

AGILITY FACTOR



Business & IT Collaboration: Ideas from the Business Side

By Jay Minnucci, Service Agility

To get the most out of your partnership with IT, make your contact center operations more transparent to other areas.

When I'm doing consulting work in contact centers, I always keep an eye out for those things that vary greatly from one center to the next. Without question, one item that fits this description is the quality of the relationship between the contact center leadership and the IT department. In some centers (almost invariably high-performing ones), the bond is strong and the two departments work in concert with each other. In other centers, the relationship is contentious — or worse, non-existent.

I have never been able to understand why there isn't more made of this relationship. Anyone who has run a contact center knows how thoroughly dependent the organization is on technology. From delivery of the contacts to the right skilled resource to providing the knowledge needed to answer inquiries from customers, technology is woven into the fabric of moment-to-moment life in the center. More often than not, though, the two departments are strategically disconnected, and the extent of the gap is alarming. I've run into the following more than once:

- Contact center directors bringing in vendors for presentations and/or proposals without informing anyone in IT;
- IT directors purchasing ACD technology without getting input from the business; and
- Phone reps continually struggling with slow system response times, and no one educating

IT on the impact this has on both customer satisfaction and costs.

If your reaction to these examples is, "Wow, that sounds like us," take heart. Change is not only possible, it is within your grasp. Many of my clients currently enjoy healthy, productive partnerships between the two departments, but the bond was not always that strong. The key to improvement is understanding the role the business plays, and taking action to bring the parties closer together. And if that sounds a bit too much like marital counseling, well, then you're getting the idea.

Where Does the Business Fit?

I've already used the word partnership a couple of times in this article. That is a good start to defining the business's role, but it doesn't fit perfectly. We think of partners as being equals with exactly the same goals and objectives, but that doesn't adequately describe our situation. Some consider that it's more of a vendor/client relationship, complete with written SLAs. I'll agree that this description works to a point and that, at a high level, the technology needs to serve the business need (it's not much good to anyone if it doesn't). The client/vendor relationship, though, does not quite accurately describe it either. Customers are too fickle, and have many more choices than you do in having your IT needs met.

So if you run the contact center, what best describes

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your role with IT? I like to use an orchestra analogy, with the business as the conductor and the IT department as a group of the musicians. In the end, the conductor has the overall responsibility for the final product and for bringing all the pieces together. The musicians want a great final product, too, but they only affect one piece of the production — and to do that effectively, they need to be experts at that one piece. They also may have their attention split between your orchestra and other obligations they have, like local charity performances or a weekend group in which they belong. Your IT staff is similar, serving other parts of the organization and meeting technology requirements that have little to do with your use of the applications.

Building a Tighter Bond

Running contact centers is more complex than ever, and running an IT department is more complex than ever. If we let things follow their natural course, we will all get too wrapped up in our task lists and our internal meetings and will ignore the actions that drive long-term improvement. When all parties are exclusively focused on the here and now, the two operations will pull further and further apart — at a time when operating in sync is more important than ever. As the conductor, you've got to make the changes that will turn this around.

Where do you start? The best first step is to make the contact center more transparent. While all the activities and issues related to running a contact center are obvious to you, often that is not the case outside your department. From financial people to marketers to the IT staff, the contact center is largely a mystery. So remove the cloak with some or all of the following:

- Set up an observation deck that is convenient to the IT staff. An observation deck is a workstation, staffed by one of your best reps, with extra desk space, an extra chair and a headset that is double-jacked 24/7. If the contact center is physically too far removed from IT, you can put this station where it's convenient for them — even if that means that it's smack

dab in the center of IT floor space.

