

Contact centre technology – help or hindrance?

Readers of this publication will be no strangers to the plethora of smart tools, “enablers” as their developers and marketers refer to them, available to call centres. Since Mr Erlang’s now famous algorithm was applied to the inception of what we now know as the “contact centre industry” the tools have become progressively smarter.

Spreadsheets are fast being overtaken by sophisticated forecasting, workforce planning and rostering software. Real-time monitoring of interactions coupled with sexy analysis tools are driving greater consistency in the behaviours of call answerers.

The convergence of traditional IT with the telecommunications technology that has long been the heart of call centres is opening wide the doors to corporate databases and arming call takers with better information, faster and more intuitively.

But is the pace of all that innovation reflected as you’d expect in better customer experience?

The sad truth of the matter is that the supplier community supporting this huge global industry, the pioneer of non face-to-face customer interaction, has served it particularly poorly. This seeming legion of innovative suppliers has, in fact, stunted the industry’s growth and development, at least in respect of the reason contact centres even exist; well-targeted customer (yes, the Joe on the end of the phone) experience.

As humans we look for the simple fix, see linear relationships where none exist, and seize on the first obvious and usually wrong solution. Suppliers use this to sell “solutions” that often make the overall problem worse – and it’s not “their” fault.

So why is it that with all this innovation and the advancement in capability now readily available, contact centres across the industry vertical spectrum still by and large fail to deliver on the customer experience promise?

It all goes back to the Erlang chap. The importance of the famous algorithm says it all. Call centres as a business organisational construct were (and are) based on a simple statistical model of random call arrival and the resources needed to service the resultant load pattern within some minimum performance standards. This is the “service level” – a target percentage of calls answered within a target time.

Just as the algorithm plots several factors in a balanced perspective delivering an outcome that is statistically sound, the optimisation of the organisation requires the balanced management of a set of competencies and disciplines. What we call the “call centre jigsaw puzzle”.

For those schooled in Peter Senge’s “Fifth

Discipline”, contact centres are a classical example of cause and effect loops in action. And the failure to appropriately balance factors, working from a holistic perspective, inevitably delivers unintended consequences. (and generally they’re consequences that we’d prefer to avoid...)

A good example is the “service level” discussed above. The general lack of understanding of the underlying causal factors of consistently good customer experience sees target service level often arbitrarily set at 80/20, meaning 80 per cent of calls are answered within 20 seconds. However a target 80/20 does not always reflect the nature of the interactions being managed by the centre and often times results in adverse customer behaviour.

You see, things are not linear – 40/20 is not twice as bad in terms of customer experience – it can be 10 times worse. Run the numbers and see. As humans we look for the simple fix, see linear relationships where none exist, and seize on the first obvious and

usually wrong solution. Suppliers use this to sell “solutions” that often make the overall problem worse – and it’s not “their” fault. This is where the unintended consequence really bites.


So what has this all got to do with the badly misaligned supplier community? Why are they somehow to blame for years of unfulfilled customer experience expectation?

Well, it’s probably got less to do with malicious intent, and a whole lot more to do with the very essence of innovation. Focus.

You see, the contact centre supplier community comprises the aforementioned plethora of creators and developers of very, very smart stuff. But that “stuff” is almost exclusively focused as point solutions to point problems. Parts of the business system that is in operation in the contact centre, but not focused on the cohesive operation of the whole. In this balanced system, a step change improvement in one area can ironically have a detrimental impact on the overall performance of the contact centre.



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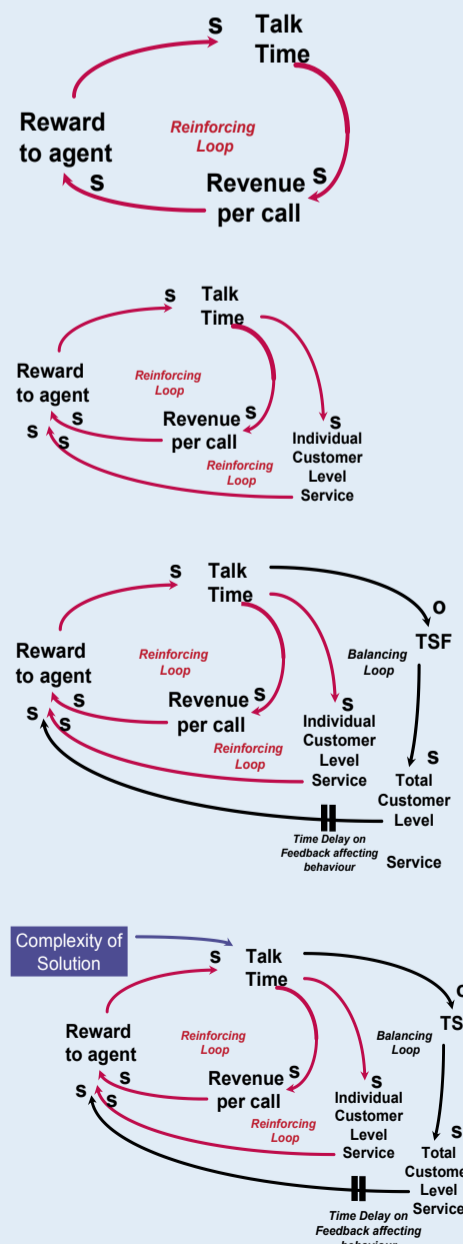
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EXAMPLE CAUSE AND EFFECT MODEL



The message for those responsible for improving customer experience in the contact centre setting is a simple one.

- Look at the operation from a holistic perspective before reacting to isolated pain points (e.g. “the spreadsheet can’t cope any more...!”).
- Deploy tools with this holistic perspective at top of mind.
- Focus attention on developing and maturing the management disciplines that glue the smart tools together as a whole jigsaw picture.
- Develop a scorecard that tracks the underlying causal factors of customer experience.
- Manage to it energetically and enthusiastically!

Key

- S** Behaviour moves in the same direction, as one goes up the other goes down
- O** Behaviour moves in the opposite direction, as one goes up the other goes down