More than a Helpdesk:

The benefits of an integrated technical contact centre for technology product support

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Technology Service & Support

1. Overview

The call (or contact) centre is a mainstay of modern customer service management. From a literal single-desk helpdesk through to call centres occupying entire buildings, a huge proportion of customer engagement now flows through these relatively modern phenomena.

The attraction is easy to see for the high-volume businesses which developed the first call centres. Centralising and standardising the handling of relatively simple and repeatable customer service processes has huge impacts, not least on control and cost.

But as other types of businesses with more complex service or product offerings have looked to capture these same advantages, new challenges have given rise to new structures and solutions.

This guide looks at the use of customer contact centres by technology manufacturers, integrators and distributors. We explore:

➢ The **key differences** between a traditional call centre and the kind of technical facility required by a modern technology company.
➢ **How technology companies can extend the contact centre model** to improve outcomes, reduce costs and extend capabilities across a wider range of technical services and support requirements.
➢ What is needed to deliver **an effective technical contact centre**, and explore **the case for outsourcing** to a specialist partner.

2. Let's Get Technical

Crucially for technology companies, not all call or contact centres are created equal.

The traditional **call centre** was created to deliver process-driven, low value-add services – everything from financial transactions (such as banking or insurance) to customer management, telemarketing and appointment booking.

Turnaround time and cost-per-contact are typical of the key metrics, and any customer complications which might undermine these metrics are generally logged and escalated elsewhere for resolution.

While the quality of the agent handling the call undoubtedly has an impact on service quality, training and wages are often low, and turnover high.

Technical call centres are an altogether difference beast, a specialist response to the demands of increasingly complex and sophisticated technology products and services.

Alongside the infrastructure, service team and efficiency of a traditional call centre, a technical call centre requires in-depth technical understanding and skills. Because the best technical call centres are essentially one-stop-shop services for problem resolution, excellent troubleshooting and communication skills are also essential.

All of this places great emphasis on the skills and qualities of the frontline team, calling for a blend of engineering, technical, communication and problem-solving skills which needs to be recruited for and then nurtured over time.

What's in a name?

There is frequent confusion about the different types of 'call' or 'contact' centres and the activities they carry out. It doesn't help that many operators and service providers tend to use phrases interchangeably.

The **call centre** is traditionally a voice-based service handling inbound and outbound telephone calls. The model was developed and grew from the 1960s onwards, and while a series of technology innovations significantly increased the efficiency of the original model, it was the introduction of new internet technologies from the late 1990s onwards which would completely transform it.

A **contact centre** typically provides the same call handling capability as a call centre, but also use cloud services and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology to let customers communicate in their channel of choice. These channels can include email, webchat, texts, social media, or other digital platforms. Importantly, all these channels are then brought together into a single integrated system so that customers can use one or more channels without disrupting the continuity of service.
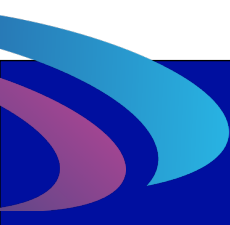
3. Supporting the entire customer journey

A key difference between the different types of contact centre operation is whether they are simply reactive call takers, or are tasked with an outbound role as well.

The help desk is typically an inbound operation, with customers calling for technical support, as well as payment or account enquiries for example.

The focus of a help desk operation is the solve user problems as quickly as possible, typically meeting their immediate need for either information (user error) or technical services such as return or repair (product fault).

While a help desk is essentially a tactical and reactive operation, that doesn't make it any less sophisticated or demanding to deliver. A specialist technology help desk, for example, will typically be divided into Tier 1 and Tier 2 responses, with call agents handling first contact, logging and routine enquiries and escalating to highly skilled Tier 2 technicians and engineers for high-end technical support, bug fixing and advanced problem resolution.

A help desk is usually an important but distinct part of the wider **service desk** operation. The service desk is the single point of contact which manages the complete customer communication

process. As well as managing incident reports and service requests, the service desk might be the point of ongoing contact between customers and installation engineers, or co-ordinate other complex and multi-stage interactions.

