Four Journeys, One Destination:
Customer Experience Excellence

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The Cloud Contact Center Technology Innovation Journey

The march of enterprise applications to the cloud dates back to before the year 2000. However, in the contact center, the move to the cloud has been slower - and for a good reason. Voice is real-time, and for many years technology was not yet available to support high-quality voice reliably and securely from the cloud.

Beginning about ten years ago, that started to change. Technical standards like Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) and WebRTC (Web Real-Time Communication), and the continual efforts to improve upon them, have been key in perfecting the cloud delivery of voice interactions to contact centers.

More recently, the need to seamlessly integrate digital interaction choices for consumers has intensified in importance. Today, digital choices are not just email and webchat. Consumers have, and want to use, 30-plus social and mobile-based messaging channels like Facebook Messenger or Twitter.

In just the last three years, the inclusion of cloud contact center alternatives in just about every new contact center decision became the norm. Since then, thousands of companies, large and small, have chosen cloud contact center solutions every year. Simultaneously, the proportion of businesses choosing traditional premises solutions has continued to decline year over year. The direction of change is clear.

This paper will highlight the experiences of four organizations who have chosen to move their contact centers to the cloud. The factors that drove each to initiate a change in their contact center solution is unique. But there are also common elements in each company's story, in the benefits they have derived since implementation and their plans for adding functionality in the future.

Resiliency: Not Just a Buzzword in Customer Service

In the early days of contact center technology (think the 1980s and 1990s) one of the most important enterprise-class system attributes was redundancy. Entire contact center platform decisions were often made as much on the subject of resiliency and reliability as feature/function. Then, as now, contact centers were a vital component of a business's well-being. In support of marketing and sales, an outage in the call center would mean loss of revenue. Revenue loss was most likely to happen in businesses where consumer product or service substitutes are readily available, e.g., hotels and airlines.

Creating contact center resiliency in a premises system world involves redundancy. Redundancy requires the physical duplication of critical components. If that sounds expensive, you are right. It is. While vendors may offer discounts for redundant components, there is still a high cost in procuring, housing, and maintaining the multiple servers required.

Even when there is no direct revenue loss, outages impact customer confidence in a company's brand. Contact center downtime is the customer experience equivalent of the frustratingly vague "Back in 10 Minutes" sign hanging in a shop window. Companies hope that consumers are resilient to these outages, but customers will re-evaluate their choices when outages become too frequent.

A third critical element in customer care delivery is the agent, customer service representative, or whatever the title is of the people working in the contact center. Psychological resilience refers to the ability to, mentally or emotionally, cope with a crisis and return to pre-crisis status quickly. When the contact center has suffered an outage, the agent is on the front line, handling customers' discontent.

As told by several of the organizations interviewed for this paper, frequent outages were often a contributing factor in moving to the cloud. And while there can be cloud as well as premises system service disruption, most cloud users will agree that cloud outages are short, typically measured in minutes or hours. With premises solutions, obtaining the required parts and service partners to install them is more often measured in hours or days.

Agility and Innovation

It has never been true that great customer experience is just about having agents available to answer the phone when a customer calls. In the age of Amazon Prime, Uber and Uber Eats, however, the bar is constantly being raised. Cloud-first companies like these and others are setting customer service expectations for all industries.

The global pandemic of 2020 certainly required information technology resiliency but companies that faired best also demonstrated agility and innovation. Local rules and regulations, personnel conditions and supply chain issues were, and in many cases continue to be, changing daily. The company stories told here will demonstrate how cloud contact center solutions helped these businesses continue to not only reliably serve customers, but pivot quickly when necessary.

Vivint Solar: Going Cloud, the Second Time Around

Vivint Solar is the second-largest full-service residential solar provider in the United States. The company designs and installs solar energy systems for homeowners and offers monitoring and maintenance services. With 7,500 employees across 26 states and customers throughout the country, both employee and customer communications are key to the firm's successful operation.

False Start

Starting in 2011, Vivint Solar was incubated inside a larger sister company and shared its existing communications system. From a unified communications (UC) perspective, the company was operating a dated version of a legacy premises system. Vivint Solar had deployed an early cloud predictive dialing solution for outbound dialing, one typically used by small telemarketing businesses. Mike Hincks, Director of IT Infrastructure for Vivint Solar, explains, "We had a team of 18 people managing eight or nine collaboration systems. And, we still had high costs, due to the maintenance contracts."