- Return the favor — provide IT with some floor space in the contact center. It could be a workstation or two, a spare office or a meeting room. If IT does not want to assign someone to be there permanently, make it available for technical staff working on call center technology projects. There is no substitute for getting closer to the user, especially in the design stage of a major project. Providing well-equipped physical space eliminates excuses.
- Familiarize yourself with the filing capabilities of your call-recording system. You may not know it, but most of your systems allow you to file a recorded and monitored call according to type. That means that if you're sometimes hampered by very slow response time, for example, you can create a category of monitored call recordings titled "slow response time calls." Bring in IT leadership and have them listen to what takes place when an agent has to struggle through a call with a system that won't cooperate. Be sure to note how much longer it takes, and how unprofessional it sounds when the rep is constantly making excuses for the system. And if your system allows you to record screen activity as well as voice, all the better.

These ideas can provide a quick burst that brings call center reality into focus. That's a great start, but you also want to make sure that change is sustainable. The following ideas are intended to make the new approach permanent:

- Establish a regular monthly meeting with leaders from the two departments, complete with agendas, notes and action plans. Don't rule this out because you "tried it before and it didn't work." If you're effective at making your operation more transparent, the meetings will work.
- Ensure that you have a strong "business level" understanding of technology. Far too many call center leaders have

adopted the "IT is not my thing" mantra, and that simply will not work in today's environment. Can you imagine the conductor ignoring part of the orchestra because "string instruments are not my thing"? IT is too important to your overall success, so if it makes you nervous, check out the numerous books, seminars and conferences where you can ratchet up your knowledge level.


- Provide Call Center 101 education for the IT staff. Erlang C may be a common term around your dinner table (well, it is around mine, anyway), but it is unknown to those outside the world of queuing. Keep the terms and concepts simple and relevant so they can stick — see the box below for some hints on how to do this.
- Make sure that your staff includes at least one "quasi-technologist." This person has worked in the contact center and understands it, and also has a good foundation in IT principles and is comfortable speaking that language. This role is becoming more and more common in contact centers, and it is a great way to bring the departments closer. We often find these people in either a project management role (internal to the contact center) or sometimes in a workforce management team. You'll love having a person to count on in these meetings, and the IT staff will find it effective to have someone they can tap with a balanced view of needs and objectives.

Finally, give some thought to structure and job responsibilities. Many IT leaders want to keep all associated roles and tasks within their domain, and there is nothing wrong with that. Others, though, would be happy to move some technical positions to other departments. Taking on some of these roles in the contact center, like Moves/Adds/Changes or acceptance testing, might help IT focus on the more complex things, and in the end provide much better service to the contact center. The extra work in your shop could pay dividends for years to come.

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Internal Opportunities Can Provide Benefits to All

Contact center leaders are always looking for ways to differentiate themselves from the competition. That search often centers on external methods of performance scoring or strategic decisions, like being open 24/7. Those may be important, but don't overlook the internal opportunities. Who knows how much more you could be getting from your technology until you get closer to those providing it? Orchestrate a tighter bond with IT and the result will be music to everyone's ears. 

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Contact Center 101 for the IT Professional

A one- to two-hour overview of contact centers is a great way for the IT staff to understand what matters most to you. You can't get too mired in the details, though. The idea is to provide the staff with some general concepts that will help them design systems that work for you. Here are a few key elements to include:

- The cost of time in your contact center. Understanding this helps them in almost every activity, from designing a knowledge management system to providing quick response time. You should be able to quote approximately how much a one-, five- or 10-second increase in talk time increases your costs. Where I once worked, we were able to determine that one second of talk time cost us about \$50,000 a year. When IT got that message, it was "game on" for the IT staff in helping us improve efficiency.
- The importance of timing and consistency. A little bit of understanding of queuing theory can go a long way. The IT staff needs to know that you run on close margins, and if something goes wrong for just 20 minutes, you can spend three hours or more dealing with the consequences.
- The challenges of turnover. Most of us have to deal with more turnover than we would like. Well-designed systems can turn new staff productive earlier, and that helps deflect some of the pain of attrition.

You may have other things you need to include based on your particular business. The items above are concepts that affect nearly every contact center and which can be better managed when IT staff understand them.

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