of calls that are suitable for self-service
Services	50%
Finance	41%
Outsourcing	33%
Telecoms	25%
Transport & Travel	25%
Retail & Distribution	24%
Public Sector	15%
IT	10%
Average	31%

For businesses using self-service, a simple method of allowing customers to decide whether a query is low-value to them or not is to offer a 'zero-out' option in the self-service session - where callers can press zero be transferred to an operator. Surprisingly, only 59% of voice self-service sessions allow a caller to join a queue to speak with an agent, with other self-service sessions making callers go around in circles or find another number to dial in order to speak with someone. Not surprisingly, this overly-aggressive tactic of call avoidance taints the company and their whole self-service offering, emphasising to callers that the self-service application is there to profit the company and not the caller.

An alternative or addition to using self-service to reduce unnecessary calls and thus optimise agents' time is to use **multimedia**, which although often requiring some agent input, will make better use of resources by interacting with the customer in the channel of their choosing, and positively impacting upon revenue as well.

The most widely-used form of multimedia is email, although the relatively low levels of inbound email from customers and prospects to many businesses is a



result of poorly-implemented email systems, a lack of understanding of the nature of the inbound email channel and the customers' natural response to the above: they use email carefully, because they never know if they'll get the same quality response as from a voice call (if they get any response at all). 'Mystery shopper' surveys of email response have consistently shown a generally poor level of service from this channel, although individual organisations (especially some in the IT and retail sector) have managed to make email a channel of choice for customers, using email templates and the identification of content and subsequent routing to cut wasted time and improve response speed and accuracy.

Text chat, although expensive to offer universally, provides an excellent opportunity for revenue-focused organisations to close a deal. For example, some US retailers are implementing text chat applications in the checkout process to offer support and last-minute answers, as it is estimated that 75% of online baskets are abandoned.

A third method of using multimedia channels to optimise agent time is to provide proactive outbound customer service, which can be done through SMS, email and voice (live or recorded) to provide information to customers about accounts, appointments or opportunities. Automated outbound processes reduce the number of inbound calls, as well as improving customer satisfaction considerably. Even outbound customer service using live agent time can improve agent utilisation rates, if it is used in a blended environment, assigning inbound service agents to an outbound team when the inbound call volumes drop, thus reducing idle time.

Resolve more calls first-time

It is clearly better for both the business and the customer for an agent to spend a little longer resolving an issue completely, rather than risk the customer having to call again and again. Of course, it is often the boundaries within an organisation - for example, between the contact centre and the field force, or accounts department - which prevents the call being entirely resolved at a single attempt, and businesses should consider how departments can actually work together in real time to deliver a result for the customer.

The ability to understand a query and deal with it in a reasonable timeframe at the first time of asking is the key to a contact centre's success, reducing the overall number of calls while providing the customer with a good experience which will impact on the company's overall performance. Improving first call resolution benefits customers (who are more happy, loyal and profitable); agents (higher morale and fewer unnecessary calls); and business (lower cost of repeated calls; higher profitability): everyone wins. Having said that, first-call resolution can be very hard to measure, as the decision comes from the customer's view rather than the contact centre's ACD statistics. UK contact centres report that 4 in 5 calls are dealt with first-time, with the finance sector reporting 84% of calls being dealt with at the first attempt.

It is perhaps better to measure first-time resolution, rather than first-call resolution, as callers want to state who they are (once), explain the issue (once) and get the correct answer, without being bounced around the contact centre,

which also wastes agent time as well. In order to maximise the chance of this happening, a contact centre needs to know:

- 1 Who the caller is
- 2 What they have called about before
- 3 What they are calling about this time
- 4 What skill-sets are suitable for answering this query and customer
- 5 Which agents have those skill-sets
- 6 When will those agents be available to help?