In 2014, Vivint Solar split off as an independent firm. The separation from the sister company allowed the Vivint Solar IT department to re-evaluate their communications solutions, leading to a five-year return on investment (ROI) analysis to understand the costs and benefits of moving communications to the cloud.

In the first quarter of 2015, the company began, as Hincks puts it, their "adventure of moving to the cloud." In addition to communications, Vivint Solar was looking to move email and their productivity suite to the cloud.

The choice of productivity suite later factored into their unified communications decision. Vivint Solar chose a "small, attractive" startup with a reputation for being tightly integrated with the productivity suite. "We thought, naively at the time, that every company born in the cloud - with public cloud as the back end - was created equal," said Hincks.

Not All Clouds Are Created Equal
"We thought, naively at the time, that every company born in the cloud - with public cloud as the back end - was created equal."

Vivint Solar quickly realized they had a problem when it started having outages. As a small startup, the chosen solution "didn't have the capital to invest in things as simple as redundancy," explained Hincks. The company also didn't have a full suite of communications solutions. Promised roadmap items were often not delivered.

From the contact center perspective, the chosen company said it had contact center functionality. But, as Hincks explained, while they had a contact center SKU, "they didn't understand the whole WFO (workforce optimization) world," according to Hincks. They did not have partnerships with WFO companies. As a result, Vivint Solar found itself running one cloud contact center for inbound calls and another for outbound.

By the end of 2017, Vivint Solar found itself running an outage-prone unified communications system, two contact center solutions, and multiple conferencing products – a piecemeal solution of eight vendors for its collaboration needs. It was time for another change.

A New Cloud Beginning

Industry analysts report how much more effective a company is and how much they can save by truly having unified communications. Vivint Solar realized it wasn't accruing those advantages because its communications solutions were so disparate.

As Vivint Solar began its second round of going to the cloud, Hincks explained, one thing that changed was the importance of the financial stability of the firms that were being considered, as well as the size of the companies.

Had it recently gone through bankruptcy? Was it likely to be acquired? That's where Cisco Webex started to jump to the top of the list. Cisco is financially stable, and Vivint Solar didn't consider Cisco to be a target for acquisition. Cisco had the entire suite of collaboration and contact center products, so instead of having eight or nine technologies, Vivint Solar could have one company that could provide everything.

Downtime is Costly

"The cost of downtime is very costly. With 250,000 customers, if they can't get a hold of us, or we have sales rep sitting in a home that can't get ahold of the contact center, that can cost us a lot of money."

Vivint Solar built and executed on a strategy to move to a single enterprise communications platform, Cisco Webex. Vivint Solar is now using Webex Teams company-wide, which means that contact center agents in Utah, the Philippines, and Bogota, Columbia, can collaborate with speed. Vivint Solar found this to be particularly important as they adjusted in early 2020 to adhere to shelter in place orders around the world.

Are Cisco solutions sometimes higher priced than those from cloud startups? Vivint Solar recognizes that this is the case. But, as Hincks explained, "The cost of downtime is also very costly. With 250,000 customers, if they can't get a hold of us, or we have sales rep sitting in a home that can't get ahold of the contact center, that can cost us a lot of money."

AFMC: Time to Replace? Time for Cloud

AFMC is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Little Rock, Arkansas, dedicated to working with beneficiaries and health care providers in all settings to improve overall health and consumers' experience of medical care while reducing health care costs. AFMC is an established, trusted partner in private, state, and federally led payment innovations by Medicare, Medicaid, and commercial payers.

Resource Intensive Premises System

In 2018 AFMC found itself with a ten-year-old enterprise communications system – being used for both unified communications and the contact center - that was no longer able to meet the organization's requirements. When asked why AFMC decided to begin looking for an alternative solution, Nathan Ray, AFMC's current Chief Business Officer and Chief Technology Officer in 2018 replied, "Number one, it was very, very IT (information technology) resource intensive."

As Ray explained, he had one employee "working around the clock" keeping the legacy going, but often that was not enough. Ray pointed out that it was difficult to find IT staff who had the skillset to support the aged system.

