

ia

interactions
talking with customers

Home working:
how does it really work
and who's making it work?

Neville Cousins discusses how home working is changing attitudes to traditional working models

Quarterly Perspectives

It's all about mobility

edition 07



Summary

01 Foreword

02 VoIP – Attitudes and experiences of working with IP

We're all feeling the pressure of the global financial crisis and looking for innovative ways to ease the burden and relieve some of our cost and operational strains. Is VoIP the technology lifeline to surviving current tough market conditions? We take a frank look at the benefits and obstacles to its adoption, and present some unique perspectives.

06 Home working – how does it really work and who's making it work?

Have you or are you considering introducing home working? This trend is changing attitudes to traditional working models as businesses begin to see real benefits – not only to the bottom line, but in terms of access to a huge and previously untapped group of highly skilled people.

08 Self-service on the move – what can we do now using mobile technology?

Advances in mobile technologies have changed the way we communicate. We only have to look at how mobile phones have revolutionised the way people can network across the globe to see how day-to-day communication has evolved. Can your business harness this power and use it to interact with your customers?

11 Consolidate or rationalise – what's the difference and what are the cycles?

Consolidation and rationalisation are hot topics given current economic conditions. Rationalisation is about cutting down the number of contact centres whereas consolidation is about bringing contact centres together under one roof. How do you know which one to choose?

11 Remote technology management – how can leveraging global support models reduce costs and improve uptime?

One of the ways Dimension Data has found to offer increased value to discerning clients is through a managed services framework that applies an end-to-end approach. By offering full lifecycle contact centre IT support, companies can maximise their return on investment, enjoying improved availability with less effort.

This Quarter:

It's all about mobility

The topic of mobility comes under the spotlight this quarter as we search for more creative ways of serving customers and running business operations. Given current economic conditions, it's more important than ever before for companies to be efficient and flexible in their approach to service delivery. This is where mobility comes in. Advances in technology and changing customer demands means that companies are changing their attitudes and thinking creatively, both for their benefit and that of their customers.

In our 27 years in the industry, we've seen the contact centre landscape change radically. In this seventh edition of Interactions, we examine current trends, success stories and new approaches to mobility.

We start with a review of how attitudes to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) have changed. At a recent Dimension Data event in Australia Contact Centre managers from across the world found they had much in common as they discussed and debated the challenges and benefits to working with IP.

And attitudes towards home working are changing too. We look at current trends in home working and how businesses are making it work. With advances in technology, home working is now more about opportunities for efficiency and access to the best people.

Building on the theme of mobile technology, our third article focuses on self-service. We review some products on the market and discuss the ways in which mobile technology is changing the face of self-service and, most importantly, offering real value to customers.

Mobility is about companies' ability to respond quickly and easily to changing market forces and customer demands. Given current economic conditions, the consolidation and rationalisation of contact centres is a hot topic for most companies. Our fourth article looks at current cycles and how technology is a key enabler to being flexible and responsive.

Lastly, we discuss remote technology management. We explore how leveraging global support models can help reduce costs and improve uptime. For example, the Dimension Data team in Cape Town are building a reputation around the world for their ability to support complex contact centre solutions from the southern tip of Africa.

I hope you find this issue informative and valuable.



Best wishes,



Martin Dove

Managing Director,
Customer Interactive Solutions

VoIP – Attitudes and experiences of working with IP

If you could pool agents from across your enterprise into a single virtual contact centre, enabling staff mobility and workforce optimisation and allowing you to offer a better, more cost effective service, wouldn't you leap at the chance to gain advantage and get ahead in our competitive and cost focused industry? The truth is that the technology is there for the taking in the form of VoIP and its benefits can literally transform your operations, delivering superior value and returns – and offering a lifeline in the storm of the current global economy, where improved operating margins may be the only thing keeping your business afloat. In this article we take a closer look at VoIP in the context of current market conditions and assess its role in the lean times that lie ahead.

By late 2008, the global economy was in freefall, the crisis triggered by a dramatic rise in mortgage delinquencies, the collapse of the subprime mortgage market and the resultant failure of banks and financial institutions around the world. When will it end? No one knows for sure, but most analysts agree that it won't be tomorrow, or even next year or the year after. There's been a 180 degree change in game plan for everyone who plans to stay in business and ride out the storm, and strategic planning now involves plotting ways to optimise operations and extract maximum value from every cent.

