VIRTUAL HOLD® TECHNOLOGY

White Paper

Is Virtual Queuing a Model for Unified Communications?

Virtual queuing technology, such as that deployed in some contact centers, sequences and prioritizes workflows and requests. What does that mean for unified communications?

by Eric Camulli

There is no more intense business environment than the busy contact center. It's not unusual for a large contact center to handle more than 100,000 calls a day – calls with varying degrees of urgency placed by callers under varying levels of stress. But each call is important to the customer and can make or break a company's relationship with that person. In the contact center, customer satisfaction is often achieved or lost in a matter of seconds, not minutes or hours.

As a result, the contact center is infused with performance-optimization technologies that are designed to enhance the effectiveness of its workers. In today's environment it may be the perfect testing ground for developing your company's Unified Communications (UC) strategy.

UC is the convergence and integration of communications such as voice, messaging, real-time chats, conferencing and more on Internet Protocol (IP) networks and open software platforms for the purpose of increasing employee efficiency and productivity throughout an organization. IT directors and managers exploring UC in all kinds of industries and fields are asking, "How can we merge these various systems as smoothly and painlessly as possible?" It stands to reason that the contact center has something to teach us about UC.

Supporting this idea is a Gartner paper titled, "A Framework for Unified Communications." It notes, "Contact centers support high-volume structured communications. Many of the technologies and applications that support contact centers are identical to those in UC." Among them is virtual queuing (VQ) technology, which is used by the contact center to sequence customer requests and eliminates the time spent waiting on hold for agent resources in a manner similar to what is needed for UC to be successful across an organization.

The paper goes on to point out an important difference between contact center communications and interdepartmental and company-wide communications: contact centers target specific interactions such as customer contacts, while UC must support less-structured interactions for much broader groups of employees and individuals. But the commonalities are telling. What can IT directors and managers pondering UC implementation learn from virtual queuing in the contact center?

Queuing Up Communications

A business rules engine is a vital component of UC. Business rules detect that a particular business situation has occurred so that a work flow can then be assigned to perform the work. Virtual queuing's business rules engine, used for customizing and automatically modifying the user's experience based on real-time queue conditions, uses the same kind of intelligence required to manage UC processes.

Defined broadly, virtual queuing allows callers to hang up instead of waiting on hold for an agent and receive a callback without losing their place in the queue. Take the experience of Southwest Airlines, with a contact center operation that fields an average of 110,000 calls per day. Southwest continually reviews its systems and processes to make sure its 2,400 customer service representatives are meeting the airline's high standards for quality and efficiency.

Combining UC and virtual queuing creates automatically unified, managed queues. No longer will we have to "stalk" colleagues because we know that the first – and only – request will be delivered as soon as the recipient becomes available.

Like any contact center operation, performance levels can be impacted by a multitude of unexpected or uncontrollable variables. A primary source of frustration – not only for Southwest customers, but for customers across all sectors of industry – is waiting on hold. So, Southwest Airlines implemented a virtual queuing solution from Virtual Hold Technology® (VHT®.) Southwest saw immediate results with a 47 percent reduction in queue times and numerous customer compliments on Twitter. In addition, Southwest saved 25 million toll minutes (and the costs associated with them) or the equivalent of 47 years of hold time over the first six months the system was deployed.

However, the opportunity to save time is not just reserved for contact centers. Individuals are also affected every time they wait to get in touch with a coworker but can't get through because he or she is currently busy. Not knowing where a request stands in another's personal queue is frustrating. Waiting for others to get back to us with information or authorization wastes precious time and can be nerve-racking when deadlines loom or urgent situations arise.

In the physical world, we queue work and messages up for each other all the time. We manage requests between departments and branch offices. We manage consecutive tasks or queues of work within projects. We also manage queues of work requests between suppliers, vendors and customers. What does virtual queuing do that mimics what we do when organizing and prioritizing work requests? What capability do we share that glues all of these functions together?

The answer is that a virtual queuing platform intelligently copies our own ability to estimate task time to completion and to estimate how long a work request must stay in queue before it is its "turn" to be completed. That's why for UC, virtual queuing is an important model for managing a task list for individuals and departments, calculating estimated task to completion and assisting with task prioritization.

If we look at UC through the lens of personal virtual queues, imagine what it could mean for the people inside your organization. The use of automatically managed queues could potentially free up individuals from "stalking" colleagues and supervisors through voice mail, e-mail, instant-messaging, text-messaging and more when attempting to reach them with an urgent request. Only one request is necessary when a managed personal virtual queue ensures that the first and only request is delivered at the first moment the desired recipient becomes available.

