

VoIP contact centre generates savings and versatility

In a fast developing market, contact centre outsourcer Vertex is keeping ahead of the pack by offering innovative solutions. Voice over IP is one strategy that is bringing on the benefits..

Summary

Vertex, with an annual turnover of £300m, has proved more adept than most at providing customer-focused outsourcing solutions with tangible benefits. The UK industry leader aims to offer leading-edge ICT at a competitive price. And the solution that it provides has to be capable of being seamlessly integrated with both client and future technologies.

It needed a single supplier that could meet all its contact centre technology procurement requirements, and it approached BT. BT's proposed consolidating the company's sites into one virtual contact centre that includes a Nortel Networks Meridian 1 platform with Symposium application software, Nortel Networks Integrated Voice Response, Meridian Remote Office and Voice over IP.

In association with
Vertex

Background

The majority of businesses would agree that contact centre outsourcing is the most efficient customer relationship management strategy available to corporations - which might explain the fact that three-quarters of Fortune 500 companies are currently trying to divest themselves of the running of some aspect of their business support services.

It is also fast developing. In the UK alone, between 1999 and 2002, the value of the outsourced contact centre market jumped from £405m to £1bn, or 30% of the European market. There are around 27,000 UK outsourced agent positions.

Little wonder then that the need to keep ahead of the competition is paramount. And Vertex, with an annual turnover of £300m, has proved more adept than most at providing customer-focused outsourcing solutions with tangible benefits. It is the UK industry leader, working in partnership with its clients to develop and implement web-integrated CRM contact centres.

Challenge

At a minimum Vertex aims to offer leading-edge information and communications technology at a competitive price. But it's not as straightforward as that.

Says General Manager, Operational Solutions for Vertex David Clarke: "Every time we win a new piece of business it inevitably comes with some technology. We have to link into a client's IT structure, and run their applications. We need to be able to bring software and hardware into our network quickly, easily, and seamlessly, so that from day one of working with a new client, they and their customers get the same or better levels of service." The integration of technology, in other words, is vitally important.

In February 2001 Vertex teamed up with Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, with a view to responding to increasing demand for business process outsourcing (BPO). Vertex then began the search for a flexible solution to allow the integration of client and future technologies.

It wanted a single supplier that could meet its future contact centre technology procurement requirements, typically geared toward enabling a virtual callhandling environment, where enquiries could be channelled across multiple contact centres or to individuals with particular skills.

Solution

After a comprehensive review of available options, Vertex opted for a solution put forward by BT and its partner Nortel Networks to consolidate the bulk of the company's sites into one virtual contact centre.

Working closely with BT, Vertex selected the Nortel Networks Meridian 1 platform with Symposium application software, Nortel Networks Integrated Voice Response and Meridian Remote Office. This solution, spread across eight sites in the UK, allows more than 4,000 Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) to operate seamlessly and to provide a faster, more efficient service to Vertex's clients.

BT Account Manager, John Bridge, says: "BT enjoys a close working relationship with Vertex. We get involved in Vertex's new business presentations as its technology partner, and together develop and present innovative technology solutions to prospective clients."

One such innovation has seen Vertex become among the first outsourcers in the UK to establish a Voice over Internet Protocol-enabled contact centre.

Says Andy Scott, Head of Telephony at Vertex: "We needed to fit out a contact centre building in Whitehaven, Cumbria. We looked closely at the relative costs of a Meridian or VoIP solution. VoIP was not only more cost effective, it gave us the ability to serve voice and data down the same cable. Homeworkers in particular benefit from this as there is no degradation in service. The voice and data packets are sent down a single BT ISDN line. Essentially, each telephone and computer terminal is able to accept voice and data down the one line."

Results

A major advantage of VoIP is that it avoids the tolls charged by an ordinary telephone service. Couple this with the fact that, through a process of consolidation, contact centres can realise between 10% and 30% savings on operational costs, and the benefits for clients are clear.

VoIP also enables Vertex to run its 250-seat Whitehaven centre as a satellite from its main operation at Lingley Mere, some 150 miles away.

"VoIP allows us to control, manage and monitor the new centre as if it were simply another floor of our main building," says Scott. "Each desk at Whitehaven is an extension of Lingley Mere; the set-up there only requires one support person, and by not having a 'tin box' in the comms room we have comfortably fitted in eight more CSRs."

Says Vertex's Clarke: "I believe our network and ability to link our sites into one virtual contact centre give us a strong competitive edge. Our vision is really paying off. We can actually make a client's operations more cost effective."

Technical information

VoIP reduces the cost of moving key staff by around £125

Any switch manufactured in the past few years had IP capability built into it. In the case of the Nortel Meridian, any switch older than that can be upgraded to the current spec (release 25).

There are four fundamental ways of enabling VoIP:

- IP gateways to the WAN
- IP Line Card to the LAN
- Converged mini-PBX for branch offices
- Remote office link to your main IP switch

By Plugging an ITG card on the trunk side of your switch, voice can be carried as IP packets over a data WAN link between two Meridians, providing full feature transparency between the sites. Each ITG trunk card supports up to 24 simultaneous voice calls.

Cost savings can be significant by totally eliminating toll charges on calls between your sites and, of course, there is no need to pay for a leased line.

By installing an IP card on the line side of your PBX, you can easily add an integrated voice and data LAN, with a host of advanced IP applications.

VoIP across the LAN gives you the flexibility to plug IP handsets, PC softphones, and applications like the Symposium Call Centre Server and the unified messaging Call Pilot Server anywhere on the network.

There are potential cost savings associated with this flexibility. Research carried out on behalf of Nortel revealed that there were administration costs of £125 every time someone moved desk or location within the organisation and needed to take their phone number with them.

Of course, this potential saving has to be set against the significant cost of replacing existing digital handsets with IP phones.



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