



Heading For IP - This Time With a Map

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The mood seems to have shifted in the last couple of years with regard to Voice-over-IP (VoIP) in the call center. As the technology becomes more robust and stable (and as people become more comfortable with it), we hear fewer "should we or shouldn't we" discussions, and more "when and how" discussions. In recent CommWeb roundtables, a common theme from participants has been the question of migration - as one user suggested, many companies that have migrated to VoIP systems seem "happy" but no one is sure how long it will take for their investment in this technology to show actual cost-saving results. And that's really the conundrum that VoIP has faced for most of the decade we've been talking about its possibility: VoIP amounts to cheap, nearly free transmission, but in an era of low-cost circuit switched transmission, where's the benefit of moving to a new technology platform?

Clearly, another way of looking at VoIP is needed. "Until recently, VoIP was considered primarily a consumer solution, targeted at a limited number of cost-conscious, quality-indifferent user groups," says Frost & Sullivan analyst Elka Popova in a recent report. What's changed, Frost found, is that embedding VoIP into enterprise solutions (like call centers) is going to be a major driver for growth of this medium. And they go on to assert that VoIP will account for approximately 75% of world voice services by 2007.

How do we get from here to there? From a state where VoIP is interesting and safe but indifferently applied, to one where it carries the lion's share of the voice traffic in a short six years?

In talking with an expert at Aspect, purveyor of call center switches and software, it became clear to me that the steps that will take us to a VoIP world are almost inevitable, and we're already farther along that road than people might think.

Here are a few factoids to think about as we explore VoIP (all provided by Aspect, even where sourced elsewhere):

IDC says that by 2003, call center systems will make up almost 30% of the worldwide market for VoIP systems. Philips Infotech estimates that by 2004, 46% of call center agent seats will be based on multichannel IP platform technology. Phillips Group says that 90% of enterprises with multiple locations will start switching to IP systems for voice over the next five years. And Dain Rauscher Wessels reports a decline in sales of traditional PBXs as

customers hold off purchases to evaluate IP-based systems.

What's this all about? On one level, it's easy to see that PBX sales would decline, especially in a saturated market and a declining economy for technology outlays. And the fact that call center systems will make up one-third of VoIP systems market is also unsurprising, given that they are traditionally buy the most advanced systems geared to the largest number of internal users. Aside from carriers, they easily represent the largest block of alternative switch purchasers.

But the switches they are buying are not necessarily so "alternative," and that perhaps accounts for the other two factoids: when we speak of a modern call center switch, we're more often talking about one that includes some IP features, or one that can be quickly and cheaply adapted to include IP functionality. As these features get built into more default, circuit-switched platforms, the number of "IP-possible" agents would naturally rise, even if call centers aren't using those IP features to deliver calls to reps or handle customer-based IP calls.

Aspect, which has been on a transformative journey for the last few years, has tried to free itself from the burdens of the traditional, 1990s-era standalone hardware ACD. When you cut through all the marketing hype, it's increasingly apparent that they know - as do their competitors - that the days of making money selling closed boxes to call centers with incremental upgrades every three to five years are long over.

In its place is a more nuanced approach to call control and switching. Centers are still eager to use traditional tools - circuit switching, etc. - because most customer interactions still take place in the traditional way, through the public switched network and a voice connection.

But they also want the IP extensibility built-in, and ready for them when they need to a) connect voice calls with data networks for CRM, b) connect locations in center-to-center loops, or c) handle variations on the traditional call, like web interaction or email routing, alongside the voracious data needs of a CRM system.

Aspect makes this case against their old model, the hardware-based voice platform:

It requires expensive switching equipment at each connected location. Because of the high integration costs of old-style CTI, the agent has only limited access to other customer information available on the IP network. It's usually based on proprietary technology, making it hard to change and integrate with other platforms.

By contrast, an IP-based system makes voice and data travel across the same path. Agents can function with a thin-client browser, and as a result the cost of outfitting an agent desktop decline. If you go so far as to use an IP-based

softphone, you go even lower. And you can blend traditional voice calls - of the circuit-switched variety - with newer interactions using different media.

In their new IP model, the two co-exist. This, if anything, is the new mood: voice isn't going anywhere for a while, but IP is a necessary adjunct to any switching platform. Wisely, Aspect is making its VoIP switching part of the larger network, instead of trying to get people to replace circuit switches with pure IP. In their model, calls come in through either the public network or the IP network; once inside, it's all packetized and then can be parsed, routed, measured, and handled in an appropriate way. Network of origin doesn't matter, nor does interaction type.

This "phased transition strategy" is likely to become a default way of thinking across the contact center industry, where purchasers are notoriously double-minded (they want to have all the latest features embedded in their technology, even if they are reluctant to actually use those features). Plus, they don't like to pay to have consultants integrate systems for the sake of features they're not likely to use.

As we move forward in the IP world, interoperability is going to be the watchword: between networks, between switches from different vendors, even between different interaction types. And unlike the vast hype of the IP community in the 1990s, it seems we're going to get somewhere through slower, more intelligent baby steps that will make contact centers more productive after all.

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