

Maximizing the Savings of Call Center Multi-Sourcing While Protecting Service Levels

A common hosted platform enables shared tools
and unified management of
in-house, remote and outsourced agents



Multi-sourcing is an advantage for call centers—but gains depend on implementation

Many companies are moving to multi-sourcing for call center agents, largely in pursuit of the cost savings that can come from flexibly tapping into a variety of labor pools. The trend is also growing because multi-sourcing enables call center resources to be rapidly scaled in either direction to align with business growth, call volumes and seasonality.

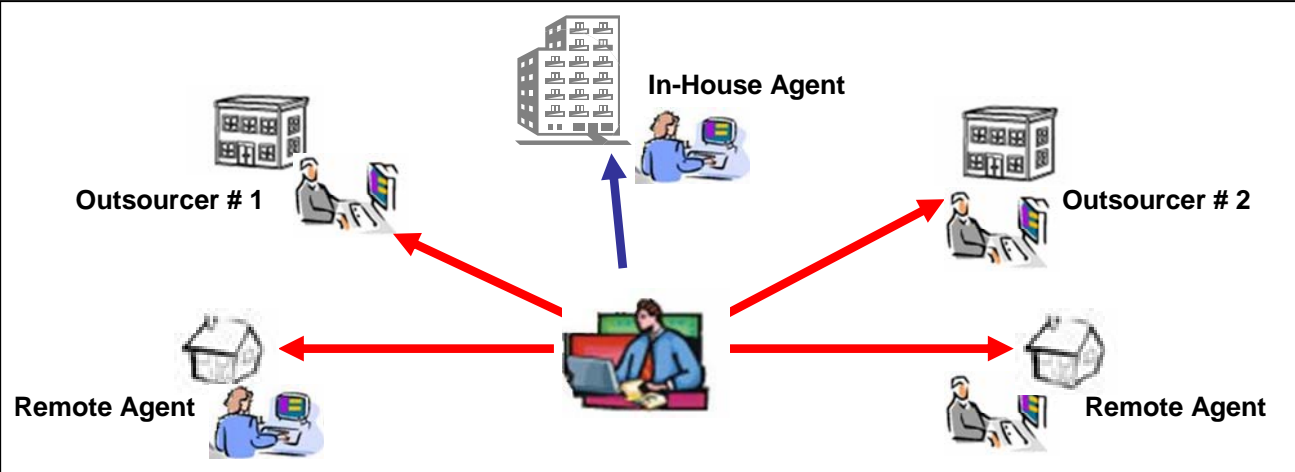
Still, multi-sourcing is not without peril—particularly the risk of negative impact on customer service and, thereby, damage to customer loyalty and brand. Nor are all companies that have adopted multi-sourcing realizing the expected levels of savings.

A single overarching problem is often the cause when multi-sourcing delivers disappointing results in service and savings: *the lack of a common infrastructure across multi-sourced call center resources*. While many call centers have all of their in-house agents on a centralized platform, their multi-sourced agents—working at various outsourcer locations or at home—may be using a hodgepodge of systems. Differences among these systems can result in problematic performance issues:

- **Agents—whose workflows are shaped by the systems they use and by various degrees of access to data and tools—are unable to deliver consistent customer service.** Problems stemming from lack of a common multi-sourcing platform aggravate and accentuate other inconsistencies, in agent skills, training and management, which companies are trying hard to eliminate. A company's most valuable customers are often the first to notice these inconsistencies, and are put at risk for attrition.
- **Companies and their customers struggle with unpredictable and largely unmanageable response times.** Because managers lack real-time visibility into the status of all their multi-sourced call center resources, they are slow or unable to react to problems—from carrier outages to volume spikes—that affect agent and system availability.
- **Poor asset utilization keeps cost per call higher than it should be.** The inability to reconfigure and reallocate call distribution as situations change may result in one agent group experiencing light volume or sitting idle while agents at another location are inundated. To avoid customer service impact, companies may over-staff beyond optimal and cost-effective levels.
- **Multi-site deployments, upgrades and maintenance stall time to market and drain savings.** Return on investment from new products, technological innovations in call center infrastructure and service enhancements are delayed and diminished by the complexities of roll outs across the heterogeneous platforms used by multiple outsourcing vendors. Companies then pay for unnecessary and redundant maintenance in their aggregate outsourcing bills.

