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# So you're on LinkedIn and Facebook. Now what do you do?

by Kim Brandt
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LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter — it's all we hear about these days. I just read an article that says 57% of people online are already engaged in some form of social networking, but who really knows what that number is. Though many began using these tools just to stay in touch with friends, avoid face to face conversations with family, or to launch a job search - there's actually a greater opportunity when it comes to your business.

Social media tools allow you to not only connect with your business network, but also to educate, inform and interact with your target audience like never before. Are Twitter and Facebook viable communication tools for your company? Well that depends on a variety of factors, but I can tell you that they have the potential to truly strengthen the relationship between your product or service and consumers. When it's used in the right way, you can create brand awareness, bring target audiences together, and learn more than you'd ever hoped about your buyers.

As for a membership-based organization such as the American Teleservices Association (ATA), we're seeing the power of the "tweet" and the response to our LinkedIn groups expand every day. It's new to us, but the Association stands to vastly broaden its reach to contact center professionals with these tools. Here are a few examples of how the ATA is already using Social Networking to create industry awareness and bring professional people together:

**Making it easy to Stay Connected**. Our members are involved in numerous social networking groups, so we've tried to make it easy. Links to various ATA social platforms can be found on the ATA web site home page (www.ataconnect.org). It's a single destination people can visit to easily connect with all ATA social networking opportunities.

**Short but Sweet**. Social networking enables us to get in touch with a large amount of people in a short period of time. We're announcing our speakers, agenda and events for Convention using Twitter. It's also been a great way to congratulate our chapter volunteers for hosting some phenomenal local events. Our list of online followers is growing! Join us at (www.twitter.com/The_ATA).

**Don't just tell them, show them**. We're not just telling our members to somehow gather in cyberspace. The ATA has launched its own social networking platform (Contact Center Performance Forum), and the content is flowing daily there (www.contactcenter.ning.org). This is the place for contact center professionals to talk about business problems and share their solutions. And it's a place for the Association board, staff and chapter leaders to monitor the

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# RANTS & RAVES!

## Randomly Timed Musings

### Customer Experience: It's All About the Action in Operations

By Kathleen M. Peterson
Chief Vision Officer, PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.

Have you ever read *First Break All the Rules* by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman of the Gallup Corporation? If not, you may want to consider it. The overwhelming message of the book is how to be a more effective leader by taking a *new and fresh look* at what you are trying to accomplish and how you are doing it. This is great stuff and although the book is several years old, I still highly recommend it. *First Break All the Rules* is primarily focused on leadership and buried within it are findings of 20 years of Gallup research on what customers *really want.*

The research is the result of 20 years of surveying over a BILLION people to identify what *really* matters to them about service. The findings are organized into four categories which are labeled as *low level* and *high level* satisfiers. The *low level* satisfiers are Accuracy and Availability. Achieving these "only prevents dissatisfaction." The *high level* satisfiers are Partnership and Advice. The authors state that achieving these are "not easy to do, but are difficult to steal" (as in replicate).

I would like to use these findings to stimulate some thinking around *simplifying* the process of understanding and reacting to customer needs. They serve as a foundation for assessing the operational side of the *Customer Experience* in the Contact Center; in fact, they apply quite nicely. So here's my take ...

#### LOW LEVEL SATISFIERS

If we begin with the low level satisfiers, we need to recognize that there are no "points" earned for achieving Accuracy and Availability. But there are *operational elements* that assure their achievement.

**Accuracy**

Customers expect information to be correct. Duh, of course they do! But has anyone called you lately to say thanks for getting it right? I doubt it! It is not enough to simply acknowledge this obvious fact; we must identify the elements that the objective of Accuracy requires.

***Hiring -*** Competencies must be very clearly defined. If you don't intend on teaching basic computer skills, TEST the candidates to make sure they have them. If your agents will be required to write emails or edit email suggested responses, TEST their writing ability. When Customer Experience is of high importance, TEST their definition - *Is it a match?* Certain competencies cannot be trained; it is more effective to hire smart than be stuck with someone not right for the position.

***Training -*** Agents must be well trained, and depending on the complexity of the business, also skilled in the area of critical thinking to enhance consistency across the operation. Training is an ongoing process, not just a new-hire requirement. It is important to train agents in the manner in which they will do their jobs. When trainers have access to a "training" or "dummy" system, they are able to integrate system, product, and customer service into the same module. The result is training that models the actual job and where all functions are utilized and practiced together.

***Communication -*** An effective communication approach must be in place to "move" relevant information to agents in a timely fashion. Centers vary in their approach - from updates to paper manuals, memos, emails, intranet, large plasma screens, "ribbons" on the desktop, whiteboards, etc. More and more operations today are investing in technology to facilitate communication in the Contact Center. And, there is a question that must be answered: "*Who is the information gatekeeper?*" This is critical! We have seen many cases in which supervisors become overwhelmed by information distribution coming from *too many* places; anyone with a distribution list seems able to send changes or requests to the floor. This is a frustrating situation and challenges Accuracy at its very core. It is critical to establish a "communication liaison" function to serve as the gatekeeper and to take a good, long, and hard look at the means by which you communicate to the front line. If you have resorted to the dreaded brightly colored paper on agents' chairs, it may be time for serious reengineering.

Think about it. *What else contributes to Accuracy in your Call Center?*

**Availability**

*Availability* is another low level satisfier that must be met before any Customer Experience points are earned. Availability includes these elements.

***Hours of Operation -*** Many companies have had to evaluate whether their hours of operation are an asset or a liability in their market. We worked recently with credit unions that made what at first was a painful decision to move to extended hours. Tough as it was, the decision was made prior to the banking meltdown and they have faired quite well. They can now compete with the big guys in terms of hours of operation, while being more stable in terms of the meltdown.

***Customer Access Channels -*** Yesterday I went to the eye doctor and was given a new prescription for my contacts. Since I like to order my contacts online, I asked the receptionist if they could provide me a copy of the prescription electronically. Well, I may as well have asked her to sprout another head. She told me that she "didn't know anything about THAT" and not in a very nice

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way. I often wonder why I can't email my doctor, dentist, etc. This is one of the issues with customer access. Customers want to do business with you on *their* terms and on *their* schedule; if your business is behind in the area of electronic access, you could be behind on market share as well.