Applying VQ Knowledge

When developing your UC strategy then, look closely at the capabilities that comprise UC and virtual queuing and consider how they might work together:

1. **Skills-based routing** assesses caller needs based on the caller's identity as well as other choices made using an integrated voice response (IVR) system and then matches the call to a suitably trained contact center specialist. In the Virtual Hold virtual queuing system, working in conjunction with Conversation Manager technology by Genesys Labs, the context of the call is examined in real-time and routing determinations are made in the same way UC needs a context-based routing tool to make determinations.

2. **Rich presence** engines provide information about the current state of an individual, equipment or application. The best-known use of rich presence is with instant messaging (IM), where it is possible to see if others are logged in before engaging them with text dialog. However, the status information does no good in indicating when the person will be next available to help with a request. Virtual queuing could provide personal expected wait times for coworkers requiring action before they can move forward with a business process. The personal expected wait time improves expectations for resource availability and therefore helps inquiring parties reprioritize and increase their own personal efficiency in the process.

3. **Personal assistants** perform tasks for individuals, such as forwarding calls or messages, accessing calendar information and providing reminders and alerts. Perhaps you've been using presence and personal assistants and wondering why you are not getting the most out of them. If you are considering deploying these technologies as part of a UC strategy, be aware that, as we know from contact center experience, they will not be fully useful unless they are integrated with a virtual queuing-like technology.

   Why not? In the same way that virtual queuing is necessary when the customer service representative you are trying to access is busy, rich presence and personal assistants can only deliver maximum efficiency when people are always available. When they are not, a personal virtual queue is required to manage the requests. A personal virtual queuing assistant could triage requests based upon rules that you set.

   For example, if needs dictate, requests from your supervisor could go to the top of your personal virtual queue and be forwarded as an SMS message to your mobile phone as soon as your status indicator changed from busy to available. In this manner, virtual queuing can bridge the gap between your presence indicator and your personal assistant that forwards messages and creates alerts. As a result, your personal productivity is elevated and communications are truly unified.

   Another concept from virtual queuing that can apply to the effectiveness of personal assistants is push queues vs. pull queues. Pull queues simply distribute queued-up requests collectively to contact center agents then rely on the individual agents to "pull" or respond to the requests in order. Push queues distribute queued requests directly to each agent, so the agent has no choice but to respond to the next request that is served up personally to him or to her.

4. **Proactive notification** auto-arranges follow-up interactions with customers that are tracked within the tool. In her research paper titled, "Proactive Outbound Notification Saves Money," Elizabeth Herrell from Forrester points out, "Proactively notifying customers of events prevents unnecessary customer calls to your company. Customer service managers anticipate situations that trigger calls and send customers messages over the device of choice to reduce the number of incoming calls."

5. The same concept applies to interdepartmental communications. With virtual queuing assisting with project management and task distribution based on rich presence, the addition of automated proactive communications naturally supports increased productivity between people working on large, time-sensitive projects.

6. As the technology evolves into a personal virtual assistant for office workers, it will increase their productivity, as the assistant is used when unavoidable unproductive activities arise, such as waiting for responses, waiting for resources to free up, waiting to submit queries and tasks, waiting to enter or progress through a defined process, or waiting to locate or allocate resources, etc. By notifying the users when assigned tasks are complete, the virtual assistant could potentially bring about a new productivity paradigm.

Other Applications

Despite the greatest routing tools, there always will be times in business when demand exceeds capacity. Therefore, virtual queuing concepts apply not only to contact centers, but to other processes that have queues as well, such as those at banks or box offices. Virtual queuing concepts are even useful in manufacturing and supply chain management, where secondary resources and activities may be accessed and used while waiting for primary resources to free up. The tenets of virtual queuing perhaps can provide a new perspective for increasing the efficiency of JIT and Kanban assembly line processes.

For a best-practices approach to UC, look to the contact center equipped with virtual queuing, specifically at software aimed at rules-based decision-making to bridge the gap between UC elements. If your company's contact center is not equipped with virtual queuing, consider implementing it for its inherent benefits plus the opportunity it will provide you to better understand UC.

Next steps include:

1. Establishing your UC goals
2. Auditing all communication points in the targeted environment
3. Defining all possible ways to interact and respond at each point
4. Re-visiting your business needs to insure an accurate assessment
5. Identifying the best solution options
6. Comparing technology providers and costs

By examining contact centers that use virtual queuing solutions you can gain insight and understanding into convergence and integration. By following these steps, you can turn that understanding into the basis for a UC implementation strategy.

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