It doesn't have to be that way. Companies moving to multi-sourced call centers can avoid these problems and maximize their savings and other benefits by adopting a common hosted call center platform. Hosted platforms flexibly extend across any number and variety of outsourcing resources—and rapidly scale to meet changing call volumes and business strategies. They enable companies to deliver consistent, high-quality customer service transparently to their customers while taking advantage of the growing range of outsourcing options.

This whitepaper describes how a common hosted call center platform fits into a multi-sourcing environment. We show how this type of hosting strategy enables companies to avoid the pitfalls of multi-sourcing while fully realizing its potential for delivering appreciably better service more economically than ever before.



Ideally, the multi-sourced infrastructure should be invisible to the customer and entirely visible to the call center manager. In reality, because of the lack of a common multi-source platform, inconsistencies make the customers all too aware of the outsourcing, while call center managers have limited visibility into their resources.

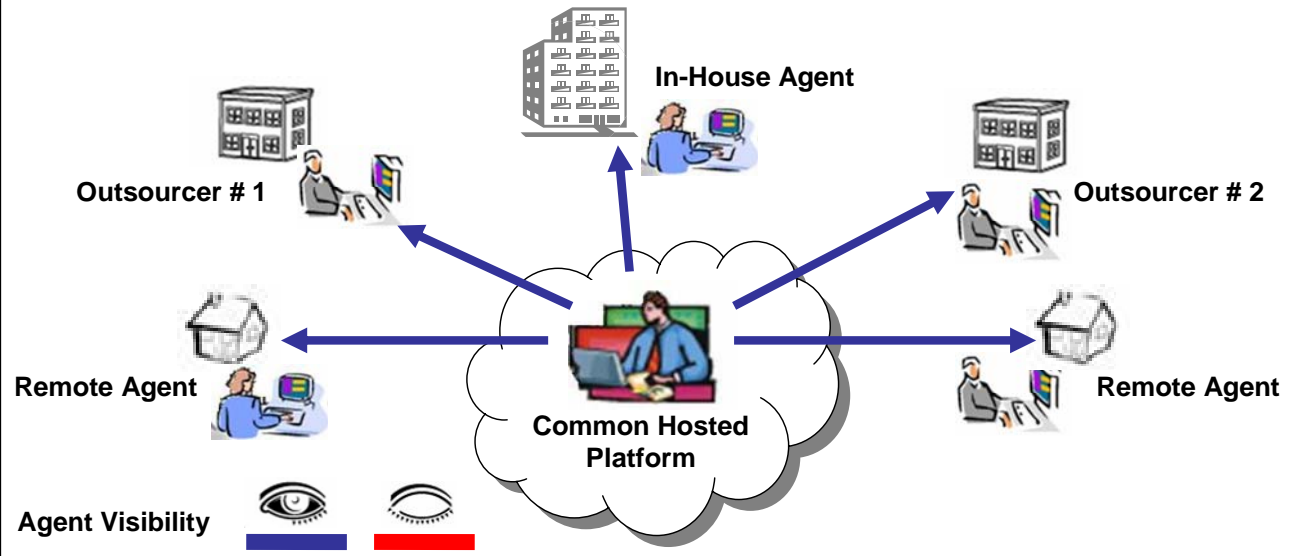


Figure 1. Agent Availability: Call Center Management View

Achieving service level consistency

When customers are interacting with a call center agent, they're interacting with the company—that's how they see it. The company's ability to support this perception through technology that makes service delivery mechanisms transparent to customers is, of course, the key enabler behind call center multi-sourcing.