### HIGH LEVEL SATISFIERS

Now for the good stuff ... *Partnership* and *Advice*. This is where the Customer Experience becomes a market differentiator. Let's assume that you have competitors - a relatively safe assumption. Many, if not most markets today, will look to match or beat their competitors on price, services available, promises, etc. But the real differentiator may just be in the experience. *How easy is it to reach you? How easy is it to understand the 'user manual?' How easy is it to use/access your warranty? How easy is it to get helpful answers?* Study your call types; some of these answers will emerge and you will know that it is time to ACT.

**Partnership**

When discussing with or training staff regarding the Customer Experience it is critical to assure the understanding that building the *relationship* IS in fact establishing the Partnership. Relationships are built in many ways, and the frontline often has a heck of a lot to do with it. A relationship is being able to *recognize* the customer's need, not only in specific terms, but on an emotional level. Providing a WOW or a THRILL leads to establishing an "emotional" connection. I believe that this is even possible electronically. For example, when I go to Amazon.com, I like the fact that it is MY page that shows up, MY recommendations, and MY account history. Amazon.com has made it easy (maybe too easy) to do business with them, at least in part because the company has managed to establish a relationship with my unique needs. When you have customers on the phone, building a Partnership with them is about needs and nuances. It is about being able to *fully represent* your brand and deepen the relationship.

It should be understood that if you are in a position to give true Advice - the kind that will possibly increase sales or order size - very few consumers accept Advice without there being Partnership in place. This is often illustrated when an unhappy or frustrated customer is escalated to a supervisor; the supervisor may be more sensitive to the customer's frustration, de-escalate the situation, and give the EXACT same answer as the agent. Yet, the answer from the person that built the Partnership (the supervisor) is accepted, while the non-Partnership Advice is rejected. Ask yourself if your frontline has in place the tools necessary to build that Partnership, for example, clear customer records, clear notes, profiles, etc. *Do they have authority to take action and resolve issues in a single contact?* Check out the frontline's capabilities in this area; identify weaknesses and move to correct.

**Advice**

Advice is the *ultimate factor* in the Customer Experience. Advice about products, services, etc., is often in the hands of the frontline contact. Advice takes the Accuracy and the Partnership elements and translates them to a market differentiator because they yield an emotional connection. People like to take Advice from those they have *confidence* in. We all have hung up from a call and called back not only because we may not have "liked" the answer, but because we felt it could be "wrong."

When you consider that it is the Advice function that solves problems and makes additional sales, the concept is easy to embrace. Add-on sales (also known as cross-sell and up-sell) offers are the *ultimate in* Advice. The frontline is going to advise the customer on other products or services that are available and appropriate. I sat in a bank one day and watched an agent kiss a twenty thousand dollar CD goodbye because he didn't offer anything else to the customer. Of course, the bank had a multitude of programs that the customer could have been advised about, but the agent seemed more comfortable explaining how to cash out the CD. So ... Advice is about confidence, critical thinking, brand knowledge, and of course products and services. No matter how *smart* we may be, smartness only has value to those with whom we have built a relationship and, in fact, a Partnership.

...............

There are challenges to achieving the *high level* satisfiers and they often lie in the *low levels*. If you cannot achieve Accuracy and Availability, you may never get the opportunity to get to the Partnership and Advice level, no matter how good you are at it. Customers will be frustrated before you can ever get to that height. All of these elements *must work together*, but somehow in order. We need to view our customers as invited guests to a party, and we are the hosts. It's our job every day to make every important aspect of the Customer Experience count. .

Take some time as summer comes to a close to evaluate how you will approach the final months of 2009. *What level of satisfiers will you reach?* We would love to hear your thoughts!

*(#29, Customer Experience: It's All About the Action in Operations, August 2009)*

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topics that seem most relevant to industry peers in a very real way.

**Location, Location, Location**. We are blabbing about our events in locations all over the social media realm. We're tweeting, posting to LinkedIn groups, blogging, discussing, and so on. The idea is to capture new audiences and drive traffic back to our web site. It's working.

Maybe some of our examples will inspire you. How else could you be using these same tools to connect with your target audience? It's more than friends and family these days – it's how smart companies are branding their company. The possibilities to reach people through social networking are endless.

If you want to learn more about social media from a very practical point of view, the ATA Convention will be the perfect place (October 4-7 in New Orleans). Author of "The Social Media Bible" Lon Safko will speak about doing business using social media tools. The "social media guy" himself, Yianni Garcia will be back with the ATA after presenting to a thrilled audience at a recent chapter event in New York about how to integrate these tools into call center customer service environments. Attorney Chad Richter of Jackson Lewis will highlight some of the legal concerns about use of social networking by your employees. There will be enough stats, analytics, case studies, ROI and such to make you think twice about your own social strategy. Don't miss out! Register now at www.ata2009convention.org.

###

**Love Thy Customer**
By Jean Marie Johnson

While Mick Jagger spoke for many a disgruntled customer when he sang “I can’t get no satisfaction,” it would appear that Bob Dylan’s lyrics are closer to current reality. In other words, “the times they are a’changin” in deed when it comes to the customer experience.

According to the Second Quarter 2009 **The American Customer Satisfaction Index**, a highly-reputed survey conducted by The University of Michigan, the news from the first quarter of this year is good. “Customer sat” is at an all-time high registering a 0.4% increase to 76.0 on ACSI’s 100-point scale, a second straight quarterly improvement. Bruce Temkin of Forrester Research supported this finding, observing that companies are continuing to spend in areas that affect the customer experience.

If you are thinking “well that’s not the case in my neck of the woods,” we were, too. So we did some probing and uncovered a bit more information about who is improving and how. As it turns out, several of the companies with enhanced customer sat scores are attending to one or more of the key drivers of service excellence: training, systems, processes and customer feedback. Here’s a sampling:

• *Training*

Comcast Corporation was able to cut repeat service calls by a significant 30% in 2008. They enhanced service rep training, and introduced software that alerts reps to network glitches before they actually impact the consumer. How’s that for proactive communication that puts the customer experience first! Comcast also monitors feedback from dissatisfied customers on blogs and on Twitter, responding to specific feedback one-on-one.

• *Systems*

Southwest Airlines made a system change that allows customers waiting in queue for a call center operator to receive a call back from the operator, without losing their place in the queue. We like the respect for the customer and the convenience of this move.