The first point - customer identification - can be automated in a number of ways, through caller line ID, and/or through typing in or saying an account number or name. The second point (caller history) can be popped automatically through CTI to an agent's screen - indeed, it may make sense to try to put the call through to the same agent, to encourage ownership of the issue and to reduce the amount of time the caller has to spend going through the issue again. The third point is harder to automate, although touchtone IVR is often used to route calls based on service, sales or helpdesk, with some success. Greater power and flexibility is provided by speech recognition, which encourages callers to use natural language to explain their issues, with a far greater number of routing options available in a shorter amount of time based on their input.

Points 4 to 6 move away from the caller's requirement, and look at the ability and presence of the agent. Point 4 identifies the skills required to deal with, for example, a query about a new mortgage. Point 5 - the agent skill-sets - are a straightforward look-up against the capabilities of the agents in question (assuming their skills are accurately and frequently updated), and finally - Point 6 - the routing of the call to the next available virtual pool of suitable agents can be done at either an operation or network-level. The suitable 'agent' may not be an agent at all, but a resident expert based outside the contact centre but whose presence and availability has been registered.

Understand the wider business and how it impacts upon the contact centre

A great deal of unnecessary agent work can be removed by identifying the types of call that are being received, and determining whether these could be reduced further up the line, in the departments whose activities actively affect the volume and type of calls received, e.g. marketing or IT (for the website). The finance sector also has to account for the impact of external events upon its customers, such as an announcement about base rate changes, or wider concern about the economy.

Understanding when and how other departments will be operating means that workforce management tools can be used to forecast and schedule accordingly (e.g. about a new TV advert or mortgage offer). Additionally, contact centre management is able to brief agents - via a desktop broadcast if at short-notice - about the correct responses and issues, as well as changing IVR prompts and messages to provide answers to the more simple answers, as well as managing agent skill-sets for relevant call groups.



Correct and fair distribution of calls

So far, most of the focus on improving agent optimisation has been focused upon reducing call handling time and avoiding calls altogether. Making the right type and number of agents available to talk to customers is just as important, and this is the job of the scheduler and the workforce management system. A deeper understanding of how agent time is spent, and why, will yield up further insights which can be incorporated into the workforce management process and any other relevant piece of the contact centre environment.

Automated workforce management systems grew out of the need to forecast and schedule more quickly than was possible manually, and to take into account some of the real world issues that contact centres face. Systems became more automated and sophisticated as the size, complexity and activity of operations mean that for many contact centres, manual methods are unworkable, unacceptably inaccurate or take up too much of a skilled employee's time.

Today's systems are flexible, adaptable and provide real-time, dynamic control of what is happening across multiple contact centres, coping with the fluctuations in demand which happen in busy enterprises, and supporting accurate monitoring and reporting. Once service levels and call volumes have been forecast, the solution can provide schedules detailing the agents and the skill-sets which are likely to be required. Of course, the old adage "junk in, junk out" applies here – if mistakes are made in the forecasting and scheduling stages, the contact centre and its agent utilization rates can suffer. This is where adherence and reporting come in.

Adherence is the ability to compare forecasts with reality, and learn from mistakes. Sophisticated scheduling and forecasting is useless without the opportunity for improvement brought about by adherence monitoring. Adherence allows a business to fine-tune its contact centre activity: put simply, the more you use it, the more accurate your forecasts and schedules become. Real-time adherence allows managers to see exactly what is happening, and can alert them to deviations from the expected activity, allowing them to make changes before problems occur. Many contact centres frequently use workforce management to check real-time adherence automatically, helping supervisors to do their job, and allowing them to be coaching staff, rather than doing administration. Statistics from real-time adherence also help when evaluating teams or individuals. Understanding non-productive time (not-ready reasons), and incorporating them into the workforce management system helps businesses to understand whether to deliver training or make changes to business processes.

Within a large contact centre - which includes multiple-site virtual operations - schedulers are able to view and schedule work over the entire enterprise, regardless of physical location. Schedulers have to make sure that agents aren't over-pressed which can lead to a drop in quality, nor sitting idle while another part of the contact centre is working flat-out. Schedulers also need to understand and keep the skills and experiences of the agents updated so that they can be transferred between virtual teams and groups as the schedule and real-time situation requires. The latter can also be ascertained by talking to the rest of the organisation, as noted in the previous section.