The problem for companies adopting multi-sourcing without benefit of a common hosted platform is that the transparency of the delivery mechanism is far from 100%. It shows itself through the numerous inconsistencies that disparate agent platforms and user interfaces cause in call center processes and workflow.

Customers who frequently interact with a call center—often a company's most valuable customers—certainly notice these inconsistencies and soon become disappointed and frustrated by unsatisfactory and unpredictable experiences.

Inconsistent service can also turn off one-time callers, if they have an experience below the standard of quality they had expected of the company. And, unlike frequent callers, these customers may never give the company a chance to change their negative opinion.

There are numerous ways platform differences can create differences in call center treatment. These discrepancies may be as subtle as the way agents transfer a call or as significant as the number of questions customers are asked during a transaction and the time required to complete it. Consider these examples:

- **Tool deployment delays.** An in-house call center develops a new scripting tool that allows for greater structure in the call and therefore better compliance with company service policies. The tool is useable immediately on the in-house platform, but deploying it on the platforms used by multi-sourced agent groups takes additional time since some custom coding is required. While the outsourcers eventually get up to speed, it isn't long before the company wants to make another tool enhancement, and once again its multi-sourced agent groups fall out of sync with the in-house group. Over several years, in fact, they are out of sync more often than not. During this time, repeat callers are apt to get contradictory answers to their questions, leaving them with the impression that the company isn't well managed.
- **Business intelligence obstacles.** Competitive pressure and poor showings in quality of service surveys have lit a fire under a company's senior management, which now wants better results ASAP. Call center management decides to elevate service levels by introducing threaded business intelligence from its CRM system and enterprise databases into call center applications. The project becomes immensely more complex, expensive and time-consuming, however, when the question of whether outsourcer platforms can support these integrations—and keep in sync with CRM and database changes and modifications going forward—is considered. The company opts for a phased rollout, focusing on its in-house call center initially. Agents in this facility get CRM screen pops that provide all the necessary information to handle calls efficiently and accelerate transactions—information agents at other locations still have to rely on callers to provide. Customers notice, and in the next quality of service survey, the company's scores continue to dip, which is a huge frustration for senior managers after the hefty investments made in pursuit of improvements.

Advantages of Multi-Sourcing with a Common Hosted Call Center Infrastructure

- *Efficient load balancing among all agents at all locations*
- *More effective skills-based routing among all agents at all locations*
- *Unified historical and trend reporting*
- *Comprehensive real-time visibility and control*
- *Broader, deeper, more consistent systems integration including incorporation of outsourced, remote, and in-house agents*
- *A common agent user interface*
- *Faster, easier, more consistent agent training*
- *Consolidated monitoring, recording, evaluation and scoring (even coaching) of outsourced, remote and in-house agents*
- *Efficient and warm transfers between locations, if desirable*
- *Better disaster prevention through complete redundancy and guaranteed systems availability*
- *Lower cost through the need for fewer agents*