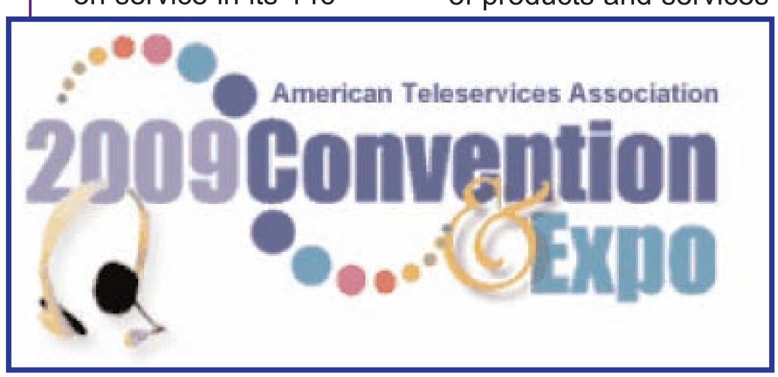
• *Processes*

Sprint Nextel launched a major service improvement initiative in late 2007, including naming a Chief Service Officer. Amongst the many changes, call center operators are now rewarded for solving a customer’s problem on the first call; no longer are they rewarded for “more calls in less time.” Thank you, thank you, thank you!

• *Customer Feedback*

Cheesecake Factory introduced an online customer survey focusing on service in its 146 locations. Systemic problems are being addressed at headquarters, while individual restaurants tackle specific sources of dissatisfaction. Second quarter earnings exceeded expectations and more changes are in the works. The large scale/small scale approach appears to be key to success here Organizations such as these are working hard to demonstrate that they are listening to their customer base and responding in a way that enhances relationship and addresses the reality of the customer’s experience. As consumers and customer experience professionals, we are pleased.

**About the ACSI**
The American Customer Satisfaction Index is a national economic indicator of customer evaluations of the quality of products and services



available to household consumers in the United States. The overall ACSI score for a given quarter factors in scores from about 200 companies in 44 industries and from government agencies over the previous four quarters. The index is produced by the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business in partnership with the American Society for Quality (ASQ) and CFI Group.

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###

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

**9/2 Leverage Back-office Expertise in Customer Service for Higher Customer Satisfaction and Lower Costs**- SAP- This webcast will present a framework on how to increase the customer service efficiency by connecting back office experts into customer service. Hear a customer case to demonstrate how the back office integration can lead to:-Increased customer satisfaction-Increased employee motivation both in contact center and in back office -Cost savings due to higher first call resolution and better resource utilization. http://www.crmxchange.com/webcast/sapsept09.backoffice.asp

**9/10 - Best Practices for Determining Contact Reasons and Using Them to Improve Performance**- Enkata – This webcast is designed to help you navigate the landscape of existing methods companies are using to categorize customer contacts and present real-world best-practices for transforming accurate contact reasons to a reduction calls, improvement in employees' performance and increased customer satisfaction. http://www.crmxchange.com/webcast/enkatasept09.performance.asp

**9/15 - The Business Value of Whole Call Recording - Avoke**

**Caller Experience Analytics** - BBN Technologies - It's no longer sufficient to focus exclusively on agent quality and ignore the other 60-70% of voice brand experiences and the other 20-30% of voice contact costs. To maximize customer loyalty, leading edge companies are using whole call analytics to look at every voice experience holistically – including the experience prior to reaching an agent, the experience including all transfers and partners, and the experience of callers who self-serve. Companies are also using whole call analytics to optimize the entire voice contact process, including the 20-30% of costs that are not driven by your agent schedule. http://www.crmxchange.com/webcast/bbnsept09/monitoring.asp

**9/22 – "Lasting Impressions: A Customer Feedback Case Study"** -Verint - What happens when a provider of semi-custom printed materials implements customer feedback as part a four-part workforce optimization strategy to find out what its customers really think about its services? The answers may surprise you! Join us for an interview with Cory Gallagher, Director of Customer Service at "Midwest Call Center, a Navitor™ Company". Learn how Cory and team also drive business and workforce optimization results as they enhance customer service across the organization. http://crmxchange.com/webcasy/verintsept09.feedback.asp

**9/24 – Squeezing Significant and Hidden Value Out of Your Contact Center Strategic Plan**- Bay Bridge Decision Technologies This webcast will discuss the individual modeling technologies that will improve your current planning process and an exciting class of commercially available contact center solutions, the Strategic Planning System. We will also discuss the areas of efficiency improvement, and the significant, but before now hidden, benefit you'll achieve by improving your planning process. http://www.crmxchange.com/webcast/baybridgesept09.asp

**9/29 "Self-Service ROI Fact and Fiction: Leading Experts Tell It Like It is"** - Voxify What steps can you take to get the full ROI from your speech self service? How can you ensure that you're getting the best possible performance from your speech applications once they're up and running? Join a distinguished panel of leading vendors in the industry, moderated by Speech Strategy News publisher Bill Meisel, as they answer your questions about how to extract the most value from self-service solutions. http://crmxchange.com/Webcast/VoxifySept09.asp

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The 2009 American Teleservices Association Convention & Expo will be October 4-7 in New Orleans and "Answering the Call" will be the theme. "Answering the Call" is about understanding how to maximize the value of every contact with each and every customer or prospect. What role does teleservices play in the overall economy? How do we address improving our image and calls? How do we use the power of our employment base to make a difference on legislation in Washington DC and our own communities?

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Contact the decision makers at leading America's call centers (as well as call center directors in Canada and the UK).... http://www.callcentertimes.com/BookofLists/tabid/64/Default.aspx

###

Call Center Times
King Technology Group
KtG thrives on a belief that your call center and its production hours come first and foremost in a sense that we understand and have a sense of urgency when your call center has a failure. We understand what it takes to keep your Touchstar system operational in a production environment and how to swiftly solve problems as they arise.

Let our experts at KtG take the call center technicalities off your hands and allow us to let you focus on new ideas that will generate your company revenue!

We are proactive with your system which will involve accessing your systems remotely and optimizing your call center including the database, telephony, scripting, and networking. Our goal is to solve problems within your current infrastructure and provide new perspectives and solutions; the level in which KtG will participate with your company is in your hands.

King Technology Group provide the following contact center solution services

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Why would you choose to work with a smaller firm like KtG?

KtG is going to save you time and money by introducing competitive solutions.

We're going to work harder for less and be the support you can truly count on.

*"King Technology Group has saved my company an annual cost of $48,000 in monthly telephone bills. The Touchstar knowledge that KtG possesses has really been a relief over the last two years - as a business owner I am able to divert my attention to more growth and management of my organization."*
Richard Hix C.E.O.
Physicians Health Group

*"The consultants at KtG are very helpful and typically respond to our Touchstar Call Center problems or questions within a timely manner. Our mortgage firm has had a business relationship with KtG for roughly two years now and it's a good feeling to have someone you can call when your primary source of production and revenue has a failure."*
Kenyon Cantino C.E.O.
Rapid One Mortgage

King Technology Group was founded on a simple notion that a business regardless of how big or small requires technical solutions, those solutions must be properly serviced and well maintained. KtG is a growing organization, and we want your Contact Center to be a part of it.

