



Service-Oriented Architecture Has Yet to Arrive In the Contact Center

Many companies aren't ready to optimize processes and technology to manage customer interactions

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Summary

Our recently completed research on Contact Center Performance Management shows that more than 80 percent of businesses rate improving customer satisfaction as their number one driver. Many businesses interpret this as improving the efficiency of their contact centers. However, mature businesses recognize that achieving that goal involves more than the contact center and that the journey needs to begin by examining the total customer experience. As with any performance improvement initiative, this effort will require changes in people's behavior, business processes and information technology. Part of the challenge is that contact centers have become isolated business silos that must be integrated back into the business and made more customer-centric. Complicating these steps, most established centers have deeply entrenched contact-handling processes and large investments in existing technologies. One solution is to replace the existing systems and adopt a service-oriented architecture (SOA). Although this may seem an attractive solution, Ventana Research believes truly SOA-compliant architectures are still some way off, and in the meantime businesses should take a more pragmatic approach.

View

In recent research Ventana Research uncovered some surprising results, one of which is that there is a higher percentage of mature contact centers in the rest of the world than in either North America or the United Kingdom. Analysis of these results strongly suggests this is so because the North American and U.K. markets have been established longer and therefore are held back to a greater extent by deeply entrenched processes and legacy technology.

The results also show that many centers want to make significant changes during the next 12 to 24 months. Prominent among these changes are intentions to add more channels of communication, to update the supporting applications that help resolve customer interactions and to turn the centers into virtual centers by distributing customer interaction-handling to "agents" working throughout the business, not just in the contact center. These plans will have to deal with the deeply rooted processes and technology.

The process changes must occur in three areas. The first is to make the current interaction process more efficient, for example by making it easier and therefore quicker for an agent to answer a billing inquiry. The second is to make the handling of each interaction more effective by ensuring the processes to handle different types of interactions are consistent with, and fit within the context of, the relevant end-to-end business processes and that these are managed across departmental boundaries, for example by ensuring that promises made at the point of sale match what is delivered to the customer. Lastly, if companies are going to make their centers virtual, the processes must flow seamlessly from the first point of contact – probably a conventional agent – to the person who is best able to resolve the issue, who may be a back-office specialist, a home worker or even someone who is mobile.

Our research also showed that in 44 percent of centers, agents have to access two or more applications to resolve a customer interaction. One technology solution that could help tremendously would be to give agents "smarter" desktops from which it is possible to access all applications, to sign in only once, to switch between applications without having to navigate through complex menus or re-enter data, and to have access to a customer-oriented dashboard. These improvements, however, first require dealing with various legacy technologies, which many companies cannot afford to throw away.

In response to these challenges, more and more companies are implementing SOA because it enables process re-engineering without replacing all existing technology – instead of a “rip and replace” situation, it offers more of a “wrap and reuse” strategy. SOA enables businesses to take a step-by-step approach to the three aspects of re-engineering required to improve the interaction-handling processes and lets the IT group build the supporting architecture largely using existing systems.

But of course this can't be done at no cost. Businesses need to deploy new technology that enables services such as “obtain customer name” or “get customer record,” drawing the data from the most appropriate source, without massive reconstruction of existing systems. Two vendors in particular, Microsoft and Jacada, offer products that could benefit businesses in this effort. The Microsoft Call Center Framework provides capabilities that enable businesses to build a process-driven desktop for agents, a middleware layer that enables those processes through integration with and access to functionality and data in existing applications and a framework to manage all channels of communication with customers.

The Jacada Workspace is a unified desktop that provides a single point of access to all the applications that agents use to resolve customer interactions. It is powered by the Fusion product, which allows businesses to build and optimize business processes even if they flow across departmental boundaries. Used in combination, Jacada's two products allow business technologists to concentrate on developing service-oriented processes that are executed at a single intelligent desktop, while hiding from the user the supporting application functionality and location of the data.

Assessment

Either of these tools provides a pragmatic short-term approach to the complex challenge of re-engineering interaction-handling processes to make agents both more efficient and effective without having to replace expensive existing technology. Ventana Research believes that businesses looking for a short-term solution to improve their customers' experience should take a careful look at these two offerings. Be aware, however, that both require custom development work on the interfaces between legacy systems, which over time will generate the need for significant maintenance effort. Over the longer term, therefore, we believe businesses should plan to re-engineer their processes to be customer-centric and rearchitect their interaction-handling technologies to comply with SOA standards.

About Ventana Research

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