AFMC resorted to contracting some of its maintenance work to a value-added reseller (VAR) of the vendor, "but it was incredibly expensive," reports Ray.

Anytime AFMC had a major issue, they would have to call in the VAR to assign resources, and sometimes they could help, and then sometimes they could not. Then the VAR would have to go to the system vendor, and things became overly complicated. "I'd have three tiers of support between my staff, the VAR and (the vendor) to deal with any kind of issue," Ray realized the current system was not a sustainable model for AFMC.

Cure for Seasonality

While it might seem that healthcare is something that has constant demand, in reality, businesses like AFMC have seasonality bursts just like many other industries. One driver of that seasonality is enrollment periods. With several healthcare plans being administered by the organization, for AFMC, that typically means multiple periods through the year where their volumes will explode for a few weeks but then revert to a much lower level.

The complexity of licensing was another pain point with the existing premises deployment. "Every time I had to add an agent, I would have to buy a whole suite of licenses (e.g., agent, reporting, Salesforce connector licenses), Ray explained. And it was incredibly expensive. Even if I needed that agent for just three or four months to do open enrollment for one of our customers, I would still have to pay for a year's worth of licenses."

Legacy System Incredibly Expensive
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The lack of functionality to easily support work from home was another factor in AFMC's decision to replace its legacy premises enterprise communications system. "We had employees working remotely throughout the state (in AFMC locations), but we really needed the ability to work from home. Our on-premises solution just did not offer me that type of flexibility," explained Ray. "Little did I know what was in store for us a few years later with the pandemic."

A Fully Integrated Solution, in the Cloud

AFMC's on-premises vendor served not just the contact center but also provided telephony services for non-contact center employees, many additional company employees. After a thorough procurement process, in 2018, AFMC chose to deploy Webex Contact Center and Webex Calling.

Allow Us to Work from Home
"We decided to go with a fully integrated solution that is cloud-based, that would allow us to work from home if we ever needed to."

Like other companies that made their decision to move to the cloud before the radical work from home requirements that 2020 brought, it wasn't just luck. While AFMC never expected for every employee to be working from home for months on end, they did realize that there might be times or types of employees or job roles that would be best filled by supporting remote work. They knew that choosing a cloud solution would ensure that.

In March of 2020, Ray reports that AFMC was able to seamlessly make the decision to have all employees work from home. In the summer of 2020, AFMC added the role of contact tracing contractor to the work they are doing for the state of Arkansas, doubling the size of the company. Ray reports, "Most of those 350 new employees are on the Cisco Webex solution, most of them on Webex Contact Center." Initially, those agents are working on voice calls, but the addition of email and chat interaction functionality is planned in a few months.

OceanX: Early Cloud Decision Delivers Continuous Innovation

OCEANX OceanX, L.L.C. is a technology platform company delivering a turnkey solution for selling physical goods directly through subscriptions and memberships. The company's all-in-one commerce platforms enable great brands and passionate entrepreneurs to sell goods directly to the consumer while providing real-time data to truly own the customer relationship.

From Network Percent Allocation to Skills-based Routing, From Voice to Omnichannel

OceanX describes itself as offering three pillars of technology: modern fulfillment, business intelligence, and customer care. In 2009, customer care involved a carrier-based routing system to allocate calls to internal and outsourced contact centers on a percentage basis. The reason the company began investigating a new solution can be attributed to another of the pillars, business intelligence.

Before OceanX's move to the cloud, the premises automatic call distributor (ACD) at each site distributed calls received from the network allocation scheme to agents, typically using a first-in, first-out system. OceanX was dependent on each contact center site to send call information to be combined and analyzed at a company level. Because it was typically only sent daily and required time to process, it was impossible to have the real-time data often required for real-time decision making.

OceanX chose a solution that has evolved into the Cisco Webex Contact Center solution. The real-time data that was impossible to have with the previous network routing and premises contact center systems is now an integral part of running OceanX customer care. DeAnna Woody, Vice President, Contact Center Operations at OceanX, reported that while they have support from Cisco when they need it, they seldom need it. "We can build all the routing. We do all of our staffing and forecasting based on historical data. When we launch a new client, we don't have to wait for someone else. We can go right into the platform and build everything out the way the client needs it."