Founder,
Chris King

cking@kingtechnologygroup.com

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###

**10 Tips to Value Engineer Your Call Center Cubicles by Jennifer Way**

In this economy everyone is asked to do more with less. Value engineering call center cubicles is one way to put this into practice. The design tips below will help to reduce the overall lifetime furniture expense, while still meeting all of the requirements of a functional and productive center.

1. Utilize back-to-back agent stations designs to save cost. These types of stations have more shared panels such as the spine panel and electric, so the cost per station is lower than a single sided run of agent stations.

2. When specifying the furniture choose melamine for the lower panels beneath the work surface instead of a fabric-covered panel. The panels are less expensive than fabric panels, will hold up better over time, and are easier to clean.

3. Look for a furniture system that does not have loose parts, i.e., kick plates and frame caps that can easily fall off. Furniture without these loose parts means less maintenance cost and a site that looks better for a longer period of time.

4. Purchase furniture with a Lifetime Warranty. A lifetime warranty guarantees that the manufacturer will stand behind the product and the furniture will stand the test of time. Durable furniture might cost slightly more initially, but have to be replaced and fixed less often, so it will hold its value over less-expensive furniture.

5. Furniture should meet LEED indoor air quality standards, which is the wave of the future. Use of compliant furniture will contribute to a better indoor environment and will help reduce allergen problems, odor complaints, and sick building issues. Use of low-VOC and formaldehyde emitting furniture should not cost more than a manufacturer's typical furniture offerings.

6. Buy furniture that can be reconfigured as needed. The cost to reconfigure existing furniture will be less than purchasing all new workstations should needs change or relocation to a different site is required. Make sure that the supplier keeps electronic files of the project and engineering paperwork so it will be easy to reference the parts of the stations at a later date.

7. Consider how the wire/cable management system works and if it will be easily accessible but still hide the cables and cords. The best system to use is a Chase system that has an accessible area under the furniture through sliding doors. This allows for easy initial set-up and future changes for IT.

8. When considering acoustic panels for the workstations, note that the most important panel to have made of acoustic material is the spine panel of the furniture. To reduce costs have the side panels constructed of a fabric covered hardboard panel.

9. Ergonomics tools are workstation accessories that will pay for themselves. Many studies show that the proper use of ergonomic accessories such as an adjustable keyboard, chair, and monitor arm, will help to reduce repetitive motion injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Reduced injuries will mean fewer workers compensation costs, less time missed from work, and less time used to train replacement employees.

10. Smaller supervisor stations are one way to reduce the floor plan of a site. In the past, typical supervisor stations consisted of at least a 6'x6' workstation. The most common design now is to have a standing height straight workstation at the end of a run of agent stations. This smaller station design costs less and gives the supervisor a better line of sight to see each of the agents, which can increase productivity and thus profitability.

Utilizing these design suggestions will help to achieve an attractive and functional call center while keeping an eye on the bottom line.

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###

**Use call center recording to develop a profitable and reliable contact center team by Jeff Valentine, CEO, Callfinity**

Your business may have the best product on the market, the most visible advertising campaign in recent history, and a price point that can't be undersold. But if your call center team can't step up to the plate, it's only a matter of time before dissatisfied customers begin flooding the internet with negative feedback and hostile comments. Face it, customers do care and they'll let everyone know when you haven't met their expectations. That's why it's critical that your contact center team receives the training and guidance necessary to handle calls in a professional and timely manner.

In order to stay ahead of the curve, businesses are constantly searching for inexpensive and effective ways to improve customer satisfaction and employee performance. After all, competent and reliable employees don't just fall out of the sky. The key to building a successful franchise hinges on a business's ability to properly educate new employees and continuously develop the skills of seasoned veterans. It sounds like a fairly simple goal to achieve, yet many businesses still struggle to develop efficient coaching methods their employees can digest and utilize.

The good news is that your business can succeed with the aid of contact center recording. Market analysis has shown that businesses using call center recording have displayed startling improvements in training, productivity, and profitability. In other words, if you want to create a contact center monster capable of adapting to customer needs, legal regulations, and product demand, contact center recording is your answer.

One of the primary reasons many businesses have adopted call recording is that it provides managers with powerful employee coaching tools. Employee coaching allows staff the ability to see the outcome of daily challenges and react accordingly. There's the old saying that we 'learn from our experience.' The benefit of coaching is that it provides reps with the ability to learn before the experience. If an employee is learning on the job, mistakes can yield lost sales, dissatisfied customers, and lead to bad habits.

Before you select a call recording device, there are four questions you need to answer. Does the interface allow you to easily locate recorded calls? How easy is it to listen to recorded calls once you locate them? Can you easily distribute recorded calls to your contact center team? Does your recorder provide a number of options that make it simple to evaluate your employees?

Not only can Callfinity's ContextRecorder™ easily integrate into any existing phone system, its feature-rich web-based interface provides administrators with all the tools you need to locate, listen, distribute, and evaluate calls.

If you need to locate a call, Callfinity's ContextRecorder lets you search for recorded calls using a variety of search keys including Agent extension, Que, inbound


call number, Agent ID, Time, Duration, and Product ID. ContextRecorder's embedded audio player lets you listen to calls using familiar playback options. You can also save the standard WAV file to your computer and use any number of preferred audio players like Windows Media Player, iTunes, or RealPlayer to listen to the recording. The Recording Library makes it easy to locate recorded calls and share them without downloading and emailing large WAV file attachments.

The most impressive feature of ContextRecorder is that it lets administrators create complex evaluation forms using a customizable scoring system. Every business has different needs, so providing administrators with a variety of scoring options is an absolute necessity. Each evaluation form can be created using an abundance of customizable form fields such as combo boxes, check boxes, radio groups, and text boxes. The possibilities are endless, allowing administrators to accurately score employees based on business needs. This way your employees know what's expected and what weak areas need some adjustment.

All of these features can be

used to develop your employees into passionate contact center reps. If your employees understand your business expectations, they can begin to hone certain skills and focus on areas that need improvement. Every call is a valuable coaching device. With ContextRecorder organizing your efforts, you can build a profitable and confident contact center team without depleting your budget.