The contact centre industry is certainly not immune from these pressures – if anything, we feel them more acutely and our painpoints are harder to address. Everyone's looking for smart ideas to get more technology, operations and business value from their contact centre. Neville Cousins, Chief Technology Officer of CIS Global at Dimension Data, describes this acute focus on tangible value as follows:

“In the current economic climate, it's important for IT to focus on initiatives that have strong business benefits. We've seen over and over again that IT initiatives can drive savings in procurement, day-to-day IT operations and business costs, and enable business process change.”

And this is where VoIP comes in. IP architectures provide the flexibility to allow contact centres to meet exact business requirements. And by migrating to an IP-based infrastructure, contact centres can dramatically reduce the cost of technology purchases. You will



“In the current economic climate, it's important for **IT to focus** on **initiatives** that have **strong business benefits.**”

also reap the rewards of lower total cost of ownership and a much easier integration of future technologies.

Contact centre agents can be deployed anywhere on the network, regardless of geographic location, allowing for almost limitless options for workforce optimisation, and the centralisation of the technology also increases performance and leads to easier virtualisation – allowing you to operate better, smarter and more cost-effectively.

So why isn't every contact centre on the planet wired up to an IP architecture and using VoIP to get competitive and stay in business? This was just one of the questions we asked at Dimension Data's recent Customer Interact Event in Australia. This event gave us an opportunity to take a snapshot of exactly where the industry is positioned and where it's going with regard to VoIP. Over 100 customer service and contact centre professionals, CIS leads and technology and integration experts attended and were extremely frank with their opinions and interpretation of their business and the market – and this is what they had to say.

Contact centres want VoIP

Our delegates made it clear that they are informed about the benefits of VoIP and that contact centres want to embrace the technology. They displayed a sophisticated understanding of how VoIP can facilitate customer service, including its ability to ease application integration and bring more relevant information to contact centre agents, more often. VoIP's potential

as an enabler of multi-channel customer service, new work practices such as home agents, new applications and more granular analysis were also identified.

Moreover, VoIP is recognised as a sure and uncomplicated way to save, and as an enabler for green outcomes. But despite the interest and enthusiasm around the technology, our facilitators at the event, Neville Cousins and his Australian colleague Michael Slip, noted that very few of the participants were already in the water and taking advantage of VoIP. Three concerns emerged as the most common factors holding them back:

- Adapting to VoIP
- Cost
- Concerns about reliability

The first hurdle: Adapting to VoIP

Both facilitators noted that contact centre operators see VoIP as having a significant upside in its potential to pool agents from across the enterprise into a single, virtual contact centre. This offers great potential to deploy workforce optimisation, for example eliminating the need for additional staff to allow for common staffing issues like sick leave, holidays and staff attrition.

However, not everyone will find it easy to embrace these benefits. Operations that have little experience operating home-based agents or a blended contact centre comprising branch staff and dedicated agents will have difficulties trying to adapt to VoIP and the fluid work scenarios it supports. Best practices describing how to remunerate and manage these staff members

are not yet widely available, so there is very little guidance on critical new issues like the structure of rewarding these new home-based employees. For example, do you tie their remuneration to their actual physical presence, or on a per call basis?

Enter Neville Cousins, who has some words of advice to offer that place these transitional difficulties in context:

“Demographic change has made it more difficult than ever to attract and retain staff, and IP-based systems offer the greatest degree of operational flexibility when it comes to the physical location, working hours and knowledge availability of staff. As new communications channels become available (web, wireless etc) the ability to respond becomes more important – and only IP-based systems offer this flexibility.”

The question of cost

The thorny issue of cost proved to be a critical issue preventing the adoption of VoIP, as articulated by one participant in the discussion:

“We need to retro-fit two of our call centres, and the cost is just horrendous. Just to put one site onto [IP] we need to then go and retro-fit the other two, because we want all our centres to be identical. The sheer cost of throwing out handsets and throwing out the Cisco routers, the switches and everything else you need to run that ... you've really got to sit down and budget it.”

This is an issue that Michael Slip, New South Wales Practice Manager for CIS Australia, is familiar with. Michael's view of the cost dilemma is as follows:

“Contact centre operators need to take the initiative and drive the agenda when their organisation makes this change, potentially on the back of a broader business telephony lifecycle program. Early planning work will help ensure that the contact centre's needs are taken into account as new systems are rolled out.”

Neville's experience is that an adverse economic climate can be highly persuasive when it comes to convincing decision makers to invest in a major new technology.

