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The Contact Center's Black Hole Illuminating the agent/customer interaction By Lori Wizdo

Today's contact centers are far more complex than earlier call centers. Multichannel support requires greater proficiency in email, live chat, and Web service. Agents must handle a variety of different interactions and business transactions ranging from support to sales.

Increasingly, agents are being called upon to make independent decisions when interacting with customers who demand a higher level of service. During a single transaction, an agent may have to access multiple software applications—a CRM application, CTI technology, accounts receivable, product catalog, knowledgebase, and more. Effective use of myriad applications has a direct impact on both the agent's productivity and the customer experience.

Each of the thousands of customer interactions across hundreds of agents is a data point in your composite customer satisfaction index and average handling time (AHT), impacting your contact center performance and costs. Inefficiencies in the process ratchet up contact center costs, with higher repeat calls from customers, unnecessary escalations, and increased traffic.

Every customer interaction will be different. The agent has a transaction flow designed to lead to a number of outcomes, but the customer can derail the process. Each agent uses the technology and applications differently—sometimes well, sometimes clumsily, and sometimes not at all. The technology itself often presents barriers to agent performance—which is usually transparently shared with the customer when the agent apologizes ("Sorry, my system is slow today") or vents frustration ("Why isn't it letting me do this today—it let me do it yesterday").

Despite the seeming glut of metrics, most contact center managers do not have comprehensive visibility into agent behavior and performance during each and every customer interaction. The agent/customer interaction is the last remaining black hole in the universe of contact center performance management.

Call recording and quality monitoring solutions provide a deep qualitative analysis of agent behavior and customer experience. However, while these technologies provide invaluable information, they are inherently a sampling technique; so many problems that impact call center performance remain undetected. It's difficult to implement holistic performance management with insight only on some of the things that have happened to some of the agents during some of the customer interactions. Continuous monitoring of the entire agent population, across all customer interactions, must be the foundation of a comprehensive contact center performance management strategy.

A new source of metrics is emerging as a source of insight to enrich contact center strategy. End-user experience and performance management (EPM) solutions aim to optimize the performance of the end-users of corporate software applications. The goal of EPM is to identify all the barriers to effective

performance so that the appropriate corrective actions can be taken. EPM solutions monitor application execution from the user's perspective and provide comprehensive metrics in two dimensions:

The first set of metrics measures the experience the application is providing to the end-user. Are the applications slow? Is the agent being presented with system errors? Those are clear impediments to agent productivity that are often invisible. Forrester Research reports that up to 80 percent of problems experienced by end-users are not reported, and that only 25 percent of performance problems are caught by existing monitoring technologies.

The second set of metrics measures effective usage of the applications. Are agents using the correct transactions for the process? Are they using them effectively or making errors? Any lack of proficiency is transparently communicated to the manager.

To illustrate the potential impact of experience and performance management, consider this actual situation. Facing massive "rework" of its legacy systems for customer interactions to comply with changing regulations, a worldwide telecommunications provider decided to migrate thousands of employees to a more current enterprise CRM application.

The agents and sales reps impacted by this transition were responsible for all of the interaction (sales, support, and service) with the company's entire consumer and small business customer base. To minimize business disruption, the contact center employees needed to begin to use the new application, effectively and efficiently. Performance problems and behavioral anomalies needed to be immediately flagged for remediation.

The company decided to implement an EPM solution for its end-user management concerns during the transition. Since implementing the experience and performance management solution, the company has experienced impressive performance improvements. Here are just a few:

- **Capture of agent innovation:** By analyzing agent behavior, productivity was improved 25 percent, worth approximately \$3 million.
- **Reduction in average handling times:** The EPM system highlighted countless ways to strip seconds from the AHT by streamlining the workflow, removing meaningless error, and warning messages.
- **Faster on-boarding.** With real-time feedback on user errors during the crucial early stages, agents were fully operational four times faster.
- **Improved agent effectiveness.** The EPM system identified a number of errors the agents were making because of a non-intuitive user interface or cumbersome process.
- **Improved productivity due to identification of technological bottlenecks.** The EPM system highlighted that the company needed to increase capacity for more than 600 desktops. The uplift allowed improved response times application uptime, which enabled a 10 percent increase in productivity for its business service advisors. The company estimated the revenue protected at more than \$2 million.

Actionable metrics to improve agent performance distinguish those firms that achieve their contact center goals from those that struggle. By taking the guesswork out of managing the agent/customer interaction, and identifying problems from the agent perspective, EPM technologies give contact center managers precise metrics on how effectively agents execute when using call center technologies. End-user experience and performance metrics effectively illuminate the last remaining black hole in the contact center, identifying system issues and pinpointing opportunities to improve the performance of service

agents on an ongoing basis.

About the Author

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