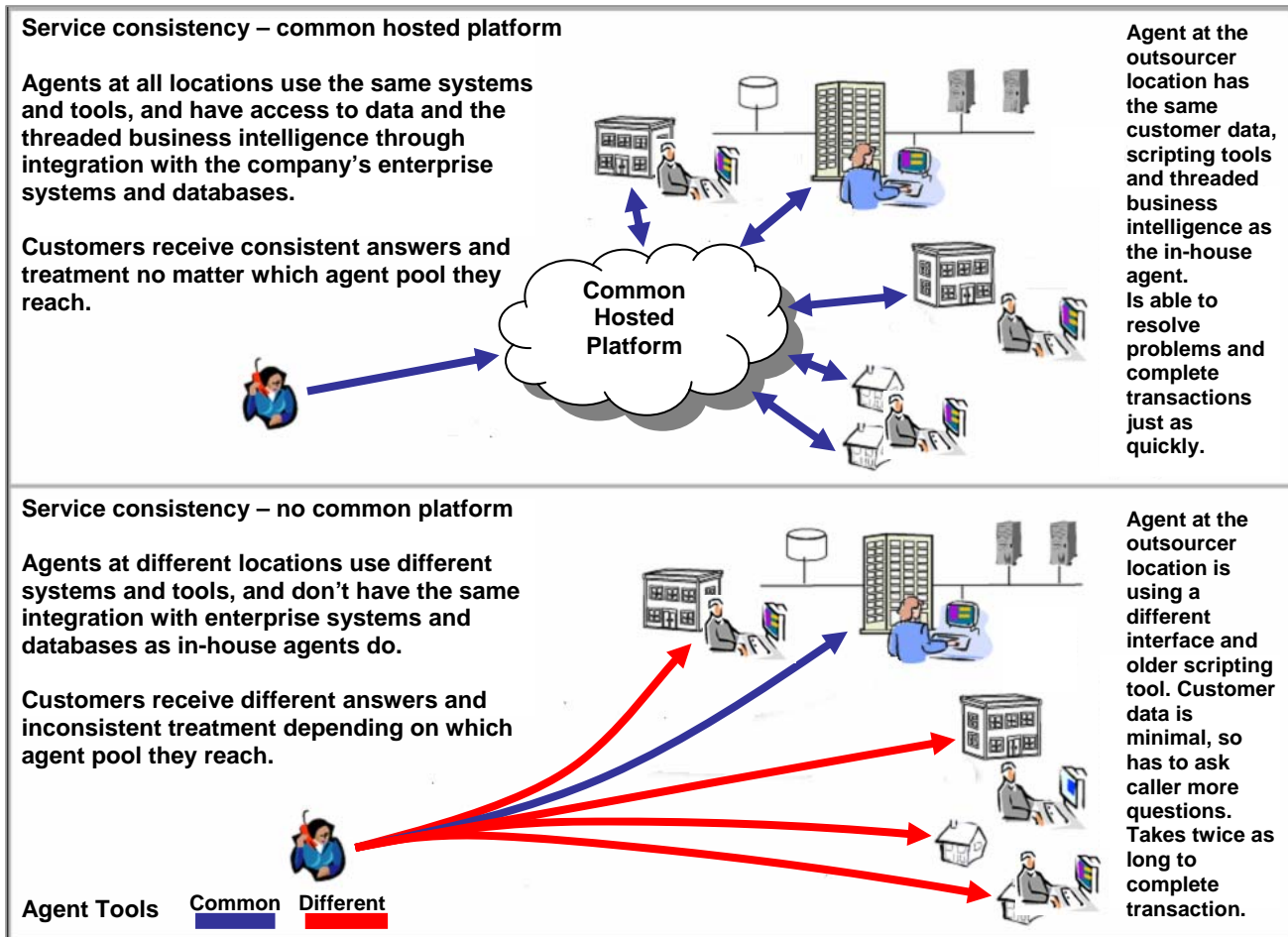


Figure 2. Service Consistency: Agent Tools

These types of delays and obstacles, with their resulting inconsistencies, should not be accepted as a “necessary evil” of call center multi-sourcing. Common hosted platforms resolve such problems, ensuring that call center management—not the outsourcer or the outsourcer’s technology—determine business processes, policies and workflow. They enable companies to establish a common baseline of capabilities for all their call center resources, to provide all agents with a common user interface and to leverage service introductions, integration and scalability across the entire agent population. They also increase visibility and interoperability between agent groups, facilitating call transfers, including warm transfers when necessary.

Improving service availability

Any number of events—power outages, weather conditions, network interruptions —can affect call center agent availability, often without warning. One of the attractions of multi-sourcing is, of course, reduced risk of call center downtime, since events affecting one location are unlikely to affect others. Still, the very fact that multiple locations are involved increases the potential for exposure to service-disrupting and service-slowng events, since the “virtual footprint” of the call center may encompass a wide range of geographies, climates and governmental entities.

