The Reinvention of Quality Monitoring

By Oscar Alban, Principal Global Market Consultant, Witness Systems

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1. Overview

For more than 30 years, call centers have used quality monitoring to ensure that their agents handle customer interactions properly. Although traditional quality monitoring has served enterprises well in the past, it falls short in today's internet-enabled business world, where customer demands — and defections — are necessitating a new way of doing business. This paper addresses the shortfalls of traditional quality monitoring and discusses how quality monitoring is being reinvented to meet the needs of successful enterprises now and in the future.

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2. Quality Monitoring's Slow Evolution

Ever since the first call center was established by the airline industry over 30 years ago, quality monitoring has existed to provide insight into the performance of agents and the efficiency with which they handle customer interactions.

Initially implemented by managers who wanted to make sure that their agents were handling customer inquiries properly, early quality monitoring was performed manually. Supervisors quite literally picked up the phone, dialed an agent's extension, and listened in to the conversation in real-time. This was a true, multi-tasking environment in which the supervisor or manager frantically took notes while listening to an agent, writing them down in longhand onto a legal pad. Feedback was provided to agents only sporadically.

Over time, improvements were instituted. One of the earliest enhancements occurred when hand-held tape recorders were connected to the supervisor's phone to record conversations. This enabled the supervisor to record calls while he or she attended to other tasks.

Although clever, this idea had a significant problem: The supervisor could dial in to only one extension at a time, switch on the tape recorder, and hope that it would record an actual customer interaction. In practice, this proved to be a hit-or-miss

process at best. Often, the supervisor found that the recorder had captured the agent's personal calls, or portions of calls, or — in the event that the agent had received no calls whatsoever — the recorder captured nothing but "air."

The next improvement occurred when hand-held recording technology arrived on the market. It was voice activated, which enabled it to record only when there was conversation on the line. This proved to be a significant time-saver for supervisors as they listened to calls. At approximately the same time, the official "call evaluation form" was created. Typically, this form addressed all parts of the call, which was tidily segmented into the opening, discovery, overcoming objections, product/service presentation, and the close. The form proved so successful that some call centers went to extremes, taking this simple, effective form and expanding it into a complex piece of art containing more than 50 sections that dissected a call in every way possible.

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3. Dynamic New Environment

Although quality monitoring has always been of interest to contact centers, it has become a critical task today due to three key drivers:
- Cost Control Pressures
- Executive Focus on Revenue and Profit
- Customer Expectations

More than ever before, these drivers are forcing contact centers to attempt to achieve the critical balance between effectiveness and efficiency.

3.1 Cost Control Pressures

Contact centers have become complex environments, and the cost of entry can be quite expensive. Investments in real estate, furnishings, telecom infrastructure, and technology such as an ACD and PCs are not cheap. The biggest cost, however, is in people. It is not unusual for agent labor to make up 70 percent or more of a contact center's operating budget.

Companies are contributing to their own customer attrition through cost-cutting strategies in their contact centers

The most recent *Merchants Global Contact Centre Benchmarking Report 2005*[*] states that companies are contributing to their own customer attrition through cost-cutting strategies in their contact centers. The report points out that an all-time high of 13.3 percent of calls are abandoned before they are even answered. This is attributed to the fact that 48 percent of contact centers cite cost reduction as their main business driver.

Almost 6 out of 10 contact centers have reduction targets as part of their business strategies. Although they might be attaining their efficiency goals, they are killing their ability to be effective from the customer's point of view.

Some contact center executives have realized that there is a cause-and-effect issue going on here. One of the ways to identify when the point of diminishing return has been reached is to listen to the customers. Some contact centers now use automated monitoring to gauge the tone of voice of the customer to determine whether they successfully have balanced efficiency with effectiveness.

3.2 Executive Focus on Revenue and Profits

Increasingly, corporate executives expect their contact centers to evolve from their traditional status as an overhead expense into active producers of revenue and profit. Many contact centers make this transition by implementing up-sell and cross-sell programs.

A recent research study conducted by Convergys Corporation and *Call Center Magazine* examined the extent to which companies have deployed up-sell and cross-sell programs, as well as their level of satisfaction with these programs. Conducted over the Web during the months of November and December 2004, the study survey captured information from 87 participants who were either contact center professionals or suppliers working with contact centers with more than 100 seats.

Sixty-two percent of the survey respondents deployed up-sell and cross-sell programs. These companies tended to be satisfied with the results of their programs, although the level of their satisfaction varied. More importantly, 67 percent of the companies with an up-sell and cross-sell program said that these programs had a positive impact on customer satisfaction. In addition to enhanced customer satisfaction, the companies reported increases in revenue and operating margin.

Over half — 57 percent — of these companies promote specified products and services to every customer who calls. Moreover, 83 percent of the companies who tended to be the most satisfied with their cross-sell and upsell programs used scripted offers, rather than "sales pitch of the week" or ad-hoc promotions directed by the agent.

Not surprisingly, agent training and recruitment were cited as the key levers to successful up-sell and cross-sell programs. Equally unsurprising is the fact that 73 percent of respondents who had implemented such programs listed agent training as the single greatest challenge to program success, followed by agent recruitment (58 percent).

3.3 Customer Expectations

In today's environment, where a company's products, services, pricing, and even customer feedback can be compared over the Internet with the click of a button, it is not surprising that customer expectations run high.