In fact, the current dire state of the economy may even help to advance the cause of any major new expensive outlay on VoIP. Most enterprises have large support and services contracts for maintaining legacy architectures and while these can generally be justified, the value of a consolidated vendor strategy, including rationalisation of the architecture across the enterprise, becomes far more attractive and desirable when budgets are being reduced. Technologists generally find it difficult to make radical changes and tend to hold on to legacy systems, but tough times often cause a change in mindset and this then leads to the radical approach required to change to IP.

In better financial times it is far harder to justify additional outlay and to install comprehensive new technology, abandoning the legacy infrastructure that has already had a lot of money thrown at it. But when times are tough, it becomes easier

to convince financiers to invest good money to attain a good outcome, particularly when you can demonstrate the measurable returns offered by a technology like VoIP. It helps to have an experienced systems integrator like Dimension Data on your side that can articulate the cost savings and demonstrate real benefits and returns using real-life case studies.

The reliability question

While many organisations have moved to IP telephony as an enterprise standard, some contact centre operators do not yet believe that IP telephony is as reliable as established technologies. Concerns were also raised that VoIP technology could negatively impact the customer service experience because it may not always deliver

voice quality that translates into a pleasant experience.

Michael and Neville have great empathy for the concerns raised by the participants. Michael remarks that “reliability is clearly a key concern for any service-oriented operation. This simply makes strategic planning the key to success for any IP-based contact centre.” Neville agrees that “attention must be paid to staff training and/or support agreements, with knowledge transfer playing a key role. The upside is that as their staff become more skilled, an IP-based contact centre can take advantage of the benefits made possible by the integration with other systems. This also has an impact on staff retention – providing technical staff with the opportunity to acquire new skills.”



Looking ahead: Is VoIP technology the future of contact centres?

While participants in the event expressed some concerns about VoIP in the contact centre, they all agreed that change was inevitable.

Neville's impressions were that it is clear that contact centre operators are well aware that Internet Protocol is coming and that it is just a question of 'when'.

Michael's assessment of the mood and opinions of the participants to the VoIP think-tank were:

"Contact centre operators are aware of and appreciate the potential of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) to change the way they deliver customer service for the better. They appreciate its ability to save money, ease talent acquisition difficulties and even help with goals like reducing carbon footprints. There is a growing awareness of IP's value to business and the fact that it runs much deeper than just voice and data convergence."

It's expected that concerns about reliability, uncertainty about how to deploy VoIP in the contact centre and how to justify the cost of implementation will be resolved quickly as VoIP becomes the standard for enterprise telephony. And as business starts to realise the additional benefits like virtualisation, systems integration and improved business agility, VoIP will become the technology of choice for competitive contact centre operations that plan to be around when the current credit crunch is just a bad memory.

About the authors:

Neville Cousins has been with Dimension Data for over 12 years. He is currently Chief Technology Officer of the CIS Global team and is responsible for the Group's CIS technology strategy, including the Partner and Alliance strategy. He is tasked with developing the Contact Centre Integration (CCI) solution offering that forms the foundation of the CIS business. This responsibility includes all aspects of solution and business development of the CCI offering at a global level. His core skill is the ability to understand business needs and match them with appropriate technology so that all requirements across strategy, costs, people and functionality are met. Having presented at numerous international conferences and being recognised as a leader in his field, Neville has the ability to predict technology and application trends that have enabled many of our customers to make better long-term decisions.

Michael Slip is the New South Wales Practice Manager for CIS Australia. Before joining Dimension Data in 2007, Michael gained more than a decade of experience providing network intelligence solutions for service providers utilising standard IT technologies to deliver carrier grade capacity and robustness. Michael has held leadership roles in the planning, design and deployment of hosted Contact Centre Integration (CCI) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) solutions. In this current role, Michael is responsible for a large CIS team and its associated business development, project delivery and operational support across a range of NSW customers.

Home working – how does it really work and who's making it work?

It's not new, but it is clever. Home working is changing attitudes to traditional working models as businesses begin to see real benefits -not only to the bottom line, but in terms of access to a huge and previously untapped group of highly skilled people.



“In order to keep service **levels high**, companies have begun to tap into additional skill sets by **accessing agents at home**.”

Home working emerged as a concept well over 10 years ago but was never really adopted by the contact centre industry. One of the reasons for this was that the technology was complex and difficult to maintain and support. Now, with advanced web-based technology, increased bandwidth, improved standards and security, the concept has started to take off.

