

Delivering a Superior Customer Experience at the Lowest Possible Cost

**Cloud-based Contact Center Application
Integration Unlocks Time, Flexibility and Money**

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The logo for SerenoVA, featuring a blue circle with a white 'S' inside, followed by the word 'erenoVA' in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

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Introduction and Perspectives on Contact Center Ops and the Customer Experience (CX)

No subject seems to have garnered more industry attention today than how to drive a better customer experience. Brand value is often determined more than anything else by the loyalty we build (or destroy) based on the how the customer feels as a result of their experience(s) with our company. Well known industry icons often comment on how important a brand is to every business, and nearly always the CX is center stage.

“Your brand is what other people say about you when you are not in the room.”
Jeff Bezos, Amazon

Important to note that our customers have ‘experiences’ with us at many stages of the customer lifecycle, starting with the development and marketing of a product or service offer, pre-sales activities, then the sale, hopefully culminating in use of the product or service, and then followed by ongoing support and future sales. Every touch of the customer across this lifecycle contributes in some way to the overall CX.

Wikipedia defines CX as follows:

‘The product of an interaction between an organization and a customer over the duration of their relationship’

Contact centers have for a long time been a very important part of how we connect and communicate with our customers, outbound for sales or other outreach, and inbound largely for customer service and support. Contact center technology has morphed from the once dominant voice channel to the omni-channel capabilities that exist today including voice response systems, email, chat, IM, social media, self-service portals and more. Omni-channel capabilities are normally a collection of ‘applications’ each sub-optimized to that particular function such as email or chat. But as these new forms of communication and customer support have grown, so has the complexity of the people, processes and technology to enable and integrate them.

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Integration of these applications is not always prevalent, and therefore the disconnected interactions with customers must be connected in some way, or the customer experiences a choppy service experience. And let's not forget every interaction delivered via our contact centers become an 'experience' with our company driving a more holistic picture of what our brand stands for.

'Channel optimization', a buzz phrase in the industry, refers to what should be a fluid and sometimes time intensive process of optimizing which channels of communications to use and how to enable them both with technology, support and education of the people who use those same channels and deliver support and other customer communications through them. This channel optimization process is only the means to an end of achieving better customer support and delivering a better customer experience. Another industry buzz phrase is 'customer centricity', referring to a process of keeping the customer at the center of our service and support strategies and not always yielding to the most cost effective approach to service, instead optimizing to how the customer wants be served.

Both channel optimization and customer centricity processes are absolutely critical to delivering a continuously improving customer experience. Today technology presents both an obstacle and an opportunity for enabling fluid processes for channel optimization with customer centricity underpinning the optimization formula or approach. Business executives responsible for driving a better CX want and need to focus more time on their customers, and less time on the technology supporting service delivery. This whitepaper is for the business owner responsible for delivering a superior CX to develop an appreciation for cloud-based CCI as a way to increase competitiveness in delivering a superior CX at the lowest possible cost.

Technology Challenges of Integrating Today's CC Applications

While not many studies exist around how much time management spends on contact center technology (planning, budgeting, implementation, training and maintenance), the typical contact center manager knows it can be very time consuming, particularly during times of outages where the needed focus on customers turns to dealing with technology issues. Contact center technology has certainly improved over the past four decades – faster, more capabilities, better reliability, lower cost – the typical technology advancement curve. However, today's approach to architecting and deploying contact center technology solutions remains dominated by premise based hardware/software solutions. These decisions are all too often focused on acquiring best of breed components e.g. PBX, ACD, IVR, CRM, and so on with IT groups very involved or in many cases leading the decision process. Compatibility of these components with each other and existing equipment and applications is always an important buying consideration as well.

The picture in figure 1 shows a hypothetical but typical premise-based collection of components needed to assemble a fully function contact center environment.

