

Rise of the IP Contact Centre

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The Rise of the IP Contact Centre (IPCC)

Within increasingly competitive markets, organisations are realising the need to forge a closer relationship with their customers through a better level of service whilst reducing the cost to provide that service. Gary Ford discusses how an IP Contact Centre can achieve this.

Today, contact centre change is happening at Internet speed. Almost every computing press journal has an article detailing Voice Over IP (VoIP), and because of ever growing increase in interest, there can be no doubt that the platform for future communications will be a converged, packet-enabled network that will deliver high bandwidth, high quality voice and data services to boost the productivity of your contact centre.

Many of the traditional ACD manufacturers have observed the increased interest in the IP contact centre. Organisations such as Lucent and Nortel have both created such converged platforms. The Lucent iMerge Centrex Feature Gateway allows a Class 5 central office switch to host business telephony using VoIP. Also called IP Centrex, or hosted IP PBX service. The iMerge gives you the ability to offer the full spectrum of voice, data and Centrex features over IP. Nortel's offering, IP Centrex, extends and expands its traditional Centrex product to a unified packet-based network. With Centrex IP, the customer retains the existing functionality provided by their Centrex and a wealth of other services such as multimedia, collaboration and unified messaging.

Cisco's AVVID also offers the functionality of a central office switch with the flexibility and cost savings of a converged network. However, rather than emerging from a telecom switch background into IP, Cisco were able to hit the ground running with their VoIP solution due to the company's obvious strength as the major IP player. Cisco's voice solution is based on Cisco AVVID (Architecture for Voice, Video and Integrated Data). Announced by Cisco in September 1999, this architecture encompasses converged client devices, infrastructure hardware/software, directory services, call processing, telephony/data applications, network and policy management, and service and support.

All of these products provide the ability to handle customer contacts over the full spectrum of available contacts, including voice, fax, email and web-collaboration. Using configurable business rules, these platforms queue and route the contacts to agents in the contact centre, or virtual contact centre should multiple sites be in use. A contact centre solution should also enable blending of agents between different media types depending on the load. Therefore, agents can handle non-realtime customer interactions, such as e-mails or fax, at periods outside the peak of real-time voice calls and web collaboration requests. Depending on your business requirements, predictive dialling for direct selling purposes can also be scheduled.

By combining Cisco's AVVID and their contact-centre solution the Cisco ICM, the Cisco IPCC delivers an integrated suite of products that enables agents using IP phones to receive both time-division multiplexing (TDM) and VoIP calls. . The Cisco ICM is a software platform that integrates with existing call centre technologies and the new channels of email and web contact. It is designed to provide virtual contact centre functionality across legacy environments. Because the IPCC was intended for integration with legacy call-centre platforms and networks, it provides a migration path to IP-based customer contact while taking advantage of previous technology investments. Traditionally, a customer would create a best-of-breed solution, consisting of a bespoke integration of point

solutions from multiple suppliers, however the Cisco IPCC solution provides the added benefit of Integrated CIM software systems from a single supplier.

The following are some of the drivers behind a converged voice and data solution such as Cisco's IPCC:

1. The IPCC utilizes a company's existing IP network, optimising investments in wide-area network (WAN) infrastructure and lowering administrative expenses. Unless you are already using an intelligent call routing platform such as Cisco's ICM, it's likely that a percentage of the calls your contact centres receive are routed to an agent not ideally suited to handle the call. In these situations, the agent may need to transfer the call to a colleague not located in the same building. Unless you have a mechanism in place that allows the call to be taken back to the telephony network, and then onward routed, you'll likely have to transfer it over tie lines between your call centres. Needless to say, these tie lines, and the call costs associated with them are not cheap. As a WAN is likely to be already in place throughout your organisation, a converged network will allow you to transfer the calls over the WAN and save you the cost of call transfers.
2. As well as infrastructure savings, the IPCC can also offer resource savings. Once a converged network has been created, the previous management of two networks is unnecessary and the focus can be changed towards a single data network. Cost savings in this area can also be realised when moves and changes are necessary. IP phones, such as Cisco's 7960 phone, registers itself on the network using Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol (DHCP). It can also take line power from the network by using an integrated Catalyst switch card or power panel. These features allow for very simple relocation of resources.
3. Specific capabilities of an IPCC include intelligent call routing, automatic call distribution (ACD) functionality, network-to-desktop computer telephony integration (CTI), interactive voice response (IVR) integration, call queuing, and consolidated reporting. The open, standards-based architecture of the IPCC can also support Web-based customer contact, including collaborative browsing, text chat, and e-mail response management. This gives Increased agility through which the organisation can deploy new IP business solutions quickly and bring new services to market quicker giving organisations the ability to achieve competitive advantage. An IPCC solution can leverage existing investment in infrastructure by integrating with telephony equipment, CRM and other legacy software.

The prime driver for IPCC is the move by organizations to converge their networks. For the contact centre the effect is that they will be able handle all customer contacts over one network while still obtaining all the benefits of a converged network and realising new features not currently possible with their legacy ACD hardware. With Cisco's AVVID, Cisco is leading in the development of products, services and applications for the integrated data, voice and video market.

