Conquering the Challenges of Complexity

Identifying Key Issues and Creating Strategies for Long-Term Contact Center Success

Evaluating the impact of contact center complexity brings to mind a Mark Twain quote: “Everybody talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it.” There do seem to be more tangible options for companies dealing with the intricacies of the evolving demand for higher levels of customer service than there are for controlling the climate. However, most businesses are still only acknowledging that they face growing challenges—as opposed to taking proactive steps to address them.

A 2012 ICMI study on contact center complexity sponsored by inContact illustrates the problem. More than 500 contact center professionals from 20 nations participated in the research, which evaluated both short- and long-term contact center goals and investment trends. The results revealed a distinct contrast: Although most contact center leaders had a clear awareness of the need for change, few were taking immediate action. In fact, nearly 70% of the centers reported increasing contact center complexity, but only a minority, roughly 33%, reported that they were in the process of actually making enhancements to meet these challenges.

To move forward, identifying the overriding issues and sorting out divergent priorities first will enable centers to develop effective strategies for successfully managing complexity, both now and in the future. Five areas were examined in the survey:

1) **What are the most significant goals of the contact center?** Forty percent of respondents considered revenue add-on and increased customer loyalty to be their main goals. Over 27% saw the objective as balancing cost containment with revenue generation, while more than 36% opted for cost containment and cost reduction. The “other” category (11%), which encompassed a variety of real-world concerns, such as first contact resolution (FCR) and agent productivity, makes the picture less clear. For example, can contact centers realistically expect to build customer loyalty without a greater focus on FCR? Can revenue add-on be a realistic objective without far greater emphasis on improved agent training?

Implementing a multi-pronged approach to achieving their stated goals is still problematic for most contact centers. And this only perpetuates the core difficulties that have traditionally plagued contact centers: Unsatisfactory call resolution rates, insufficient cross-training and unmotivated staff, which in turn lead to unacceptable rates of agent and customer attrition.

2) **Is increased customer satisfaction more than just a slogan?** Participants were asked to rank what they considered their contact centers’ key priority from 1 to 5 (most important). The choices included lower operating costs, increased customer satisfaction, increased agent productivity, increased sales and profitability, and meeting service level agreements (SLAs). While increased customer satisfaction was rated a 5 by 53% of the respondents—with an average grade of 3.86—the other choices also received above-average ratings (3.0 or higher).
3) **How is technology helping to take centers to the next level?**

Contact centers can select from a wide range of investment options to reach their diverse goals. The specific solutions reported vary—**process improvement** (59%), **recruiting, hiring and training agents** (40%) **quality/call monitoring** (37%), **agent desktop tools** (29%), and **CRM upgrade/integration** (27.5%) were the leading choices. However, all the solutions cited are based on improvement through the introduction of technology.

High on the scale of existing cloud-based services currently being used are IVRs, ACDs and customer survey tools, each used by approximately one-third of the respondents' companies. Roughly 25% also have CRM systems and knowledge-base applications in place.

Once again, contact center leaders are aware of the value of enhanced technology in solving the challenges they face. But the devil is in the details. In many cases, centers are throwing just about everything available into the mix, with unintended results. Making too many improvements over a short period of time adds to, rather than diminishes, complexity and often leads to higher levels of worker burnout. To avoid this, management needs to more accurately determine appropriate intervals between the identification of a process issue and the implementation of its solution.

4) **Dealing with data dilemmas and the consequences of complexity**

Thirty-six percent of respondents reported that they “don’t have data to quantify customer attrition.” This deficiency is actually a symptom of issues created by increasing contact center complexity. Businesses are now using specialized agent groups and specialized processes for diverse products and customer segments, as well as different channels. This higher-touch approach requires more involved recruiting and training of new agents. Added complexity has also affected the performance of contact centers, with nearly 42% reporting increases in broken processes, additional data-input errors, lower FCR rates, and missed opportunities for cross-selling.

Companies have taken a number of steps to diminish this burgeoning complexity, including cross-training initiatives, enhanced coaching and training, bringing in consultants, and implementing desktop integration tools. But this try-anything approach hasn’t always produced the desired results. More than 42% of companies surveyed still report agent attrition, with nearly half these departures attributed to agent burnout.

5) **Leading centers past a state of confusion to a more productive future**

How can contact centers handle the complexity of today's operations while improving service levels and agent productivity, keeping costs from spiraling, and increasing customer satisfaction? How can management have a clear understanding of the challenges, yet a lack of focus in dealing with them?

One reason for the lack of progress is that contact centers are so busy dealing with immediate problems, there’s little time to see the future.

Contact center managers are looking to a brighter future ahead. When asked where they see their centers in five years, 63% replied that they would be a driver of customer loyalty, and 5% viewed their centers as revenue generators. One-quarter predicted that complexity will diminish to more manageable proportions, and 27% predicted that attrition will decrease.
What improvements do the respondents expect in five years? Fifty-four percent envisioned having access to a pool of cross-trained, multi-skilled agents; 44% saw improvement driven by accurate and accessible knowledge bases; and 42% predicted that agents would be able to communicate effectively with customers on their channels of choice.

Five key solutions were seen as game changers: Knowledge management (31%), customer self-service (30%), quality monitoring (27%), at-home agents (24%), and workforce management software (24%).

Active and targeted incorporation of the newest technology will drive improvements that will ultimately bring complexity under control. Decisions need to be considered that focus on ease of upgrades, smooth integration, and scalability, with an eye toward making measured operational improvements. The end goals must always be to enhance functionality, reduce complexity in the contact center, and focus on providing the kind of customer experience that will build loyalty.

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