Callfinity provides the easiest to use telecommunications software, systems, and services to contact centers, service providers, and enterprises. Since 1999, over 270 customers in six countries around the world have selected Callfinity's on-premise equipment and hosted services. For more information about Callfinity, please visit Callfinity's Web site at www.callfinity.com or call (877) 897-2962 (within US) or +1 585-278-1940 (elsewhere.) ###

**Hiring the Right Call Center Is An Investment, Not An Expense by Tony Zito, Answer Quick Telecommunications**

In today's unstable economic times just about all business owners are looking for ways to increase profit. Even businesses that are still thriving, having the right business affiliations are critical.

But for those who are running slimmer profit margins than ever have a greater need for spending their dollars wisely.

This article highlights some features that a good call center will offer. And some common questions that business owners have as they inquire about call center services.

Studies have shown that up to 70% of first time callers who call a business for their first time who receive a voicemail or answering machine will hang up and call the competition. Therefore having a live person answer your phones 24-7-365 is essential to capture every new customer that you can and reduce the amount of hang ups!

As you will probably agree it isn't cheap or easy to acquire new customers today, no matter what business you're in! So having a cost effective system in place such as a call center will likely increase your bottom line.

Here are some things that managers and business owners want to know before they hire a call center.

How long have they been in business? This is important to know due to the complexity of managing a call center. Experience is one sure way to insure that your calls will be answered and your instructions will be followed to the tee!

What is the turnover rate? If the call center has a high turnover rate there is a good chance that your calls won't be handled properly because the operators will have to be trained repeatedly!

What exactly are your charges? There two parts to the billing structure with call center pricing. 1. The set up fee, this fee ranges from call center to call center and is determined by the complexity of your needs. Things such as scripting, and call volume will determine the set up fee. The prices range from no set up fee to several thousands of dollars.

2. The calls are billed per minute based on the complexity of your account. There will usually be a different charge for simple message taking, compared to taking orders and performing customer service activities that a contact center would do.

How do you do your billing to the second or minute? Some call centers bill to the second and some round up to the next minute. Billing to the second is self explanatory; this means if a call lasts 2 minutes and 3 seconds that is exactly what you're billed for. On the other hand if a call is

2 minutes and 3 seconds with billing that is rounded up you would be billed for a three minute call.

How do you handle power outages? If you take one of the most important reasons that most businesses use a call center, to have their calls answered 24-7-365. A four hour power outage could cost the business big bucks if the call center couldn't take their calls. You will find that the more experienced call centers will have a generator system that can power their entire building for days without missing a single call!

Are your CSRs virtual or do they come to your office? There are a few different scenarios. The call center has a brick and mortar location her in the United States that the CSR's have to come to in order to take calls. The CSR's can work from home and log in from their computer to take calls and can be located anywhere. Or the call center call center can outsource the calls over seas!

These are some of the key questions that people are interested in knowing about hopefully these will help you in selecting the right call center for your business.

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###

**Would You Run a Retail Store with No Salesclerks?**
**by Jim Iyoob**

Maintaining an internet presence costs companies billions of dollars each year. In addition, the marketing costs incurred to drive potential customers to the company web site increases the overall costs exponentially. It seems illogical then that after successfully generating interest from prospects in a product or service and guiding these prospects to an expensive and well designed web site, these same companies allow potential customers to leave without completing a revenue producing action. Even more surprising is the lack of knowledge companies have as to why prospects leave the web site.

Interactive functions which allow for live web communication provide companies with tools to reach out to their web site visitors, answer questions, guide these prospective customers through the order system, and provide a heightened level of customer service. Many companies are discovering the benefits of adding interactive chat to their web sites to better engage their visitors.

***Service and Sales***
Customer satisfaction surveys show that the customer experience is improved by providing Online Chat Representatives to answer questions, provide additional information and resolve customer issues. In addition to improving the customer experience, deflecting inbound phone calls to a more cost effective service channel has reduced some companies' phone call volume by more than 20%. Rather than speaking with one customer at a time by phone, an experienced Chat Representative can service up to six online customers at one time. Redefining inbound customer service can make a substantial savings to the bottom line. For those companies who include the cost of customer service in the price of a product or service, this reduction in overall service costs can be passed directly to the consumer in the form of lower prices.

While service issues are the initial driver in implementing chat for many, conversion metrics can be so successful that using chat as a selling tool is becoming a cost effective avenue to generate additional revenue. One Internet Service Provider is experiencing a 10%

conversion rate with chat visitors versus a 2% conversion rate with self service. Another company is seeing nearly 100% increase in close rates on their web site sales, as well as an increase in average order values by 11%. As startling as these statistics are, the reduction in the average sales cycle by 48% illustrates what providing interactive chat can do to improve first call resolution and close sales quickly.

***Static versus Proactive***

Currently, there are two primary options available to companies when considering adding chat to their web site:

Reactive or Static Chat: Usually a simple addition of a link to a third party tool which allows a web site visitor to initiate a chat with a trained Online Chat Representative. Static chat opens the communication between the company and their potential customer, providing an online interactive conversation. Chat buttons can be placed on key marketing and customer service pages on the web site.

Proactive Chat: Through the creation of business rules, proactive invitations can be sent to a visitor to chat based on the browsing behavior, including key word searches, geographic location, and abandonment actions. The invitation can be specific to the behavior. For instance, a university which uses proactive chat, tags a page explaining one of their popular degree plans. Visitors who spend in excess of 30 seconds on that page receive a chat invitation which includes starting salary statistics of graduates with this particular degree. By targeting “hot” leads, companies see much higher conversion rates and maximize the costs of the Chat Representatives.

Determining whether Static Chat or Proactive Chat is best for a company’s web site can best be assessed through a Return on Investment analysis. Chat will add incremental costs to the company. Even though the start-up costs of Static Chat are less, an ROI analysis may show that the investment of Static Chat produces a smaller return than the larger investment to support Proactive Chat.

While the benefits of interactive chat seem obvious, incurring the additional costs seems to counter the mission of the internet; empowering consumers with the information they need to make independent decisions. However, an objective evaluation of the benefits, costs, and risks will guide a company to make the right decision.

***Online Chat Representatives***

One cannot overstate the importance of the front line representative who is interacting with the company’s customers and prospects. Proper selection through testing and an extensive interview process; thorough training in all aspects of the company, its’ products, and customer interaction skills; and finally, floor leadership responsible for coaching and motivating are critical to the success of any customer contact program.

The typical chat customer is educated and product savvy. They choose chat as their preferred means of interacting and they expect to chat with a knowledgeable resource. Improper spelling and grammar can cause an unpleasant customer experience as quickly as inaccurate information. It is imperative that Chat Representatives are chosen carefully and tested for spelling and grammar as well as typing skills.

