White Paper

Evolving the Agent Desktop - Why the Time Is Now

Introduction

All organizations should plan for three trends when considering the next-generation agent desktop for their contact center: 1) the increasingly unstructured and unpredictable nature of contact center work, 2) the shift from reactive inbound to proactive outbound interactions, and 3) the incorporation of Web 2.0 technologies.

The increasingly unstructured and unpredictable nature of contact center work extends from the fact that most customers are content to use self-service tools such as e-commerce applications for order entry, billing, and shipping status, and they use a knowledge base for things like technical product support. If those self-service options fail, many customers turn to Internet searches, customer forums, and social networks for help. As a result, the contact center now often becomes the last stop for customers. When they do call, they are extremely well-informed, their problems are more complex, and the problems cannot readily be solved by the agent alone. The agent must collaborate with other people in business functions such as sales, marketing, product management, accounts payable, and shipping to solve these problems. A new type of agent desktop is required to support this modern, collaborative style of contact center work.

The shift from reactive inbound to proactive outbound communication refers to the growing importance of social network monitoring and response. With the growth of applications such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs, organizations must now proactively monitor customer discourse to capture opportunities and respond to brand equity threats from poor customer experiences. A singular bad experience is not just between a customer and a company any more - it can now include millions of Twitter followers, YouTube viewers, and Facebook friends. This need for proactive social network response shifts the emphasis of contact center work from reacting to inbound calls to proactively inserting the company into social network conversations. Once again, a new type of agent desktop is required to enable this proactive outreach in the contact center.

The incorporation of Web 2.0 technologies into the agent desktop more effectively enables the two trends mentioned previously. These technologies include thin clients, browsers, HTML 5, JavaScript, XML, Representational State Transfer (REST), JavaScript Object Notation (JSON), Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP), and OpenSocial gadgets. Collectively, these technologies create a mash-up, or portal, providing a customizable “cockpit” with all the information agents need, when they need it. This programmatic model is infinitely more flexible, supportable, and extensible than the traditional fat-client, compiled computer telephony integration (CTI) applications of the past.

The new Cisco Finesse™ agent desktop addresses these three trends. The following sections explain how.

From Task Worker to Relationship Manager

It is evident that the nature of the transactions performed in a contact center is changing dramatically. When the contact center was the primary channel for delivery of real-time information, most of the work performed there was repetitive. Now, callers are seeking a highly personal and specialized dialog. By the time they reach an agent in the contact center, they have exhausted self-service alternatives - either because their request is complex, the systems have failed them, or they need specialized consulting. In other words, exception handing is the “new norm”.

Metrics must be adapted to meet this new norm. These “unscripted” calls last longer, so evaluating agents based on short average handle times is no longer applicable. Voice portals are less able to filter inbound calls as new generations call only when live help is needed - so calculating voice portal retention ratios looses importance.

Positive brand experiences have exponential value when everyone has an audience on the web. Companies are challenged with improving the word of mouth (or word of tweet) advertisement to manage brand detractors. More agents are measured on their contribution to Net Promoter Score, cycle time from the opening to the closing of an interaction, and - most importantly - first-call resolution. Table 1 compares the two paradigms.

Table 1. Traditional Versus Emerging Contact Center Agent Paradigm

Traditional Contact Center Agent	Emerging Agent Paradigm
• Predictable, repetitive, and scriptable transactions • High turnover • Focus on efficiency - short talk times and high voice portal retention ratios • Rigid CTI-centric integration • Task worker	• Exception handling and unpredictable work • Agent retention as a priority • Focus on efficacy - Net Promoter Score and first-call resolution • Web 2.0 integration and mash-ups • Relationship manager

Of course, this makeover does not happen overnight. Many consumers still expect to be handled the old-fashioned way, and businesses cannot ignore them. So how should a contact center be equipped for both the present and the future?

Enabling the New Agent

An experienced agent - one with relationship and problem-solving skills - handles an inquiry from an important customer. This agent does not serve merely as a vehicle to input information into the customer service software. As a matter of fact, the roles are exactly the opposite - the software tools are there to help agents do their job, not direct it. What would experienced agents want their work to be like?

- “My company trusts me to make decisions. I don’t need to put callers on hold to get permission to do the right thing.”
- “I have the right tools at the right time. The tools support my job.”
- “My company concentrates on supporting me instead of measuring me.”
- “My desktop applications evolve in lockstep with business changes.”
- “My organization is set up to help customers.”
- “I always have the right information when I need it. I don’t need to hunt for data or switch between applications.”

A person who becomes a contact center agent tends to enjoy helping people. Yet traditional contact center tools focus more on monitoring agents than on helping to serve customers. “New agents” want their contact center applications to be intuitive and require minimal or no training. They do not want to be simply a contact center expert - they want to be a **solution** expert.

New agents are familiar with Facebook and Google, and they want similar user interfaces to extend to their work environment. They know how to search for information when it is not readily available, and how to ask peers for help. They are more comfortable with social media than with a terminal emulator.

Cisco Finesse Desktop Software

The idea of a tightly integrated agent desktop is not new. CTI has been used in the contact center for more than two decades. Companies have invested incredible amounts of time and money to merge phone controls into enterprise applications, and have typically received positive initial returns on their investment. However, CTI has proven to be hard to maintain and has had difficulty addressing changing business requirements, so the cost of ownership grew.

Cisco Finesse software, the new Cisco Contact Center agent desktop application, is designed to allow companies to navigate the transformations in the marketplace outlined previously, and to provide a technology foundation that can keep pace with the web itself. At the same time, the Cisco Finesse application is built with an understanding that older environments do not disappear overnight, so that companies in different stages of maturity can take advantage of it immediately while protecting their current investments.