In the case of virtual contact centres (consisting of many operations, or even homeworkers, which are linked together so as to be viewed and managed as a single mega-site) significant economies of scale and improvements in performance are hoped for, especially around agent utilisation. There is likely to be greater consolidation driven by merger and acquisition activity within the finance industry as a result of the global economic situation, with the result for contact centres will be that the various locations that are left will be linked and virtualised to improve their performance further.

Recent research shows that respondents with virtual contact centres were generally pleased with the gains in efficiency and service level that they have experienced. The agent optimisation factors were especially noted - the ability to smooth out call spikes by moving them between contact centres, and the reduced wait times - although all of the potential virtual contact centre benefits mentioned were rated positively.

Table 3: If you have a virtual contact centre, what benefits have you gained?

Benefits gained from implementing a virtual contact centre	Mean average (from 10)	Proportion of respondents marking at 8, 9 or 10 from 10
Ability to deal with peaks	8.0	76%
Fairer agent utilisation / reduced wait times	7.7	76%
Greater flexibility on when agents are online	6.9	53%
Wider range of skills available to callers	6.0	40%
Savings on call costs between sites	5.9	37%

The issue of coping with call spikes is one which is growing year upon year, and may well be one of the causes of the increase in agent idle time, as contact centres end up overstaffing during non-peak times, to make sure of hitting service levels in peak periods. Virtual contact centres allow agents from other locations (including homeworkers) to make themselves available to deal with a different queue, being seamlessly moved back to their original work when the spike has flattened or the length of their own primary queue triggers a move back to their original work. Dealing early with such call spikes can often remove the issue before it becomes a real problem, and such movement between call groups can be done automatically by setting thresholds in each queue. Such flexibility of agents means that there is a fairer agent utilisation, as the situation of a set of agents sitting idle while others are under great pressure is less likely to happen.

Reducing idle time

The phrase 'idle time' conjures up images of agents sitting back in their chairs, putting their feet up on the desk while ignoring the ringing phone. In fact, most idle time is useless chunks of 30 seconds here and a minute there between calls, where the agent can neither do anything useful nor productive, nor take a real break to recharge themselves.



Call blending can alleviate this issue, giving the ability to deliver both inbound and outbound calls seamlessly to the agent and regulating outbound call volume based on inbound traffic. When inbound traffic is low, outbound calls are automatically generated for a specified campaign, or groups of agents may be directed to deal with multimedia enquiries or even to take an at-desk training session. When inbound traffic picks up, the dialler dynamically slows the number of outgoing calls to meet the inbound service level. Results include increased agent productivity, streamlined staffing, and improved customer service. However, this process needs to be understood and managed carefully, as not all agents are adept at dealing with both inbound and outbound calls.

The advantages of blending include:

- Relevant proactive outbound service calls prevent future inbound calls about the same issue, reducing spikes and improving customer satisfaction
- Agents are kept at a sustainable level of activity, saving costs and alleviating boredom
- A variety of work is proven to reduce attrition rates (especially multimedia blending).

Scripting and the role of the supervisor

Although strict scripting of conversations is consigned to the past for most contact centres, the use of dynamic, intelligent scripting or prompting provides the agent with the right information at the right part of the conversation, without them having to learn first about every product and service that might be relevant. There is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that this loose scripting - checkpoints throughout the conversation, rather than exact scripts - can help inexperienced agents through a call more quickly without missing anything out, although all agents can benefit from this.

Supervisors can be helped to understand their team members' training requirements through automated processes that report on patterns of exceptions that may indicate a deeper issue. For example, automated monitoring systems can identify calls where the agent is moving away from what is required (perhaps a trigger phrase or word is used, or the elapsed time is outside set parameters), and the supervisor can enter the conversation in real-time, or listen-in and coach the agent afterwards. This is especially useful in the case of virtual contact centres where the supervisor may not even be at the same physical location as the agent. Supervisor alerts can also be set for calls which are unusual, such as agents trying to avoid calls, incorrect routing rules, disconnects from hold, high transfer rates and short handle times. Post-call analysis of recordings can also identify areas of agent weakness where training would be suitable, as through these methods, the supervisor can understand not only what the agent utilisation rate is like, but also whether the agents are being optimised: that is, working to the best of their ability in an efficient manner.