It's been standard operational practice within the contact centre to locate and manage agents centrally. To start with, this was conducted from a single site, which meant easy management and supervision. Contact centre technology advanced to the point where multiple contact centre sites could be managed centrally. This resulted in a major shift in the way contact centres viewed their ability to manage agents across different locations.

Organisations are now able to access agents across many regions and with different skills, e.g. the ability to answer callers in their preferred language. As organisations the world over began to do the same, it became obvious that it didn't matter where agents were, what was important was to maintain customer service levels.

Dimension Data's CIS Global Chief Technology Officer Neville Cousins says,

“in order to keep service levels high, companies have begun to tap into additional skill sets by accessing agents at home”.

For example, an American low-cost airline set out to target a previously untapped group of highly skilled, stay-at-home mums with university degrees. It works so well for this company that 100% of their contact centre agents are now home agents.

While technology has come along in leaps and bounds and is fully capable of supporting the trend to home working, there are a few important concerns which need to be addressed. Organisations need to tackle issues of:

- **Authentication** – security over data access and agent identity
- **Customer service standards and culture** – managing and maintaining consistent service levels
- **Day-to-day performance management** – remote management of staff
- **Environmental conditions** – lighting, workspace and ergonomics of the home office.

Cousins says, “while concerns remain, companies are favouring the ‘offsets’ to home working. They are seeing the ‘green’ value of using home agents and the ultimate benefit to the bottom line.” Security issues are being dealt with using readily available technologies and set ups are easy using standard applications and a broadband connection. Resource management is also easier through staggered work shifts, as home agents offer more flexibility.

And there is value for the agent as well. They’re able to manage their own time, avoid time in traffic and save on transport costs.

Given the volatile fuel price, home working can offer real savings to staff and be used as an incentive to attract the right skills.

The Royal Automobile Association of Australia (RACQ) uses home working in an innovative way to incentivise performance by its agents. Cousins says, “by using home working as an incentive, contact centre agents are encouraged to achieve a certain performance level before being able to work from home. In terms of people management, this means you have a benchmark to measure and maintain performance against.” To tackle agent support and concerns over cultural exclusion from the company, it has a standing rule that home workers have to come into the office on a regular basis. Home agents are then given the support they need through coaching, training, quality reviews, supervision, etc. And, by interacting with fellow agents and the organisation, they still feel part of the team.

But even with the obvious benefits, companies are still concerned about risk. As Neville Cousins explains,

“you’ll never eliminate risk completely – you can only manage it well by putting controls in place and by being realistic.”

The general rise in the uptake of home agents shows that

risk levels are becoming more acceptable. In reality, most companies today give staff access to company intranets and systems from home anyway, for which security would have been a key requirement.

Home working is not just about sending people home. You need good strategies and processes to keep control. Cousins says “adopting a new approach to home working means a different management style, operational environment and a new view of how agents should be managed. Mutual trust and maturity come into play and conditions must be optimal at home for the system to be effective.”

If home conditions are a big hold back factor, another solution might be ‘branch offices’. Cousins explains,

“these satellite offices can be set up easily and environmental conditions controlled while still incentivising local agents through flexible working patterns and less time spent in traffic.”

If you’re thinking about implementing home working, it’s important to be mindful of some key planning issues:

- **Timing** – Try phasing in a home agent strategy.

“In order to keep service **level high**, companies have begun to **tap into additional skill** sets by **accessing agents at home.**”

- **Cost** – There are many opportunities to reduce costs:
 - Consider organisational flexibility and weigh up the savings in overheads versus access to the best agents in the market, AND
 - Introduce home working as part of a contact centre expansion project and save on additional infrastructure in the contact centre.
- **Selection** – Home working is an ideal opportunity to reward high performing agents. This will ensure the management of agents at home is self regulating. Agents selected for home working need to be technology savvy and able to support their own environment at home.
- **Support strategy** – There are two main considerations:
 - Schedule home workers to go into the office regularly for training, reviews etc, AND
 - Use technology to deliver online coaching and support (pure home agent environment).
- **Technical troubleshooting**
 - This can be done using a number of different media like phone, video, webcam, etc. – ensure your IT team is set up to do it.

If you're thinking about implementing home working, it's important to be mindful of some key planning issues:

There is little doubt that home working is here to stay. Technology offers a wide variety of solutions to fit specific needs. The fundamental shift is in attitudes to home working, and by using it as an incentive and opportunity for cost savings, companies will be able to stay competitive, access the very best skills and make a difference to the environment.

