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Contact Centers in the Age of SOA

By 2007, businesses of all sizes will already be a long way down the transformative path toward a Service-Oriented Architecture. Businesses justify their investment in SOA on cost savings and efficiencies that arise when Web-based standards and low-cost communications links destroy traditional silos that divide department from department, customers from the resources they seek and employees from the data or processes that make their lives easier. Yet the contact center will remain a showcase for the best practices that meld speech processing, call processing, workforce management and customer relationship management on an SOA-conformant infrastructure.

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Key Findings

Contact center managers, personnel and infrastructure have important roles to play as businesses make the transition from legacy systems to SOA-conformant architectures. Contact centers are where the bulk of real-time, telephone-based communications and transactions are carried out. It is also the place that has historically defined and implemented best practices for customer care and self-service.

- **SOA Transformation Is Incremental** – Few firms have the resources to "SOA-enable" their entire IT infrastructure. Therefore, they establish priorities based on business criteria, rather than purely technological considerations. Leverage and re-use of time-tested processes is the overall objective.

- **Customer Satisfaction Remains Key** – Migrating to an SOA is characterized as "The IT guy's problem." Yet the contact center and customer care staff are the historic keepers of customer satisfaction. This role takes on increasing importance as customer care goes multi-modal.

- **Solutions Must Leverage Existing Infrastructure** – Contact centers and self-service Web sites have showcased shared infrastructure for many years. By adhering to an "Open IP-Speech Architecture," Avaya, for example, helps companies provide consistent information, reinforcing the same image whether customers navigate to the Web site, send an e-mail, talk to a voice portal or chat with a live agent.

- **Efficiency Is Achieved by Separating Delivery Channels from Services** – Functional groups such as telecom, IT, marketing and HR can create services that are easily integrated into inbound or outbound voice channels or Web portals while voice- and data-network teams manage access methods and bandwidth.

- **It's Still a 'Hybrid' World** – In spite of all the attention that IP-telephony is garnering among enterprise telecom managers, the switched network – often referred to as TDM, for Time Division Multiplexing – will be with us until the end of the decade and beyond.

- **Contact Centers Are "Keepers" of the Best Practices** – Their personnel have lived in the hybrid world longest and were the first to conduct purpose-based, real-time interfaces between voice processing, call processing and computer resources to support real-time conversations and interactions.

- **Marrying SOA to the Contact Center Is No Longer Rocket Science** – The underlying standards, VoiceXML, Java (J2EE) and MRCP, are maturing nicely. Software and infrastructure providers are rapidly adding the planning and development tools, middleware, conduits and business intelligence components to ease the organizational as well as technical transition to an SOA.

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