Conclusion

Despite the increased maturity of the contact centre industry and its management, the proportion of an agent's time that is spent handling calls has not increased: usually quite the opposite. The production line method of running a contact centre is being seriously questioned, yet its aim to keep the calls flowing in a swift manner that means customers do not have to wait to be served is still a laudable aim, but one which is now tempered by the message of quality. How then can a contact centre keep what is good about the focus upon efficiency (and perhaps improve upon the results), while delivering real quality? There are several ways to improve agent optimisation:

Reduce call times

- Automated security checks cut thirty seconds from the front of the call
- Automated wrap-up cuts time and reduces miskeying and mistakes
- The unified desktop speeds up navigation around multiple systems

Avoid unnecessary calls

- Remove low-value calls through self-service and multimedia, where both organisation and customer consider it appropriate
- Supporting agent issue ownership means better first-call resolution rates
- Provide proactive outbound customer service via multimedia and voice
- Understand the effect of what the rest of the organisation is doing which will impact upon the contact centre and act accordingly

Distribute calls correctly and fairly

- Use workforce management to make sure the right number of the right agents are available when they are needed
- Implement flexible working (outsourcing, homeworking, telecottages, virtual environments) to handle call spikes without overstaffing
- Skills-based routing improves the rate at which calls get to the right agent

Reduce idle time

- Implement call blending in less-busy periods
- Use multimedia blending to reduce idle time and avoid inbound chase-up calls about non-answered emails
- Outbound diallers improve efficiency and contact rates

Be more effective on the call

- Dynamic scripting and knowledge bases can help to provide the correct answer while on the call
- Analysis of call recordings show areas for agent development and broken processes
- Provide supervisor-level alerts to show calls which are falling outside of the expected boundaries and identify underperforming agents or areas for process improvement.



About ContactBabel

ContactBabel are the contact centre industry experts. If you have a question about how the industry works, or where it's heading, the chances are we have the answer.

The coverage provided by our massive and ongoing primary research projects is matched by our experience analysing the contact centre industry. We understand how technology, people and process best fit together, and how they will work collectively in the future.

We help the biggest and most successful vendors develop their contact centre strategies and talk to the right prospects. We have shown the UK government how the contact centre industry will develop and change. We help contact centres compare themselves to their closest competitors so they can understand what they are doing well and what needs to improve.

If you have a question about your company's place in the contact centre industry, perhaps we can help you.

About the Author:

ContactBabel was set up in 2000 by Steve Morrell, a leading expert on the contact centre industry. He has written over 200 reports on the future of technology, people and business processes surrounding the contact centre industry, and is widely-quoted in industry journals and the international media as the author of key studies of the UK, US, Irish, South African and Indian contact centre markets.

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About Avaya

Avaya delivers Intelligent Communications solutions that help companies transform their businesses to achieve marketplace advantage. More than 1 million businesses worldwide, including more than 90 percent of the FORTUNE 500®, use Avaya solutions for IP Telephony, Unified Communications, Contact Centres and Communications-Enabled Business Processes. Avaya Global Services provides comprehensive service and support for companies, small to large.

Worldwide, Avaya has almost 4,400 patents issued and pending for business communications that companies use to keep their operations running and their customers satisfied. Avaya helps companies of every size, large and small, map real-world business processes in a way that allows companies to better interact with their customers and to grow their business.

Avaya is best known for making communications a business advantage and has helped customers in every industry, including financial services, hospitality, retail, public sector, travel, technology and telecommunications. Companies rely on their communications to ensure they can best collaborate across the value chain, and many businesses can both enhance and advance their competitive market position by using the right mix of software, services and hardware to create truly “unified” communications across employees, customers and partners rather than just relying on the status quo of telephony systems.

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