> ### Next Best Available Agent
>
> *"We were able to bring all of our routing in-house, our own single platform system. All of the agents are logged in to that one system, and it just sends calls to the next best available agent."*

When the cloud contact center solution was first installed in 2009, Woody said more than 95% of the interactions handled by the company were voice. Since then, OceanX has added digital channels, email, and chat, and has plans to add SMS and social media interaction types to their Webex Contact Center deployment later in 2020.

New Contact Centers in New Countries? No Problem

> ### No Downtime
>
> *"From a COVID perspective, I'm so glad we were not on-premises because we wouldn't have been able to get our brands and clients back up and going as quickly as we did."*

With the new system, OceanX can use a single Cisco contact center platform across both its internal and outsourced contact centers, 1,000 agents in 10 globally dispersed locations. The ability to quickly provision agents to work from home was put to the test in 2020 when the global pandemic hit.

Quarantine procedures in the Philippines – where many of OceanX's outsourced agents work – resulted in a decreased number of agents working. Woody recounts, "We were able to set up sites in Jamaica and Guatemala within weeks. We had to hire and train agents, but it would have been just a day from a technology perspective. All it meant was providing a login."

McGee-Smith
Analytics

Emerging Application Called for Modern Technology

Global CX BPO is a multi-billion-dollar company with customer experience business processing outsourcing (BPO) as of one of its service/market offerings. The company has been in business for over 100 years. (Preferring anonymity, we will refer to them here as Global CX BPO.) While Global CX BPO, as a practice, is vendor-agnostic, the team there has worked with the complete portfolio of collaboration and customer experience solutions since Cisco first entered the contact center market in 1999, with the acquisition of GeoTel.

Contact Center Component for Contact Tracing

With many state, local, and federal government clients, in March of 2020, Global CX BPO quickly understood the need for and developed a fully integrated contact center and contact tracing program. In operation, the application would need to be connected to a contact center solution that could readily integrate with Salesforce, which would be used to house the application data. Initially, the contact center would be used to both make outbound calls and received inbound follow-up calls from those contacted.

Because of the requirement of so many government agencies to rapidly deploy contact tracing and allow agents to work from home, Global CX BPO sought to integrate with a robust, yet easy-to-learn contact center software solution. With tight timeframes – in some cases, customers required deployments in terms of days and not weeks or months - Global CX BPO was looking for a solution that didn't require any kind of hardware or a long deployment process.

But Global CX BPO also wanted a fully-featured solution, one that they would be able to use as they extend the contact tracing application to incorporate features like Google Contact Center Artificial Intelligence (Google CCAI) and SMS between the contact center and citizens. After looking at the solutions of several vendors they work with, Global CX BPO chose Webex Contact Center Enterprise.

First Deployment: US State Government

Early in the spring of 2020, Global CX BPO's integrated contact center tracing and Webex Contact Center Enterprise solution was ready for deployment for their first customer, a state government. Global CX BPO reports they successfully deployed the application for 450 initial agents in four days.

Speed Required - and Delivered

…deployed the application for 450 initial agents in four days

The contact tracing application developers at Global CX BPO understood from the outset is that, for the most part, contact tracers would be working on laptops. Unlike a modern contact center, where agents typically work with two large monitors, contact tracers would probably work with a 13- or 14-inch screen. Global CX BPO didn't want tracers to be forced to jump from screen to screen. Global CX BPO said that one of the major benefits of Webex Contact Center Enterprise was the ability to give agents a simplified user interface. The solution provides a so-called single pane of glass, combining contact center agent controls with the BPO's SFDC contact tracing application.

Another of the many features that Global CX BPO highlights as key in their selection of Webex Contact Center Enterprise was the reporting solution. It allows Global CX BPO to create either a custom report definition or use one of the existing templates to identify the metrics required and simply have scheduled reports to go out to the state as needed.

When asked how well its inaugural state client has received the contact tracing solution, Global CX BPO replied that "the state is very happy." Global CX BPO went on to say that the system has had no major issues, supporting all the expected and unanticipated data needs of the state. Global CX BPO is happy that Webex Contact Center Enterprise provided the agility they needed, that it "really delivered."

Four Journeys, One Destination: CX Excellence

While technology has changed how consumers shop or consume services, the need to interact with the companies and organizations that supply goods and services is universal. And, despite the often-heavy involvement of the information technology department, the focus of migration to the cloud for contact center software is not on technology, but on customer experience. One can think of the migration to the cloud as keeping abreast of technology for the *customer's* sake, something each of the companies discussed here is accomplishing by upgrading their contact center software.

