Presence-Aware Tools for the Contact Center

By Ross Sedgewick

Presence-aware tools that help improve a contact center agent's performance are a relatively new capability. Simply put, presence-based software allows a user to view the real-time availability status and readiness to communicate of others – both within the contact center or across the enterprise. In the context of managing customer interactions, presence and collaboration capabilities can have a great impact on improving first-contact resolution rates.

Meeting the challenge of first-contact resolution continues to be one of the most important measures of a contact center or call handling group's effectiveness and efficiency. To quote Ken Landoline, VP and Principal Analyst at Saddletree Research: "Our experience in customer contact center operations confirms that the inability to reach the right person the first time is a major driver of customer dissatisfaction in the customer service/contact center environment. Additionally, in many cases, poor first call resolution performance has been shown to drive a significant share (in some cases, up to a third) of a call center's overall operational costs."

In some environments, a significant percentage of customer issues (or opportunities) go beyond the answering agent's skill-set, knowledge, authority or system access. Due to the complexity, urgency, sensitivity or dollar value of a given customer situation, additional assistance is required to drive closure. Customer or caller satisfaction can be greatly increased by avoiding cumbersome callbacks, unnecessary or blind call transfers or lengthy hold times while call takers physically search for an available party to assist in call resolution.

Where do presence-aware tools fit in? Beyond the contact center, there are many employees – knowledge workers, experts, back-office personnel, part-time agents and managers, for example – who must collaborate on customer issues or help take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Leveraging presence-aware tools, contact center agents can view the real-time presence and availability of peers, supervisors and experts across the company. With just a mouse click, experts can be consulted and even included on a call or other multimedia collaboration session.

The agent's ability to quickly see who is available to assist with immediate customer care and leverage the entire expertise of enterprise will undoubtedly be a major factor in efforts to increase first-call resolutions, improve customer satisfaction and maintain high levels of repeat business. These are all critical measurements in contact center process optimization. But, as a prerequisite for successfully implementing presence and collaboration tools, enterprises may need to address some real-world challenges and potential misperceptions.

1. "Engaging agents and employees with presence and collaboration tools sounds complicated and technical."

   All presence tools are not created equal. Focus on finding a non-intrusive solution that offers as much multimedia user status automation as possible. Ease-of-use, including intuitive, visual interfaces, is critical. This means color-coded users states and the ability to sort by availability, by media preferences and by department or job role – with just a mouse click. Initiating collaboration with other users and sharing real-time customer data should not take more than one or two mouse clicks.

2. “My employees will lose control of their privacy if their status is always visible to other users.”

   The key here is that presence tools are used to drive purpose-based accessibility, not to track employee behavior. Presence tools are preference-driven as well as availability-driven. No one, for example, wants to be interrupted when they are already in the middle of an important customer conversation. The goal of the presence tool should be to enhance process-driven access to users states, meaning that managers or supervisors decide the processes and situations that warrant using presence and collaboration tools. The tool’s monitoring capabilities can be restricted to only those who support those processes.

3. “Having everyone in the organization available to assist on customer calls will be disruptive and wreak havoc with productivity.”

   This misperception assumes a lack of business rules and processes for the use of presence and collaboration tools. Those who are responsible for taking ownership of first-call resolution must be clearly identified and trained on the ground rules that consider the immediate situation in terms of customer value or urgency – before involving enterprise users, second level support or other knowledge workers.

4. “Do I need a SIP-based IP solution to take advantage of new technologies like presence management?”

   Many companies assume that only SIP-based solutions will allow them to take advantage of enterprise-wide presence and collaboration tools. The reality is that SIP is compatible with, but not a prerequisite for implementing multimedia presence and collaboration. Flexible support for traditional, converged and existing IP multimedia platforms can be a key to finding the right solution.

5. “Doesn't presence and collaboration only work if people are available sitting at their desks?”

   It is often thought that presence and collaboration will only work if people are ready and available at their desks, waiting to be contacted. But, this doesn’t take into consideration that presence tools also interoperate with wireless media and mobile client devices, no matter where experts may roam across an enterprise campus or in remote offices. Wirelessly-connected handsets, PDA’s or laptops provide a basis for presence-based communications via multiple media – all ‘on the fly’.

Keeping these best practices ideas in mind when evaluating how presence tools can help your contact center’s performance may well overcome some of the initial skepticism or resistance in your organization – and shine a new light on becoming a more customer-engaged enterprise.

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