Chat is rapidly becoming a “channel of choice” for its impact on customer satisfaction and sales. Adding interactive chat to a company’s web site will maximize the cost of the internet presence and reduce dependency on other service and sales channels.

**About Etech**:

Etech, Inc. is a leading provider of customer contact and business process outsourcing solutions that help Fortune 500 companies grow revenue and manage costs. Founded in 1997 and headquartered in Nacogdoches, TX. Etech employs over 2000 team members occupying 6 state-of-the art customer interaction centers in Texas and Gujarat, India.

Visit www.etechinc.com or call us today to learn what Etech can do for you.

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###

**New White Paper from InVision Software: Reducing Costs by Integrating Staff Scheduling and Time Management**

**InVision Software, a leading international provider of enterprise-wide workforce management (WFM) systems, offers a free white paper to staff planners, time management supervisors and HR managers, focusing on integrated staff scheduling and time management processes. The downloadable guide explains how to optimise the management of working times in increasingly demanding working environments and in the context of progressively more complex company structures.**

Efficient personnel scheduling requires integrated time management which is just as flexible as the working hours of the employees. In most businesses, labour and time are the most valuable resources. As employers move away from fixed working hours to demand-oriented staff schedules, the more complex the requirements for time management become. Even in small and medium-sized companies, this cannot be managed without modern IT applications. This InVision white paper explains step by step how to optimise all time management processes with the help of the software solution InVision Enterprise WFM, from the transfer, distribution, allocation, monitoring and approval of working times using time accounts to the export of validated, error-free data for payroll systems.

“The automation of time management saves time and money. It also helps to avoid payroll errors, eases the scheduling burden and increases employee satisfaction,” says Peter Bollenbeck, CEO of InVision Software. “For efficient time management, it is important that all applicable rules can be defined and used to automatically process all time account transactions in the system. For example, rules may apply to break times and rounding may be applied at the beginning or end of a shift. It is also necessary to correctly identify whether extra work should be done at normal pay rates or on overtime pay rates.”

Integrating staff scheduling and time management processes into a single comprehensive workforce management system provides a number of benefits, leading to increased efficiency and performance – especially welcome during these difficult economic times. Benefits include reduced administration costs due to automated time account calculation, eliminated pay inflation due to identification and correction of time recording errors, as well as an increased employee satisfaction and productivity due to more flexible working hours.

The white paper ‘Efficient Time Management in Increasingly Demanding Working Environments – How the Management of Working Time Can Be Optimised in the Context of Progressively more Complex Company

Structures' is available as free download at http://www.invisionwfm.com/eng/download/file/15591/297372/version/4/file/WhitePaper+ENG_UK+TimeManagement_sec.pdf

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###

**A Green solution that is truly a "Win-Win" for both companies and their employees! By Darren Prine**

The ultimate "Green" business solution is now available through utilizing new call center technology. By implementing an enterprise class Virtual Call Center platform, companies can virtualize their business and move their employees to a Work From Home environment. This seamless Work From Home platform with full call management, call reporting, call recording, call auditing and more, allows a business to move employees from costly commercial space and allows them the luxury of working from home. With a built-in "workforce management" module, companies can monitor employees just as if they were working in a "brick and mortar" office environment.

The Green implications here are that new buildings can be built designed with virtualization in mind and a building that traditionally required 10 floors at a cost of $10 million dollars might now only require 3 floors at a cost of $3 million dollars. Only essential staff will have to occupy office space and everyone else will be working from home. Imagine the savings in valuable resources when buildings can be built at half the size traditionally required? This solution drastically reduces auto emissions due to employees working from home. Imagine the corresponding reduction in traffic!

The savings to a business are staggering. Here's an example: Hilton Hotels just moved over 2,000 customer service representatives from 3 call centers to a work from home environment. Hilton is saving approximately $15 million dollars a year on leased space alone. In addition, work from home employees will trade the convenience of working from home for a reduced compensation plan. In the case of Hilton, they are saving over $6.00 an hour per employee on thousands of employees.

The "Green" Benefits in a nutshell:
- Less cars on the road, less emissions in the air.
- Less natural resources needed for new buildings.
- Commercial buildings are the largest users of gas and electricity during peak hours. This solution will reduce this energy usage.

This amazing platform is truly a win for businesses, employees and the environment. To learn more about how your business can Virtualize its workforce and enjoy the tremendous benefits outlined here, visit www.northwindscontactsolutions.com or contact:

**Darren Prine** at

1-800-831-8130
dprine@thenorthwinds.com

###

**Does Accuracy Matter?**

Ric Kosiba, Ph.D.
President, Bay Bridge Decision Technologies

**Our Struggle With Accuracy**

I am very proud of my company, Bay Bridge Decision Technologies. We've brought together a very talented group of mathematicians and industrial engineers who spend a good chunk of their day analyzing ACD data, developing hiring optimization algorithms and contact center simulation models, and ensuring simulation model accuracy against real world call center data.

When we started Bay Bridge, we built our first prototype CenterBridge system using Erlang equations to develop staff and budget plans. Everyone in the call center industry used some variant of the Erlang equation to do staffing analysis, so we thought we would as well. We plugged the results of our Erlang model and compared it to real-world ACD data and found that the results were not very close.

So, we went back to the drawing board. We researched and developed modified Erlang equations for use in CenterBridge. This time we had more luck. We found that we could get more accurate for a particular call center (although still not as accurate as we'd like), but that model did not translate well to other call center data. In other words, for our models to be closer to accurate, using a modified Erlang equation, we had to build a different model for every call type. There was a ton of math involved in doing this, a lot of time, and the results were still not as close as we'd like.