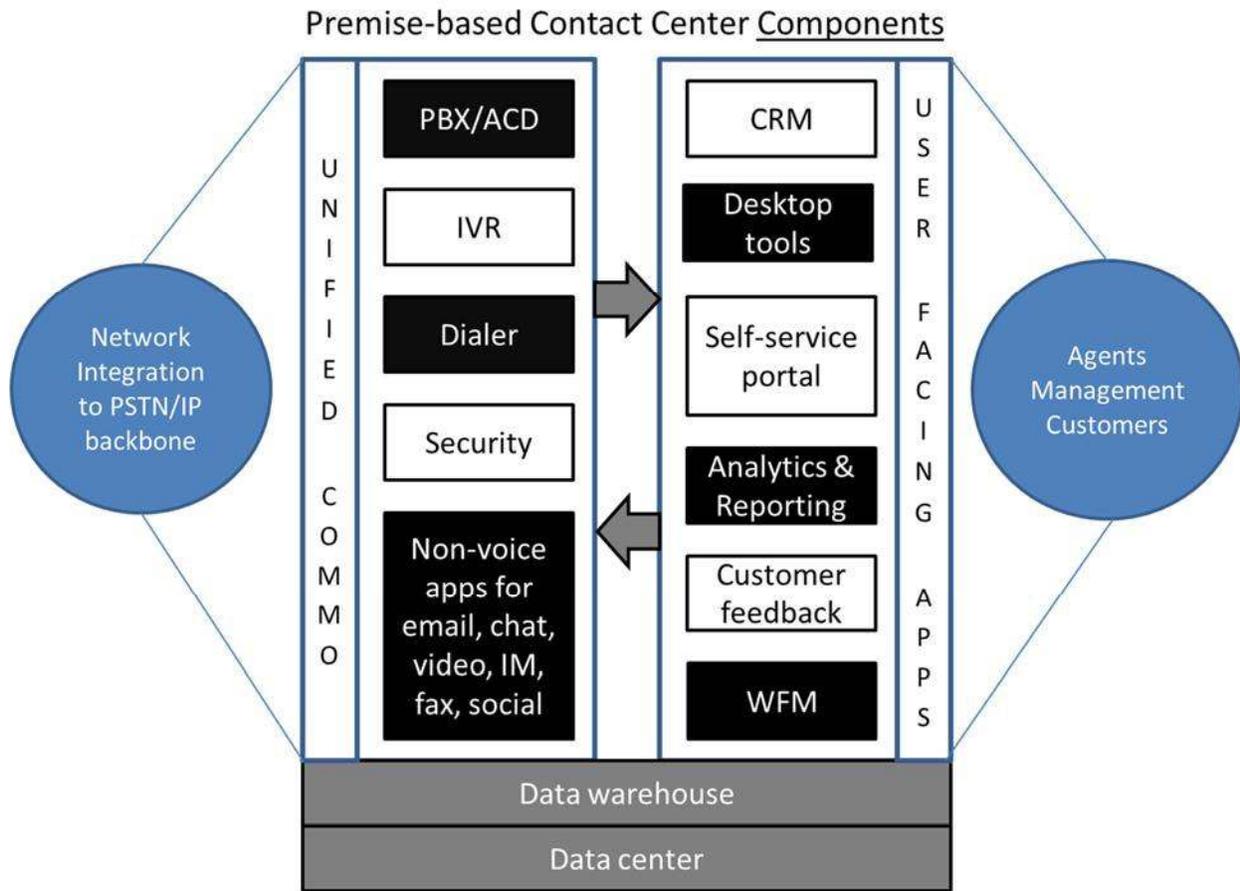


Figure 1

Hopefully obvious to the reader is the inherent complexity of:

- Architecting a solution that meets the needs of the business from a customer support point of view given how many components must fit together to achieve a desired outcome

- Finding/testing compatibility of the components – this becomes quite complex as different vendors introduce changes in hardware, software versions and patches, networking changes occur, etc.
- Addressing changes to call flows is similarly complex as CC management wishes to address changes in call handling procedures such as incorporation of a self-service portal, changes in automation to drive more incidents to automated environments, customer demands for change, and so on
- Aggregating a single view/history of what happens on a particular call(s) or interactions via other channels from a customer on a particular sales or service matter
- Aggregating information from all channels to perform timely analysis leading to management choices to intervene in service breakdowns, or support continuous improvement initiatives

Another organizational complexity is simply the reliance many contact centers have in internal IT support to maintain their premise based environments. Let's face it – IT shops get busy with a complex array of enterprise-wide issues to consider. But when the customer calls or communicates via whatever channel they may happen to prefer and the support function is not available, we all know what happens – escalations, abandoned calls, call-backs that drive-up volumes, and unhappy customers all as a result. Because there is such a unique set of requirements to support a contact center, many internal IT organizations are not prepared to support the demanding requirements of a 24x7 support center.