“Mutual trust and maturity come into play and conditions must be optimal at home for the system to be effective.”

About the author:

Neville Cousins has been with Dimension Data for over 12 years. He is currently Chief Technology Officer of the CIS Global team and is responsible for the Group's CIS technology strategy, including the Partner and Alliance strategy. He is tasked with developing the Contact Centre Integration (CCI) solution offering that forms the foundation of the CIS business. This responsibility includes all aspects of solution and business development of the CCI offering at a global level. His core skill is the ability to understand business needs and match them with appropriate technology so that all requirements across strategy, costs, people and functionality are met. Having presented at numerous international conferences and recognised as a leader in his field, Neville has the ability to predict technology and application trends that have enabled many of our clients to make better long-term decisions.

Self-service on the move –

what can we do now using mobile technology?

Advances in mobile technologies have changed the way we communicate. We only have to look at how mobile phones have revolutionised the way people can network across the globe to see how day-to-day communication has evolved. Companies are keen to harness this power and use it to effectively interact with their customers.

Organisations are realising that offering more interaction channels is critically important in the search for ways to improve efficiency and reduce costs. Mobile technologies are widening access to customers and expanding the channels available to them. Dimension Data's Self-Service Consultant Jane Curtain says,

“because customers expect 24x7 access to services across more channels, businesses are pushing the barriers to have meaningful interactions with them.”

This is where self-service via mobile technologies is coming into its own.

Self-service has evolved beyond web transactions and automated IVR phone solutions to the mobile phone handset. Customers are now able to access services via handset-specific interfaces developed to handle all sorts of interactions. Curtain explains,

“one example might be the ability to call a short dial number on a billboard to access an information portal. Another would be the ability to order a phone upgrade using only your handset, scrolling through various options available, accessing information and then making your choice.”

Through this evolution, the cost benefits of self-service become clearer. Organisations have realised that human agents can be more strategically and efficiently placed. An example of this might be to automatically route particular requests to a priority queue. Curtain says,



“**TellMe** shares the benefits of a **dedicated infrastructure** across **multiple clients**. Through sheer volume of transactions, TellMe can offer a **commercially differentiated product** with **reduced risk and technological advantages**.”

“by having this intelligence, organisations can drive efficiencies, and this becomes very attractive.”

Considering the cost differential between self-service and human agent interactions, this means a significant boost to the bottom line.

And customer expectations are also changing. Customers across the world are more comfortable with technology than ever before. They are more articulate and want convenience and responsiveness, and self-service hits the mark. Curtain says,

“this has a knock-on effect on service delivery across even more channels. Self-service used to be about cost management – now, if it works well, it's about mutual benefit.”

But why does it matter?

The message in Dimension Data's Global Benchmarking Report 2008 was clear. Curtain says we have to do more for customers, more efficiently and using more products, and that

“this involves process optimisation, cost reduction, self-service capabilities, and continued strategic improvements and efficiencies”.

Given current service expectations, organisations are under more pressure than ever before for immediacy. As Curtain points out,

“one has only to look at today's ‘tweens’ and how they use their mobile phones to imagine what their service expectations in the future will be.”

To respond to these expectations and stay ahead of the pack, companies must have a well-considered customer service strategy.