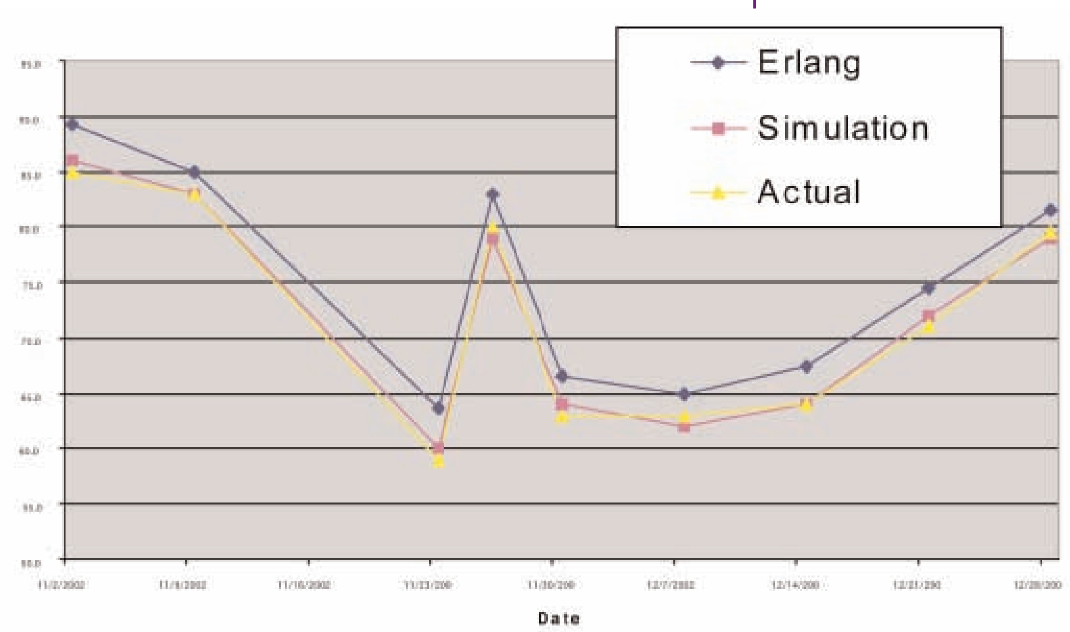
But this makes a lot of intuitive sense. Every call type and call center customer is not the same. We all know that analyzing a technical support contact center is different from analyzing a sales center. We all know this, yet most of us use the same equation to determine staffing across all of our different call types.

We had to go back to the drawing board again.

We found that we could get amazing accuracy with a well known, but slow, technology called discrete-event simulation modeling. So, our engineers went to work on speeding up the simulation model runs. When they finally succeeded, we had our first version of CenterBridge.

**The Big Question**

We spend an awful lot of time building these custom simulation models for our customers. To get this accuracy, we have had to hire expensive engineers, invest our time and resources into software and processes designed to ensure speed and accuracy, and go to great lengths to analyze our customer's ACD data. What a pain.
I cannot tell you how many times we have asked ourselves: "Does accuracy really matter?" It would sure make our lives easier if accuracy was not so important.




**What does accuracy mean to your staffing numbers?**

It is common knowledge that Erlang-based equations tend to overstaff. The real problem most analysts face is that they do not know, for their centers, how much Erlang tends to overstate the staffing requirements. During our normal course of business- analyzing ACD data, building discrete-event simulation models, and comparing models to reality- we also take the step of comparing models to Erlang equations.

Here's the rub. For the same center, Erlang may overstate requirements anywhere between 2% and 7%. It is not always two, and it is not always seven, it definitely fluctuates. So you cannot hide the inaccuracy with fudge factors or schedule inflexibility factors, because the fudges would move around.

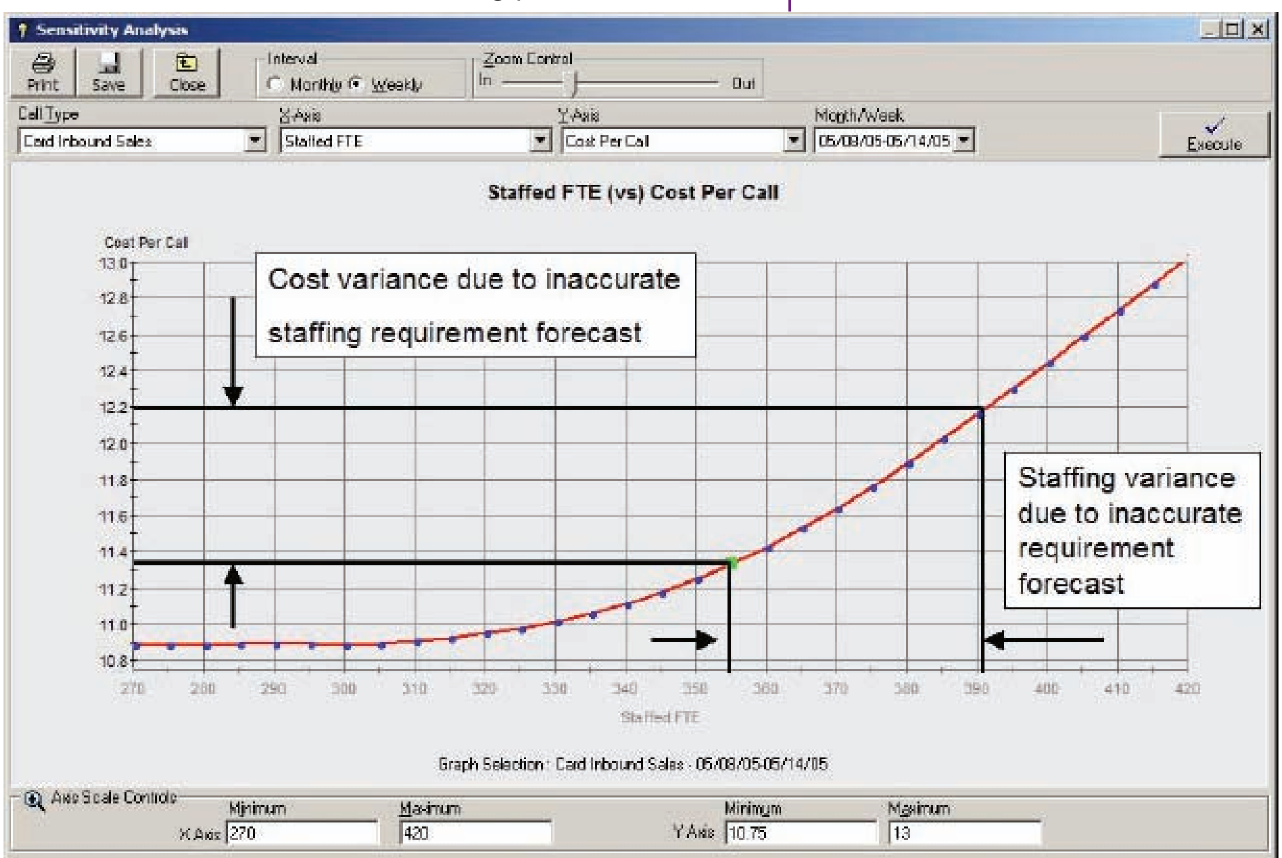
Figure 1: A comparison between Erlang, Simulation, and Actual center performance.