The Cisco Finesse application is the first of its kind. At its core is a Web 2.0 gadget-based framework that sets the standard for usability and application integration. The power of this approach is such that the benefits cascade through lines of business, IT, and the agents themselves.

The Experience

In order to speed the agent initiation and training process, the Cisco Finesse application user interface follows a model similar to that adopted by popular websites. The layout is not cluttered with unnecessary information, keeping the display clean and simple. Call context determines the features and data that are displayed. Cisco used the recommendations from a comprehensive usability study to make each operation intuitive - small details make a difference.

Customer data gathered by the Cisco Finesse application during call qualification is readily available, without the need for customization. Agents have the option to select how much they want to see, and to update the data as appropriate. And call history can also be shown, right out of the box.

Mash-Ups

Web 2.0 mash-ups can reduce integration times by more than an order of magnitude. Simply put, the Cisco Finesse application is a flexible webpage (“gadget container”) where individual applications (“gadgets”) are ready to use. Cisco provides the contact center components, and administrators can choose from thousands of options available from third parties. Adherence to the popular OpenSocial standards enables compatibility, and common webpages can be “imported” as well (using “iFrames”).

Creating the agent experience is no longer a major IT project, and can be as dynamic as the business itself. For example, the desktop layout can change from week to week to correspond with marketing promotions or seasonal activities. Or different agent groups can have gadgets that are specific to the work they do, as opposed to a “one-size-fits-all” agent desktop.

Another advantage of Web 2.0 is that gadgets are loosely coupled, meaning that there are fewer technical dependencies between them, so applications can be upgraded independently without cascading compatibility concerns.

Going Beyond CTI

Passing call data to another application, performing a screen pop, and feeding information back into the contact center clearly have a role in the accuracy and effectiveness of serving customers. However, traditional CTI interfaces are proprietary and complex, and expertise with these interfaces is scarce. Even the largest contact centers typically have to rely on a small number of in-house developers or expensive contracted professional services to support traditional CTI implementations.

The Cisco Finesse application solves this problem by embracing a web-based architecture. Every function it performs is also exposed as a next-generation web application programming interface (API), taking advantage of XML and HTTP standards (for example, REST, JSON, and XMPP) - not unlike typing a URL in a web browser. These methods are known to most college graduates, and companies can now tap pervasive web developer talent if desktop customization is required - reducing the deployment cost and eliminating the risk of losing trained personnel. To simplify things even further, the product interface itself is open source (JavaScript) and can be modified to meet specific needs.

Thin and Virtual

The Cisco Finesse agent desktop is a web application with no desktop installation required. Agents can work from anywhere by simply invoking a URL and logging in. The Cisco Finesse application can work in virtual desktop environments, and its servers can run as virtual machines in data centers. In other words, it has low associated deployment and operational costs.

Shifting to Higher Gears

Companies do not need to be fully “Web 2.0-compliant” in order to take advantage of the Cisco Finesse application. Many contact centers are still permeated with older applications, and not every agent is a new agent. The Cisco Finesse application can be adopted in an older environment and smoothly transition to a web-centric desktop, following this progression example:

1. The Cisco Finesse software desktop can be deployed as a standalone contact center soft phone, and with little integration to other desktop applications, companies can take advantage of its zero desktop footprint and lower TCO.
2. Web 2.0 APIs can be used to pass information to and from other agent desktop applications - allowing more precise and efficient call handling.
3. New gadgets can be incorporated into the desktop - streamlining navigation and optimizing agents’ and supervisors’ work.
4. Dynamic layouts can be rolled out based on agent and business needs.
5. Gadgets can start communicating with each other, enabling context sharing between multiple systems on the same framework.

The value grows exponentially as more gadgets are deployed and a holistic experience is built. Some of the most popular gadgets are discussed in the following sections.

Cisco SocialMiner

The Cisco SocialMiner social media customer care solution is also a first of its kind, designed to help companies proactively respond to customers and prospects communicating through social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook or other public forums. Agents and supervisors with a Cisco SocialMiner gadget can keep track of relevant web activity and blend their voice work with this new social media channel. Cisco SocialMiner can also be used for internal communications to facilitate expert engagement and escalations.

Extended Ecosystem

Cisco partners have added immense value to the Cisco Finesse application as they have quickly embraced the OpenSocial framework and delivered their own applications in this format. An extensive catalogue of gadgets including workforce management, quality and compliance recording, and speech analytics tools is already available to work with the Cisco Finesse application.

Cloud Options

Thousands of gadgets are available from public sources such as iGoogle and MyYahoo, which offer gadgets for news feeds, weather, email, and much more. Incorporating these gadgets into the Cisco Finesse agent desktop can add valuable information that can only enhance the customer service experience.

Why Cisco, Why Now

As companies plan to handle new demographics and consumer behavior, they have to consider the role the contact center will play in the future. Businesses do not need to wait to feel the pressure of this changing consumer base to act. Contact center platforms often last more than a decade, so today's technology selection will determine the ability to respond at the right time in the future.

Cisco understands the market transition and is innovating to enable competitive differentiation. The Cisco Finesse application addresses business and technical goals in unprecedented ways - showcasing Cisco's commitment to open standards and interfaces. Flexible adoption models allow companies to unlock the value of the Cisco Finesse desktop software at their own pace. Just as important as the desktop itself is the large ecosystem of Cisco and third-party applications that complement it.

As the Cisco Finesse desktop software leapfrogs over competing alternatives, Cisco's continued commitment to core collaboration and financial strength assures companies that there is no better partner to rely on for their contact center needs.

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