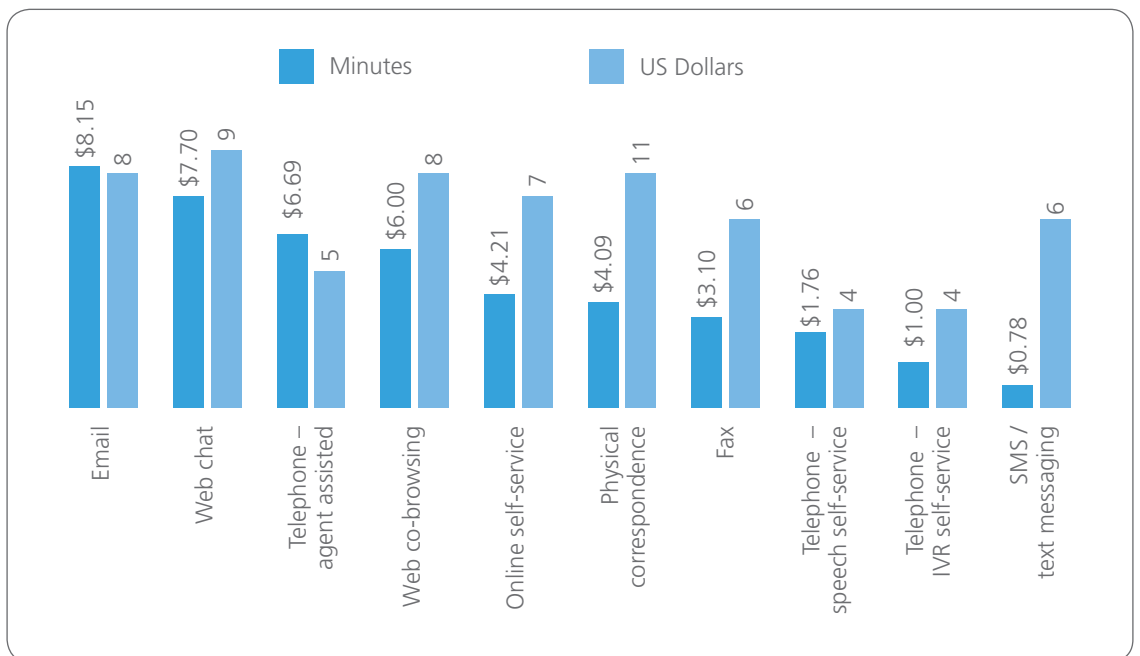
Taking self-service to the next level

Self-service is changing. It's no longer about a single channel strategy – it's about choosing channels that are fit for purpose.

Curtain says,

“today's customers are technology-wise and want a channel that suits them wherever they are and whatever they're doing. For example, people may require a web channel for at-home use, a mobile channel for when they're driving and a handset channel for other times.”

If you can fully or partially measure the cost and time per customer interaction for each channel you use, indicate the actual average cost per customer interaction and time taken per interaction. n = 79



GRAPH – extract from Dimension Data Contact Centre Benchmark Report 2008.

Looking at solutions

There are a host of solutions that support self-service. Current products on the market that offer seamless solutions and give wider access to services across more channels include TellMe, SnapIn and Ydilo, amongst others. SnapIn and Ydilo specialise in handset self-service, while TellMe bridges channels like handsets, touch tone and speech recognition. Curtain says that what is interesting about TellMe is its service offerings: In designing the solution, TellMe realised that companies were hitting a wall of complexity and needed a more efficient and accessible solution. And as interactions move further away, organisations feel pushed out of their comfort zones.

Curtain says,

“a solution like TellMe shares the benefits of a dedicated infrastructure across multiple clients. Through sheer volume of transactions, TellMe can offer a commercially differentiated product with reduced risk and technological advantages.”

And given current capex constraints, a pay-as-you-use option is hugely appealing to organisations across the globe.

Key pointers in using different channels

- Be practical in the way you offer and promote the channels.
- Think about your users and their needs. Make sure you fully understand them.
- Ensure a level of consistency across the channels.
- Talk to the specialists – know what your core competence is and work with partners for advice, experience and expertise.
- Look at how you can most effectively use the architecture of your contact centre as an enabler.

And most importantly...

Think big picture. Always make sure your self-service strategy falls under an holistic customer service strategy. To ensure success, self-service must be seen as an integral part of customer service and be viewed alongside things like product mix, customer lifetime value and value segmentation. And if you're getting this right, you're on track to meeting customer needs and delivering an efficient and effective service.

About the author:

Jane Curtain is a Speech, Self-service and User Experience Consultant for Dimension Data with over 10 years experience identifying and delivering successful self-service solutions that promote business process automation and optimisation.

Jane passionately advocates a user-centric approach to developing solutions to address the challenges faced by businesses today, and warns against adopting technology led 'solutions looking for a problem'.

Jane has led several Contact Centre Assessments across the globe, with particular emphasis on the discovery and identification of suitable Speech Recognition opportunities that will provide a sound return on investment as well as a positive user experience. She has postgraduate qualifications in Linguistics and Psychology, and has published works on linguistics, other language-related matters and self-service.

Consolidate or rationalise – what's the difference and what are the cycles?

Consolidation and rationalisation are hot topics given current economic conditions. They may look like the same thing, but the devil's in the detail. If we look closely, we see they are in fact very different. Rationalisation is about cutting the number of contact centres while still providing as good a service using fewer centres. Consolidation, on the other hand, is about reducing the physical footprint of contact centres and bringing centres together under one roof – either physically or virtually. And regardless of which strategy you follow, the real challenge is how to maintain service levels and drive efficiency, while at the same time delivering real value to the business.