Figure 1 represents a head to head comparison between Average Speed of Answer predictions. It compares what actually occurred at a contact center, with what was simulated using Discrete-Event Simulation, versus an Erlang prediction. As you can see, Erlang always overstates the requirement for this contact center (and from our experience, every contact center).

**What does accuracy mean to your costs?**

Clearly, being off anywhere from two to seven percent in your staffing figures translates to large inaccuracies in your budget figures. While we can sometimes tolerate staffing inaccuracies as a "safety net," it certainly does not go over well with our friends over in finance. Figure 2 represents the trade-offs between staffing accuracy and cost per call. It is important to know this trade-off for every one of your centers.

Figure 2: Trade-off between cost per call and staffing forecast accuracy.




But, I would argue that there is another cost that may be more problematic. The extra "shrinkage" or lost time that becomes available when there is invisible, Erlang-derived, slop in your contact center network, breeds sloppiness in your center. Any time that you are consistently overstaffed, it means your center management will be able to slack off to some extent. Those inaccurate seven percent weeks are not conducive to running a tight ship.

**What does accuracy mean to what-if analysis?**

Throughout the planning cycle, what-if analysis is very important. These what-ifs are often used to make important strategic decisions, such as:

Should I close a center?
Should I offer this cross sell program?
Should I combine agent groups?
Should I outsource?
How much of my business should be outsourced?

Clearly, overstating your staffing requirements, may possibly lead you down the wrong path on a number of these questions. Looking back on Figure 2, ask yourself, “If I overstate my staffing requirements, and put 8% additional cost into my forecast, will we be more or less likely to outsource my center?” These are big, big, strategic decisions.

**Short Term is Different From Long Term**

Now I know that for tactical workforce management, this issue is very much lessened. Certainly, being off a few percent for the next 15 minutes does not pose the same risks as being off in your budget and long-term staff plans.

Most workforce managers I speak to have their own fudge factors, kept in the back of their heads, to help them manage this inaccuracy on a “day-of” basis. This intuition is one of the differentiators between an experienced workforce manager and a “newbie”.

**Does My Planning System Use an Erlang-Based Model or Discrete-Event Simulation?**

Simulation is one of the words that many folks can use to describe many methods of analysis. Indeed, an Erlang equation is itself, a form of simulation (impress your workforce management friends- Erlang is a “closed-form” equation, or a “continuous simulation”).

The type of simulation model that leads to the accuracy described in Figure 1 is called “Discrete-Event” simulation. What makes this form of simulation so powerful is that it can, and should, take into account behaviors of your customers, such as their patience on the phone and their handle times. You can create virtual, computerized customers in your Discrete-Event Simulation, that have the same statistical attributes that your real customers have. By getting these behaviors right, you can get the accuracy that we like to brag about.

Most of us use spreadsheets to do our strategic planning. A simple way to tell if you are using Discrete-Event Simulation or some Erlang derived equation is to check whether your tool outputs all the standard metrics: service level, average speed of answer, abandons, and occupancy. If your model does not explicitly, and accurately display your abandon rates, it is most likely an Erlang equation and not Discrete-Event Simulation.

Does your model first develop requirements? Discrete-Event Simulation works the other way- it presents to you the service expected given your handle times, staff levels, and call volumes. Erlang-based equations usually display requirements, given your service level goal, first. Usually, you’ll also have to provide to your spreadsheet some sort of schedule inflexibility factor to help fudge your Erlang equation.

**The Importance of Model Validation**

No matter what type of tool you use to help you with your strategic planning, it is important that you validate the accuracy of your tool. To do this, simply plug into your planning tool, say, for last week’s historical center performance, the number of staff you had, the call volume you received, and the handle time you saw. If the resulting service level, speed of answer, abandon level, and occupancy of your historical center performance doesn’t come very close to what your model says you should have achieved, then you have an accuracy issue.

Now, the most significant area that accuracy will help you is probably “bad decision avoidance”. When considering big changes, like outsourcing, or opening or closing centers, you want to make sure your analysis is spot on. But even in the course of putting together plain vanilla budget plans, being able to squeeze out five percent of your staffing costs is pretty significant. It could help save your company money. It could help save your company.

Accuracy matters. A lot.

Ric is a charter member of SWPP. Feel free to reach him at EDK@baybridgetech.com or (410) 224-9883.

###

## A CASE STUDY

**TELTRONICS**
***Client Success Story***

**Birmingham City Council**
*Makes a Connection with the OMNIWorks Contact Center Solution*

**History**
**Client:** Birmingham City Council
**Industry:** Government
**Solution:** Contact Center, Call Recording
Birmingham Council is the largest Local Authority in Europe with a history dating back to 1838. Birmingham is one of the most populous cities in the United Kingdom, and the council was designed to meet the needs of residents and anyone inquiring about Birmingham and its surrounding areas.

**The Challenge**
With so many different departments and functions operating under the Birmingham Local Authority, it is sometimes difficult to determine where a call should be directed based on one's judgment alone. In the past, Council callers were not always served in the most efficient manner, leading them to speak with multiple persons before reaching the appropriate agent.

**The Situation**
Several years ago, the Council outsourced both operations and staff for their Revenue and Benefits sectors to a third party supplier. The remaining departmental users were supported by a Hunt Group where distribution of phone calls proceed from a single telephone number to a group of phone lines, supplied as part of a cross-council Centrex telephone service. The Council realized to better serve a caller, implementing a complete contact center solution for departmental use was necessary.

**Why Teltronics?**
Working with its Centrex supplier, Telewest, the Council reviewed several applications and decided on Teltronics OMNIWorks Contact Center solution. The Council chose Teltronics OMNIWorks based on its skills-based routing capability, coordination with the Centrex telephony service, and price. Additionally, the Teltronics Interactive Voice Response (IVR) platform provided beneficial features such as dynamic messaging to callers in queues and multiple automated menu options, and the Teltronics Call Recording Solution monitored all traffic throughout the call center. Combined, these functions allowed each department to build and maintain services unique to their area of expertise.

**The Results**
Initially set up for 50 users in the IT Help Desk department, an additional 300 users in Social Care, Education, and Planning were connected after a successful 3-month trial.

**The Council experienced:**
• Successful connections to the best qualified agents
• Historical analysis of call patterns and call durations
• Implementation of a quality improvement process

"The benefits of the OMNIWorks Solution has prompted the Council to consider a future expansion to include multi-media platforms such as email, with a likely migration to call recording."



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# Call Center Times

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