What today's contact center technology buying decisions often under-value is the increasing importance of making technology decisions that lead to a better CX, and taking into consideration the many dramatic improvements in price performance of premise based CCI solutions that should put less focus on hardware and IT matters, and more focus on the customer experience. And it's not just the hardware/software cost that is important – at least as important now are the cost of maintaining systems and for the truly CX focused company, the need to enable the ability to fluidly reconfigure our call flows, call handling processes, and channel optimization to meet continually shifting customer demands. Reducing reliance on an IT organization that often have many competing priorities is not criticism, but often a reality of our particular circumstances. Turning the CC components over to a 'specialist' can be a welcome solution to internal IT teams!

Today the power of integrated cloud-based contact center infrastructure (CCI) solutions can help you unlock time and greatly enhance flexibility for management and agents, and free up capital for more important investments in your company. True integrated cloud-based solutions also make data-based dynamic channel optimization possible by diverting management time once devoted to technology management, to better focus on contact center workflow, call handling and the overall customer experience.

Opportunities and Benefits

In the next whitepaper of this series, we will discuss the tremendous advantages in organizational agility enable by cloud-based CCI, particularly where continuous channel optimization is a design point for delivering continuous improvements in customer support strategies. For this whitepaper, our focus is on the simple power of application and component integration. If we bring these components closer together (integration), we:

- Let someone else worry about integration, compatibility and various security issues
- Capture all CX related data in one place for real-time use or analysis
- Enable a simpler interface for making changes to call flow and channel reconfiguration
- Enable feature upgrades more easily

By moving to the cloud, we also:

- Gain operational flexibility like the ability to more easily implement home agent technology and the ability to scale up and down to meet changing business demands
- Let someone else worry about reliability, systems uptime, many security issues and business continuity while reducing dependencies on internal IT
- Divert unproductive management time managing the complexities of a premise-based solution, to the CX
- Divert needed investment capital to other company needs (lower TCO and CAPEX)