Companies that engage in multi-sourcing without a common hosted platform are exposing their call center operations to heightened risk. Disparate platforms cause each agent pool to be invisible to one another and, in most cases, to call center management, necessitating the blind distribution of calls. In fact, this lack of visibility reduces not only the company's ability to perceive problems at outsourced locations, but to respond to them with timely remedies. Here are two examples:

- **Disaster recovery can be close to disastrous.** A multi-sourced call center is using in-house and outsourced agents with disparate platforms and varying levels of high-availability protection. Suddenly, one of its outsourced agent groups becomes unreachable. The call center has enhanced 800 service, so calls are automatically rerouted by the carrier to other agent locations. This rerouting is based on preconfigured rules, however, and does not take into account the current status of the agent groups. There's no awareness of the fact that one location, where capacity is low because several agents called in sick and several others are on lunch break, is overloaded. Another location, which has a large number of highly skilled agents who complete transactions quickly, could take on more of the burden, but there's no awareness of their availability. Customers experience needlessly higher wait times, blocked calls and substandard service from frazzled agents.
- **Poor asset utilization can increase costs and diminish service.** A call center has outsourced to multiple vendors and distributes calls to each location according to percentages based on historical call volume. These generalized percentage allocations don't correspond to current call volumes, so when situations change, callers can end up being deeply queued for one agent group while agent groups in other locations are available to handle the calls. Call center management can't do better with load balancing because there's no global visibility into agent queues and no unified reporting to support system-wide control. The company ends up paying for resources it isn't using—resources that should be providing its customers with a better service experience.

A common hosted platform dynamically routes calls to the best available agent location. It makes an intelligent on-the-fly routing decision for each incoming call based on the current status of agent locations and queues, and can also take into account agent skill level and other specified factors. As a result, when an agent location suddenly becomes unavailable, calls are rerouted in a way that is optimal given the current status of all call center resources. As the situation changes—as more agents become available at one location, for example, and capacity drops at another—call distribution automatically adjusts to the new realities. At any moment in time the call center is using all of its available resources to deliver the very best service possible to its customers. And with this kind of capability, disaster recovery is effectively replaced by disaster prevention.

Call center managers with a common hosted platform also have visibility into the status of the entire agent pool, including all agent locations and queues. They can therefore marshal their resources and perform load balancing in a fluid manner that responds to actual conditions and shifting call volume patterns. Seeing queues lengthen in one location, for example, managers might shift a group of agents from making outgoing calls to taking incoming calls. They might bring more home-based “on demand” agents online. With real-time visibility, the call center can maximize asset utilization, so that it is able to deliver a higher level of service at a lower level of staffing. In addition, unified historical and trend reporting provides call center management with the comprehensive and detailed data necessary to make accurate planning and staffing decisions..

The truth is call center multi-sourcing should never be the source of increased risk. It should always reduce risk, and a common hosted multi-sourcing platform is the only cost-efficient way to ensure this. Hosted common platforms should also provide a high-availability “always-on” call center infrastructure that encompasses all resources.