While helpdesk operations are generally inbound, the service desk function might widen this out considerably to include a range of outbound functions which could include anything from sales calls to maintenance reminders, satisfaction surveys or late-payment collection.

By embracing this wider perspective, the technology sector has transformed the modern customer contact centre into an effective and efficient means of supporting the complete end-to-end customer journey.
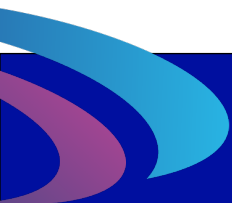
In this context, roles might include:

(i) Pre-sales activity, such as taking technical questions and providing specifications or other critical buyer information.

(ii) Sales process, including taking orders and making sales appointments.

(iii) Order implementation, from making appointments for site visits and product installation to arranging training or handling new user enquiries.

(iv) Warranty support, such as help desk support, warranty checks, or arranging swap out or repair responses.

(v) Preventative maintenance, including reminders, bookings and enquires.

(vi) Non-warranty technical service & support, including help desk support, and repair or replacement services.

Beyond Helpdesk: Multilingual technical support, warranty and more

The Need

Our client is a global manufacturers of auto ID and data capture technologies for the healthcare, logistics and retail industries.

To support its warranty service provision, the company required a multi-language technical helpdesk solution for English and Polish speakers.

The Challenge

The high expected volume of calls meant that this service would require full-time dedicated helpdesk engineers.

Bespoke new processes would need to be developed and implemented by both Qcom and the manufacturer.

The Solution

Qcom established a technical helpdesk with six dedicated engineers. The engineers were trained on the complete product line, and supported to provide multi-language support for end users and resellers.

Dedicated telephone lines and email addresses were answered with full customer branding.

Where the equipment was not covered under warranty, the engineer quoted for a repair either in the Qcom workshop or onsite.

The Results

Qcom took over 400 calls per month from end users and resellers.

By introducing a single point of contact which covered technical assistance, RMAs and repair quotations, the service streamlined and improved the customer experience.

By resolving technical problems remotely wherever possible, equipment downtime was minimised and the costs of shipping equipment to workshops was considerably reduced.

4. Counting the benefits

Cost per contact and response times are typical metrics which are used to assess the benefits of a traditional call centre. But for a <u>technical</u> contact centre, these are just two of a much wider suite of benefits.

Accessibility

As technology becomes increasingly fundamental to both our work and leisure, technology customers increasingly want – and indeed demand – help and support at the times which suit them. In b2b environments this will almost always be as soon as a problem occurs – estimates from the retail industry put the cost of equipment downtime at £3,765 per minute.

An effective contact centre operation can help you to extend support from traditional working hours to a more appropriate service level for your customers' requirements, up to 24-7-365 if appropriate. It can also allow you to extend international coverage, provide services through seasonal holidays, and so on.

Resolution

Being accessible is one thing; being able to resolve the problem is quite another. The Tier 1 / Tier 2 structure already discussed can transform the outcomes achieved by technical services and support facilities. Our experience with a range of technology

types suggests that up to 80% of problems are resolvable over the phone by suitably experienced technicians and engineers.

By combining this structure with efficient processes for returns, swap outs, warranty management and other interventions, a good contact centre can transform the customer experience.

Customer-focus

Almost as important as the <u>outcome</u> of each customer contact is the <u>quality</u> of that contact. The point about a contact centre is that it is a 100% customer focused operation, where no one is taking time out from other responsibilities to make or receive a call, find a solution, or resolve a problem.

This customer orientation means that you can confidently recruit and train for service skill and attitude. With those people in place at every level you can build an operation which is entirely focused on the needs of the customers and end-users, including features such as local language support or multi-channel access if those are in tune

with the way your customers want to interact.

Consistency

Another compelling argument for centralising all of these functions into a single integrated contact centre is the consistency this provides. This is consistency across not just each individual engagement – a support enquiry taking multiple contacts, or the booking of sequential rollout appointments (site visit, installation and user training, for example), but also the whole-of-life consistency from initial enquiry through sale, implementation, aftermarket support and, hopefully, re-purchase.