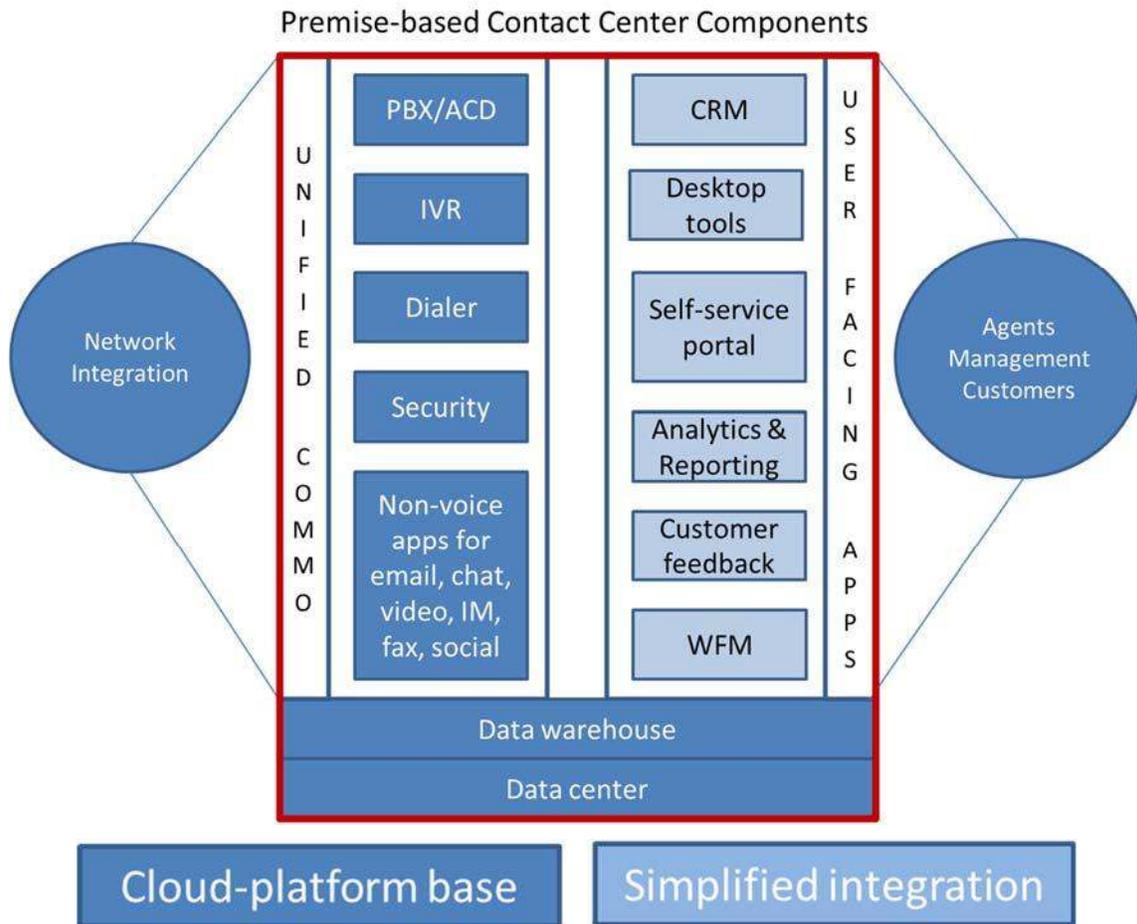


Figure 2

The cloud-platform base components can be delivered in a seamless way, driving integration benefits and accountability for support to a single place. This is unified communications at its best! Having all your customer interaction history in one place is a benefit that cannot be understated. The data integration challenges of a multi-application and systems environment interject time delays and data correlation difficulties that are just simpler in a cloud-based platform.

The better cloud solutions today provide pre-built connectors or APIs or both for interfacing your user facing application of choice. Some are even providing some of these capabilities in a native format.

To be clear, all complexity is not removed from the cloud-based CCI scenario. But a majority of the 'back room' IT related complexity issues are, and leaving more time for management to focus on what is really important and that's your customers.

Critical Success Factors and Best Practices

If there are so many benefits to cloud-based CCI, why aren't more companies making the transition? To be clear cloud growth is 4x that of premise-based solutions. But in raw numbers premise-based solutions for contact centers are still dominant. But we have seen many other functions make this leap, such as CRM tools, data storage options, and the like. Perhaps the biggest industry challenges for CCI moving to the cloud come down to this:

- Existing premise-based components have typically been purchased on somewhat different schedules and the financial considerations of which not fully depreciated assets to replace makes the decision more costly and complex to the enterprise – but the flip side of this is that this may always be the case so at some point it makes sense to consider writing off something if other exit alternatives are not applicable.
- Shifting organizational control of what have long been considered ITs' domain cannot be underestimated. At some level there is a desire perhaps to simplify and outsource, but that transition can be itself complex and downright scary for some. The flip side of this one is the business enablers for the business manager in cloud solutions now in our opinion outweigh the technical advantages, if any, of premise based solutions.

Getting some traction and making this shift requires a change of the internal conversation from an IT focus to that of the customer experience and the need to enable customer engagement flexibility. The CX and your brand value are what are really at stake. The economics have shifted enough whereby the business advantages/tradeoffs are now more compelling. Business managers must interject this thinking into the company planning and facilitate dialogue on additional dimensions of CCI decisions. Some key areas to focus are:

- Managers with CX responsibility spend too much time on IT support planning and not enough on managing the CX – the technology now exists to shift that balance
- Great CX requires the ability to fluidly monitor and adjust call flows to adapt to rapidly changing customer needs and feedback – premise based solutions limit this flexibility
- Great CX requires continuous channel optimization to accelerate customer centricity objectives (be more responsive to how the customer wants to be served) – cloud-based CCI makes channel optimization easier

Closing comments

Contact centers will continue to be a very important part of how we connect and communicate with our customers, outbound for sales or other outreach, and inbound largely for customer service and support. The power of integrated cloud-based contact center infrastructure (CCI)

solutions can help you unlock time and greatly enhance flexibility for management and agents, and free up capital for more important investments in your company. True integrated cloud-based solutions also make data-based dynamic channel optimization possible by diverting management time once devoted to technology management, to better focus on contact center workflow, call handling and the overall customer experience delivered at the lowest possible cost.

The next whitepaper in our series will focus on business agility gained with cloud-based CCI. Stay tuned!

About the Author

With nearly 40 years of IT experiences including 18 years with IBM serving IT departments, and 7 years at Convergys, one of the world's largest call center outsourcing companies, Randy Mysliviec now leads RTM Consulting and the Resource Management Institute. Acknowledged by industry sources as an expert in Global Resource Management (GRM) and author of the Just-in-Time Resourcing® brand of solutions, Randy advises multi-national companies with the complex challenge of operating IT services teams serving the global market.

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