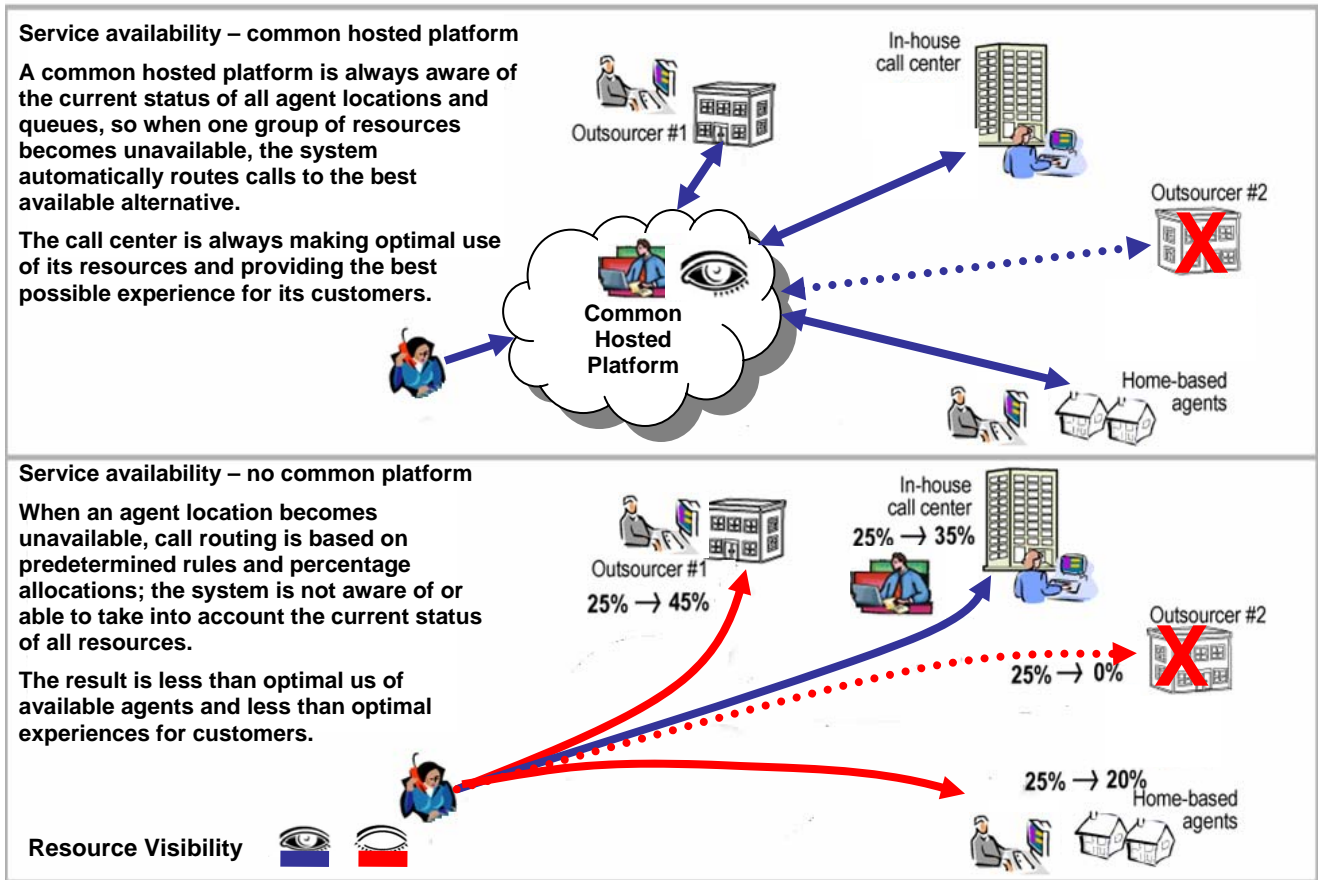


Figure 3. Service Availability: Call Allocation

Finding efficiency in numbers

By multiplying the number of call center outsourcers they use, companies are saving money—but not necessarily through greater efficiency. In fact, savings—from lower wage labor or reduced facilities expense—are usually being achieved today despite reduced efficiency.

As we've pointed out already in this paper, companies that adopt call center agent multi-sourcing strategies are often forced to staff up beyond optimal and cost-effective levels in order to meet service quality and availability goals. They end up shouldering additional costs when they deploy service enhancements across heterogeneous multi-sourcing environments. Even when the direct expense of such upgrades is borne by outsourcing partners, the company still pays indirectly for the redundant IT work going on at multiple locations.