Merchants' Solutions Director Paul Scott says that companies oscillate between the two options:

“either they want to bring contact centres closer to their customers, as in the branches of a bank, or they have all services delivered centrally from one place. The choice often depends on technological infrastructure and cost.”

Consolidation and rationalisation feature in the top list of trends in Dimension Data's Global Benchmarking Report 2008. Organisations listed major strategic trends as:

- Process optimisation
- Self-service
- Voice and data convergence
- Rationalisation and consolidation

The decision to rationalise or consolidate is not a tactical one. Companies are being pressed to find strategic ways of cutting costs without affecting service. It's often a lot easier to manage services and operations under one roof, or to manage fewer than before. Scott adds,

“in current economic times, either choice can offer real benefits to organisations and may even drive increases in efficiency and revenue.”

In making the decision, companies need to focus on three main areas:

- Customer strategy
- People
- Technology

Scott says,

“when considering your **customer strategy**, you need to ask yourself what



“To ensure **success**, look at employing an **experienced company** with a **proven track record** and/or creating a **specialist team**.”

you're trying to do – question whether you have a sales or service culture, whether you want to reduce customers and increase revenue or drive an expansionist policy.”

With 70% of the cost to contact centres being **people**, you need to be sure you can get the people you need remotely or in one location. Scott says,

“in the 90s, some contact centres were located in regions with limited availability of skilled staff, resulting in overinflated wage costs. This in turn drove centres offshore and companies began to consolidate them into only one or two different locations. Companies have to make sure they have the right people and get them trained quickly to be economically viable.”

Technology is becoming an enabler for companies wanting to move their customer service agents easily. Organisations that have invested in IP infrastructure (voice and data) can do this at low cost – an extremely attractive option. Scott says,

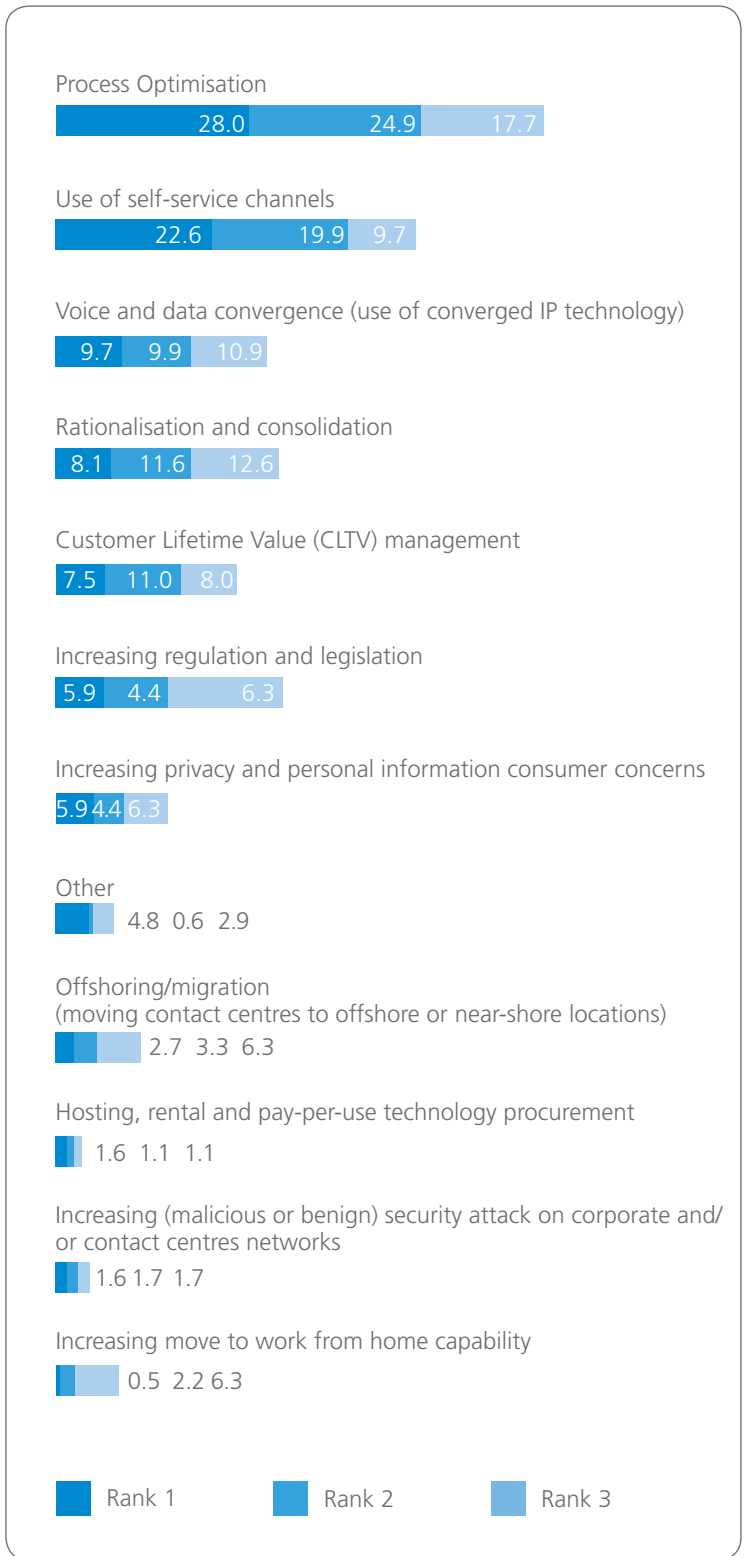
“you need to check whether you have the infrastructure in place to easily move between centralised and decentralised service delivery.”

