

Putting agents on the map

A critical look at the finer points of the concept of the Unified Agent Front End

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A lot has been said recently about the concept of the Unified Agent Front End in contact centres. For those who have been shunning the contact centre press for the last couple of years, here is the essence of the idea. Handling multiple, incompatible, dated and disjointed applications is causing all kinds of problems for agents up and down the land, mainly in (but not limited to) customer service inbound environments.

Over time an organisation may have implemented a variety of systems: product databases, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Computer Telephony Integration (CTI), quality control, call logging, account management, billing, ticketing, stock control, and so on. Depending on the type of enquiry, each agent may have to dip in and out of any number of these applications. Each time they do so, they are likely to have to re-enter a lot of the data they have already entered (possibly several times). They need to be trained to operate a variety of user interfaces and applications that they may only use occasionally or partially and likely to forget easily.

Training times keep growing (in some cases stretching over several months) and in an industry with an average annual staff attrition rate of 30% this is bad news as far as costs go. Also, this kind of complexity is very likely to cause mistakes that are expensive to put right and deliver grossly inefficient or ineffective customer care. Call durations go through the roof as agents spend their time juggling systems rather than concentrating on the customer.

A few years ago, the solution would have been to replace all these systems with a spanking new one. Unfortunately many a company have fallen by the wayside in pursuit of that mythical land promised by the advocates of a brand new system. It invariably proves to be a risky undertaking; rarely successful and tremendously expensive.

Only the other day I visited a company that was involved in such a project. Over 200 software developers had been working on the new system for well over three years and deadlines kept slipping from one year to the next. It wouldn't surprise me if they ran out of patience and money before they see anything useful being delivered by the project. This is not an isolated case.

In today's economic climate this kind of approach is clearly suicidal. Enter the Unified Agent Front End, a simple concept but an effective one. Keep all your systems, but bring them together under one roof by orchestrating a user interface that is easier to handle and more effective to use.

How does it work? In most cases it involves the creation of an über-application that has the ability to "talk" behind the scenes (typically using middleware or an integration layer) to all your old applications and present to the agent a coherent environment where they can achieve all the old functions with a lot less fuss.

Pretty cool, eh? Consider what happened in the property market with the “don’t move... improve” concept. You don’t need a new house, just stay in the one you have by making improvements to it.

So far so good. You spend less money, take less of a risk and get most of the benefits of a new system a lot quicker and without the pain. With the global economic crisis and the credit crunch already upon us, not only is this a smart way forward, but possibly the only way forward.

So where’s the catch? The devil, as usual, is in the detail. The concept is sound and proven; the pitfalls are mainly related to the approach that different solution providers take when putting this concept into practice.

The key to the best implementations of a Unified Agent Front End is the concept of the business process. Each and every interaction that an agent would ever get involved in needs to adhere to some business process. The ways in which agents handle orders, complaints, information requests and so on should always conform to a clearly defined process. In most contact centres, these processes are simply a matter for agent training.

So not only do agents need to remember how to use 10 or more different software systems but also which of these systems need to be used for each type of interaction and in what order, what questions need to be asked, where the information needs to go etc. All this knowledge inevitably needs to be replicated in each one of hundreds’ of agents memories and after months of training about a third will leave within 6 to 12 months. As a result, mistakes are rife, incomplete data is collected, customers get exasperated by what they perceive as hesitant and incompetent agents, and efficiency suffers dramatically. The answer usually is to add more agents and the problem is magnified further.

A Unified Agent Front End that simply brings together all your existing applications under a “tidier” and more modern looking framework will not solve this problem. Instead of having to juggle different applications, agents simply need to juggle different panes of one larger and more complex application window.

The main benefits of a Unified Agent Front End implementation can only be achieved if - and only if - business processes are at the heart of the project. These processes need to be moved from hundreds of agents’ heads into one system. Training times will be dramatically reduced and call durations will drop. This is where the big savings will come from.

So how does one go about putting business processes at the heart of a successful Unified Agent Front End implementation? Well, the idea is pretty simple, really. Use a tool that will allow you to map the logic of each process and only present to the agents information and options that are relevant to each step in the process.

Think of it as a journey between “Hello” and “Goodbye”. The journey can take many routes and have many different outcomes, but after all you want to get from one end to the other in the best and quickest way. Your Agent Front End needs to become the agent’s satellite navigation system, which will point the way to reach a destination from any point in the interaction.

The agent still has the freedom to move in any direction they wish but their movements are now tracked on a map and their itinerary is constantly recalculated in order to provide an optimal route

to a desired destination. Not only are agents no longer required to memorise the map (like they used to), but there is a charted record now of their journeys and a great deal can be learned from that and how to improve these processes in order to achieve better customer service and higher efficiency.

So, a simple face-lift of the old systems and a reorganisation of the desktop will not do the job and not achieve the potential of a good Unified Agent Front End implementation. A new method based on creating a process guide that only provides agents with access to one or two systems that are relevant to each process step is clearly the way forward.

And finally, let's not forget the most crucial factor of all, and that is that processes change. No business can afford to assume that the way they deal with their customers today is identical to the way they will deal with them tomorrow. Like an organism, the only organisation that never changes is a dead one.

So when you are looking at mapping your processes and enshrining them in your new Unified Agent Front End, make sure you use a tool that will allow you to change these processes at will and preferably without having to re-program your system each time you wish to do that. Ideally, you should use a tool that puts the control of the logic of your Unified Agent Front End in the hands of your business and operations people rather than IT.

The implementation of an Unified Agent Front End should not be a major project. These things take months rather than years and typically it is not the technology but the process mapping which takes longest to get right. The thing is, once you've done it you will be wondering how on earth you managed to live without it.