The quality and consistency of customer experience is fundamental to brand and brand management for technology companies, and to building and maintaining the lifetime value of each and every customer.

Insight

The process of bringing these functions into a central function can also generate valuable insight into the customer, the product, and the interaction between them. A modern contact centre should have the technology, the employee expertise and the volume of customer contacts required to capture metrics such as call volumes and cycles, typical user errors or customer behaviours, and product failure patterns.

These metrics can be analysed and used for everything from assessing future technical services and support provision through to user literature and training,

product development, or even parts distribution to field engineers.

Value

And finally, yes of course that cost advantage counts. The call centre model has become universal precisely because it is a cost-effective way of delivering the kind of services we have discussed. So cost per contact will always be an important metric, no matter what kind of call or contact centre you are running.

But remember that cost is only one part of the value equation, perhaps more with technology products than with any other kind of product. Customers calculate the value they receive from their purchases as cost vs utility, and with anything except throwaway consumables this utility is typically the entire package from enquiry and purchase through to delivery and the full aftersales experience.

By configuring a contact centre in ways which optimise this end-to-end customer journey, the contact centre model won't simply reduce costs. Through increased customer loyalty, word-of-mouth reputation, and loyalty / repeat purchase, it will also increase the lifetime value of each customer, thus building revenues over the medium to longer term.

5. The case for outsourcing

The modern customer contact centre we have been describing is a highly specialised operation. To achieve its full potential it will harness a dedicated infrastructure, software, skills and even culture not typically found together in technology manufacturing, integration or distribution businesses.

For all these reasons, contact centres are among the most commonly outsourced of the technical services functions.

Operationally, the outsourcing of customer contact and calls handling gives a business instant access to all of these resources. As well as putting specialist customer contact agents, technicians and systems to the fore, this can also free in-house engineers and technicians for core operational requirements.

Importantly, these outsourced resources are also likely to be highly scalable, allowing the business to respond to peaks and troughs in demand, to manage peak or holiday season arrangements, and to handle one-off technical projects or ad hoc promotional initiatives.

Competitively, today's technology (social media and more) means that service quality has never translated so quickly into reputation and brand value (and of course the opposite is also true, if things aren't done right).

Financially, the scale and efficiency of a specialist outsource provider should also have a significant impact on the cost per contact. In addition, outsourcing will turn fixed overhead costs into a variable cost, as employment, staff training, IT and infrastructure costs are swapped for a regular budgeted contract fee. All of this can impact straight on the bottom line, or free up resources for reinvestment back in core technology operations.

6. Choosing Qcom

By outsourcing with Qcom, technology companies can tailor their customer contact management to suit the budget and service outcomes which matter to them.
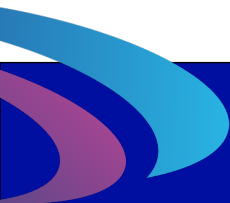
We offer:

- Dedicated infrastructure and software for contact management.
- A Tier 1 / Tier 2 structure with technical filter and technician/engineer escalation for higher resolution rates (typically up to 80% by telephone or remote support).
- Enhanced service options including pan European and multilingual support, out of hours coverage and 7-day opening.
- Flexible service levels including cover for peak periods, overflow calls or one-off campaigns.
- Experienced customer service, technician, and engineering specialists at every level, with low staff turnover.
- Regular reporting against service level agreements (SLAs) defined by the customer.
- A service culture defined by 'going the extra mile' – we understand that with every single customer contact, we very much have 'your brand in our hands'.

Crucially, Qcom is more than just a contact management company – we are a full-service technical services and support specialist.

By linking a state-of-the-art contact management service to other technical services, we can provide a one-stop-shop service to elevate your customer experience to an entirely new level.

So, for example, your technical helpdesk can be integrated with our award-winning field support service, warranty management, product returns and swap out, workshop repair, installation and more.

If you are not satisfied with your current contact centre operation, our specialists can help you review its effectiveness and efficiency and provide proposals for a new Qcom solution. Call us today on +44(0)1905 827650, email outsourcing@qcom.co.uk or visit www.qcom.co.uk for more information.