If a company was looking to adopt a rationalisation strategy for example, it might want to scale back two-thirds of the contact centre. Says Scott:

“The beauty of the IP platform is its ability to create a virtual contact centre that appears to be in one location, but have its people placed elsewhere in the organisation.”

Scott explains,

Which of the following market trends are the top three affecting your contact centre? Percentage of contact centres | n = 186



“switching from decentralised to centralised models can be done quickly. With IP-based infrastructures, organisations can position their contact centres in locations across the world. And with travel, communications and security no longer being major issues, companies can break down the walls of contact centres and have flexibility beyond the confines of the physical location of a centre.”

And there are even more benefits to going the flexible route. Scott says, “in the devolved model for example, customer service is at the edge, as in bank branches. What is interesting is how the financial services industry is using branches as a key differentiating factor in their customer experience to stay competitive.”

The devil's in the detail

Taking the decision to consolidate and rationalise means careful planning.

Scott says

“to ensure success, look at employing an experienced company with a proven track record and/or creating a specialist team.”

In this way you will ensure you have everything you need:

- A sound business plan
- A well-developed transition plan
- Effective management of the entire project from start to finish

Companies that are agile and able to respond quickly to economic factors are those that will ultimately lead the way. When you are flexible and responsive

to your customers' needs, the benefits are endless. The secret lies in your customer services strategy – keep your customer in clear focus and always base decisions on what works best for them and for you.

About the author:

Paul Scott is Merchants' Solutions Director, based in the UK. He has worked successfully in numerous roles with clients in the call centre industry for more than 12 years. He believes passionately that for organisations to optimise their contact centres, managers must first understand what it feels like to stand in the customer's shoes and experience the service or product they are seeking to deliver.

Scott has worked for Merchants twice in his career, first in the mid 90s leading the development of the consulting practice. More recently he has been working with global clients to focus on developing customer service strategies, contact centre joint ventures and offshore business process outsourcing facilities.

Paul has published papers on a number of topics and appears regularly on business TV channels to comment on changes in the industry. He is a regular speaker at conferences on customer services, marketing and CRM.

MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

ALGERIA • ANGOLA
BOTSWANA • GHANA • KENYA
MOROCCO • NAMIBIA • NIGERIA
SAUDI ARABIA • SOUTH AFRICA
TANZANIA • UGANDA
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

ASIA

CHINA • HONG KONG
INDIA • INDONESIA • JAPAN
KOREA • MALAYSIA
NEW ZEALAND • PHILIPPINES
SINGAPORE • TAIWAN
THAILAND • VIETNAM

AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
NEW SOUTH WALES • QUEENSLAND
SOUTH AUSTRALIA • VICTORIA
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

EUROPE

BELGIUM • CZECH REPUBLIC
FRANCE • GERMANY • HUNGARY
ITALY • LUXEMBOURG
NETHERLANDS • SPAIN
SWITZERLAND • UNITED KINGDOM

AMERICAS

BRAZIL • CANADA • CHILE
MEXICO • UNITED STATES