Looked at from a certain perspective, all this inefficiency is good news. It means there remains plenty of opportunity for companies to increase the cost savings from multi-sourcing even further. And unlike the initial sources of savings, which can be affected by mega forces such as unemployment levels, interest rates and regulations, these incremental savings are something companies can address and control.

Ongoing savings, in IT and outsourcing fees, come from the ability to use shared tools, applications and services across the commonly hosted multi-sourced environment. In addition, since disparate systems no longer force variations in call center workflows and methods, the cost and time required for agent training is dramatically reduced. Companies can even perform consolidated monitoring, evaluating and coaching of all agents.

Conclusion

Many companies have made tremendous strides to improve the service they provide their customers, as well as enhance the management and cost control of resources across the call center. Now, as call centers migrate toward a distributed agent model, it's important to be thinking beyond the physical agent location alternatives. Companies also need to consider how these dispersed resources can be most efficiently managed to maximize the cost savings without diminishing service quality and availability.

A common hosted call center technology platform is essential to fully realizing the benefits of call center multi-sourcing. Companies that adopt and implement this strategy will be able to deliver unmatched service with unmatched efficiency. System-wide visibility into the status of all agents, the ability to provide them with shared tools, data and business intelligence, and the ability to manage them in real-time with unified reporting and controls will enable these service leaders to deliver consistently excellent service regardless of where an agent resides.

About Echopass

Echopass provides advanced IP-based hosted call and contact center solutions through the EchoSystem™ Service Integration Platform.

The EchoSystem is a multi-tenant, multi-sourced service, available directly from Echopass as well as through outsourcer partners. Consequently, our customer's agents can work in single or multiple sites, remotely, at home, or as virtual employees through our outsourcers. As long as the customer is using the Echopass technology platform, management is able to have a constant unified view of the entire agent pool with common reporting, load balancing, and disaster prevention rather than disaster recovery.

Echopass EchoSystem Service Integration Platform Advantages

- **On-Demand:** hosted multi-tenant service delivered via SaaS model, complete flexibility and scalability
- **Always On:** service uptime and 24x365 world-class customer support
- **Guaranteed:** backed by the industry's highest SLA of 99.9% for the entire platform
- **End to End:** fully integrated solution including CRM, WFM, IVR, Telco, custom applications

Echopass provides the common hosted platform and management controls across the entire set of agents to eliminate any uncertainties or inefficiencies between in-house and outsourced or work-at-home agents. The management toolkit Echopass customers use is also fully extended to the entire agent population. As a result, Echopass assures the same business continuity protection currently in place for the portion of customer's existing agents using Echopass technology (either in-house or via an outsourcer) to all agents using our technology wherever they may be located.

Echopass self-service applications, such as frequently asked questions (FAQs), automated order status, and automated credit card payments, have been used extensively by our customers to both automate and deflect a significant number of calls away from the call center with dramatic organizational cost savings and, more importantly, improved customer service. If the callers can satisfy themselves through a wider choice of options, the customer and the end-user customer have the best of both worlds: customer needs are fulfilled according to their choice of touch point; customers who wish to reach live agents after or in lieu of self service, can still do so.

Several articles recently published and available on the Echopass website describe how Echopass customers, including customers served by our outsourcers, were able to work through weather related problems (such as the recent blizzards in Colorado and typhoons in the Philippines) without missing a single customer call.

Only Echopass delivers the promise of on-demand, always on, guaranteed, and end-to-end solutions that are both affordable and fully integrated with clients' existing customer contact applications and voice or data technologies. Echopass managed solutions are in use by numerous mid-to-large enterprises and government agencies, and are quick to deploy, easy to use, flexible, and require no capital investment or ongoing maintenance. Privately-held Echopass, backed by venture capital firms Canaan Partners and New Enterprise Associates, is a recipient of the Red Herring Top 100 Companies award.

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