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Shaving seconds off the call center: Knoa's EPM By Chris Bucholtz

A decade ago, I was given the chance to interview Jackie Stewart, the three-time Formula 1 world champion and incredibly fast-talking Scottish television commentator. He was at HP Labs, purportedly to talk about new sensors for his race cars but, in actuality, was hoping to secure an assurance from new CEO Carly Fiorina that his race team's sponsorship would remain intact (Fiorina's predecessor, Lew Platt, was a big motor sports fan who had personally pushed for the sponsorship of Stewart's race team).

Jackie was exactly the person he appeared to be on television – friendly, energetic and very enthusiastic, about the people in racing and about the technology that was becoming pervasive in Formula 1. He wanted to speak to the scientists at the labs about the telemetry his cars generated as they traveled across a course; information on speed, tire pressure, RPMs, G-forces and a host of other factors gave mechanics the opportunity to make changes, even during the race. The issue he had was that his two drivers, Johnny Herbert and Rubens Barrichello, could drive the same car with the same set-up, generate the same telemetry – and report totally different opinions about its behavior. The trick, Jackie said, would be to merge the drivers' feelings with the hard data to develop a plan to customize the cars's set-ups to make them perform their best while being perfectly attuned to the drivers' desires.

That meeting popped into my head as I was discussing, of all things, call centers with Lori Wizdo, the vice president of marketing at Knoa. Although a call center is nowhere near as glamorous as auto racing, there is a similar interface between people and technology that needs to be understood. The stakes are not winning or losing a race, but winning and losing customers.

Knoa's focused on the call center for only a couple of years, but the idea behind the Software Experience and Performance Manager (EPM) is one that's been needed for a long time. Essentially, the system measures the experience of call center agents and their interactions with knowledge bases, CRM systems and the other applications they need to do their jobs. In many cases, agents aren't using the applications in the most efficient way; in some cases, technical issues are keeping them from being at their most efficient. In an industry where call times are measured in seconds, these issues can result in clear performance problems.

Worse yet, they can result in poor customer experiences. "There's a real transparency of these problems to the customer calling in," Wizdo said. "There have been many times when an agent has said to me, 'I'm sorry – my system's running slow today.' I've even heard agents say, 'why won't the system let me do that?'"

By monitoring and recording these agent-to-technology interactions, the Knoa solution can detect issues with the way agents are using an application – breaking from a workflow they've been trained to use, for example – or see where agents make the same error frequently. Conversely, the solution can reveal startling positive aspects of agent behavior.

One example, Wizdo said, was the case of a British Telecom call center that was 25 percent more productive than the rest of the company's call centers. "They didn't know if it was a case of the application performing better, or the agents making fewer errors," she said. In actuality, the agents had discovered a way to move through the workflow in a manner the vendor had never designed or tested for – but it was faster. When this technique was spread throughout BT's call centers, the company found that the increase in performance was the equivalent of 75 agents; the company has been able to absorb routine attrition and is now translating that improvement into bottom-line savings.

Another useful aspect of this monitoring is on the IT side. EPM also detects problems with application performance, error messages and other indicators of software problems, which can introduce delays and drive up call times. Many technical issues agents encounter are essentially ignored; in the pressure-packed world of call centers, finding a work-around is easier than contacting IT, explaining the problem and waiting for IT to resolve the issue. Knoa's monitoring tool allows IT to see these small issues and to proactively set about fixing them. Not only is that a productivity booster, Wizdo said, but it can help with agent morale. And for IT, it can help them prioritize the problems hampering many users on a regular basis over the sporadic problem happening to the loudest complainer in the call center.

It can also help understand adoption of new applications. A company that had invested in a knowledge base was on the verge of upgrading that application when it used the Knoa tools to discover that agents usually did not use it – instead, they were instant messaging people for answers! Not only could the agents be coached about the right way to get information (the official information – not the best guesses of fellow agents), but the upgrade to the knowledge base could be delayed.

Knoa already has 75 customers for the technology, but the trick for the company is explaining that there's still a lot left to learn about call center transactions. "The lack of visibility is really quite amazing in most call centers, but there's still an assumption that the call center is already one of the most monitored environments on the planet," she said. "But the right things aren't being looked at, and as a result there are still a lot of people flying blind out there."

The good news is that, like motor sports, call center performance is measured in seconds – and any time you can gain gives you an advantage. Knoa's entry in this nascent field is the next step in driving efficiency to the advantage of both the customer and the call center, making it an entrant to keep an eye on.