While their final destination may have been the same, Cisco Webex Contact Center solutions, the four companies discussed here took quite different paths.

Journey 1: Replace First Generation Cloud Point Solutions with Enterprise-Grade Cloud Suite

Vivint Solar recognized in 2014 that continuing to spend millions of dollars to support aging premises equipment was not a long-term solution. They deployed a solution from a sexy startup. They quickly found the company unable to support the level of service required by a firm with thousands of employees and hundreds of thousands of customers. They spent a few years suffering frequent outages and the need to deploy additional applications to fill functionality gaps.

Key in their selection when they chose the Cisco Webex platform, including Cisco Webex Contact Center, was financial stability. This would help ensure that roadmap capabilities would be funded and that the company would not suddenly be acquired, with service-impacting consequences. Another priority was a single solution that could meet today's collaboration and contact center requirements and future needs.

Journey 2: Abandon Aging UC/CC Premises Solution for Cloud Collaboration Platform

Resource-intensive was also a key factor in **AFMC**'s decision to re-evaluate its communications infrastructure. Not only were many IT hours dedicated to system maintenance, but the proprietary nature of the legacy premises solution made it difficult to find appropriately trained employees locally.

AFMC replaced a combined PBX/call center solution with a complete collaboration suite that includes Webex Contact Center. In March of 2020, that decision enabled the company to make an early and seamlessly executed decision to move its employees to work from home. When the need to double the size of the firm to support contact tracing requirements came in the summer of 2020, AFMC was able to easily add the hundreds of agents required.

Journey 3: Continually Innovate CX with Cloud

As an early adopter of cloud contact center technology, in 2009, **OceanX** has ridden the wave of increased functionality and innovation delivered via the cloud for over a decade. Today, with approximately 1,000 agents in 10 countries around the world, when the 2020 pandemic hit, they were able to quickly provision agents to work from home, even in new countries, seamlessly.

Initially, a voice-only call center, in keeping with increased demand from consumers for digital options, email and web chat support were later added. OceanX plans to extend its Webex Contact Center deployment digital engagement channels to include SMS and social media in the second half of 2020.

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Analytics

Journey 4: Cap Premises Investments to Innovate and Grow in the Cloud

Companies that have consistently maintained and upgraded their contact center solutions often plan a gradual move to a cloud-based solution. In the case of **Global CX BPO**, the need to support an emerging application, contact tracing, led to the choice of Cisco's most advanced enterprise cloud contact center, Webex Contact Center Enterprise.

There will potentially be a significant number of agents using the application and the need to support contact tracers both at home and on mobile devices in areas of the world with limited broadband infrastructure. Global CX BPO knew that cloud was the right answer, but they also understood that they required a solution that would integrate with the required CRM application and deliver real-time data and analytics.

About Cisco Webex

Cisco helps you meet less, connect more, and get stuff done – so your employees can thrive in today's distributed work environment. Our Webex portfolio delivers the most complete collaboration suite of cloud calling, meetings, team collaboration and contact center solutions with world-class devices and headsets.

Cisco is a global leader in contact centers, delivering the most complete contact center portfolio. Our cloud contact center portfolio is on the open and flexible Webex Platform for Contact Center, which integrates advanced cloud services such as AI capabilities, enterprise-grade cloud calling, data analytics, workforce optimization, CRM, and experience management applications. Our Webex Contact Center solution is an omni-channel CCaaS for any size contact center that delivers enriched customer journeys powered by the cloud and data intelligence, driving faster and more personalized customer experiences. Discover more on Cisco.com and follow us on Twitter at @CiscoCollab.

About McGee-Smith Analytics

Sheila McGee-Smith, the founder and principal analyst at McGee-Smith Analytics, is a leading customer experience industry analyst and strategic consultant with a proven track record in new product development, competitive assessment, market research, and sales strategies for customer care solutions and services. Her insight helps enterprises and solution providers develop strategies to meet the escalating demands of today's consumer and business customers. She is the contact center track chair for Enterprise Connect, and her views on the market can regularly be found on NoJitter.com and through her Twitter feed @mcgeesmith.