Like it or not, this is the reality faced by every business, and the trend will almost certain strengthen over time. In fact, for the vast majority of businesses, the contact center has become the front door, and it falls to the agent to set out the welcome mat. The need for skilled agents has never been greater. Similarly, the need for effective agent training, performance monitoring, and feedback has intensified as well. This flies in the face of cost-cutting measures, putting the contact center manager into a difficult position — a situation for which traditional quality monitoring practices provide no ready solution. Something has to give.

Traditional quality monitoring has become increasingly inadequate to meet the needs of enterprises – both now and in the future

4. Quality Monitoring Reinvented

Although some form of quality monitoring has existed since the advent of call centers, it is clear that traditional quality monitoring has become increasingly inadequate to meet the needs of enterprises — both now and in the future. It is the opinion of Witness Systems that quality monitoring requires reinventing to address the realities of contemporary business practices and global consumer demands.

Why does quality monitoring need reinventing?
Consider the following:

- Contact centers record a wealth of information, but merely listening to and evaluating a recorded call literally leaves money on the table. The data collected provides useful — and actionable — information about customers and agents alike. It should be gleaned and used to drive decision making on products and services, marketing promotions, internal processes, agent training (including e-learning), and more.
- Unmanageable supervisor-to-agent ratios — all too common in today's contact centers — impede contact center performance. The industry average in the US is 1 supervisor to 20 agents. In environments such as this, the supervisor typically careens from crisis to crisis, unable to provide coaching or other value-added services that could help drive agent performance.

* Dimension Data plc, *2005 Global Contact Centre Benchmarking Report,* February 2005.

- Typically, the contact center supervisor is the youngest member of the management team and has the most direct reports, even though he or she has the least amount of experience.
- Few supervisors are taught skills in time management, prioritization, conflict management or coaching skills — all of which are critical for them to succeed in their roles.
- Increasingly, senior executives are focusing on the internal ROI from their Quality Assurance teams, and they are often disappointed with the statistics presented to them. For that reason, some companies are retooling their QA groups to monitor different metrics than those monitored by their supervisors.
- Contact center supervisors are being held accountable for agent monitoring and development, while QA is being asked to monitor against strategic initiatives on an enterprise-wide basis. Such strategic initiatives include final transaction disposition in the back office, back-office trends, root cause analysis to get to the bottom of problems, process improvements, branding through service, service-to-sales initiatives, overall behavioral trends and more. This information is passed to senior executives and is used to drive strategic business decisions.

Reinvented centers will focus less on addressing one-off customer issues and more on correcting the underlying root causes that are prompting the customer interactions to begin with

5. The Future of Quality Monitoring

As contact centers move to a more strategic position, their impact will be felt beyond their four walls and ripple throughout the entire organization, including branch locations, satellite offices — even suppliers. Unlike today's typical contact centers, these reinvented centers will focus less on addressing one-off customer issues and more on correcting the underlying root causes that are prompting the customer interactions to begin with. In doing so, the reinvented centers will help reduce operating costs.

The difference between fixing an immediate problem versus correcting a process goes beyond mere semantics; it can be profound and have a considerable impact on customer goodwill and the bottom line.

For example, a telecommunications company noticed that every billing cycle triggered a flood of calls to the contact center that serviced customers who spoke Asian languages. Instead handling these calls as individual, one-off problems, the company sought to find the root cause that was driving call volume through the roof. As a result of their investigation, the company found that the majority of these calls came from children calling on behalf of their non-English speaking parents, who wanted to have their bill deciphered before they wrote out the check.

As a result of this finding, the company came out with in-language billing in twelve different dialects of Asian languages. This helped to stabilize call volumes, thus reducing operating costs. More importantly, however, the company gained wallet share, making it extremely difficult for the competition to take these valuable customers away — even in the hypercompetitive telecommunications market.

In the reinvented quality monitoring environment, listening to recorded calls will become part in parcel to scorecards. If a manager notices that an agent's scorecard continually shows high average handle time but an increase in revenue, there will be a logical pathway by which the manager can conduct further investigation. For example, by drilling down to the actual calls that the agent handled, the manager can determine whether the agent is handling calls wisely. If so, technology exists to transform this agent's recorded calls easily into a best-practice "training clip" that can be deployed to every agent's desktop for training purposes.

6. Point Systems or End-to-End Solution?

Well-understood legacy applications, such as quality monitoring and forecasting and scheduling, are being reinvented as end-to-end solutions. A synergy develops among the previously disparate parts, and its beneficial impact is profound.

This puts contact centers into a dilemma: Should they continue to adopt traditional, point systems for quality monitoring, workforce management, performance management, and e-learning and then attempt to integrate separate software applications to achieve the desired result? Or should they select a packaged solution that provides a single end-to-end solution?

6.1 Integration

The argument in favor of selecting and integrating point solutions typically focuses on the fact that the user receives extensive sets of tried-and-true functionality and can augment, rather than replace, existing technology investments. Although this argument is not without merit, it is flawed and carries substantial risk.

First, integrating separate best-in-breed solutions is costly, not because the integration per se is terribly difficult to accomplish, but because integrated systems are difficult to standardize, replicate, and maintain over time. For example, pulling data out of standard databases is easy, but understanding where the data resides — and when and how to extract it — takes time and can be costly. Consequently, integrating disparate solutions tends to result in superficial and narrow interactions between the packages — which may leave the user unable to tap into the full range of functionality provided by each point system. It should be noted that this situation is not limited to integrations of disparate products offered by different vendors. Occasionally, an individual vendor will offer multiple products that, although give the same name, have no real integration among them. In effect, the user is purchasing as set of stand-alone solutions.

Tightly woven, interoperating solutions provide cost-of-ownership advantages

Integration costs are only part of the total cost of ownership problems facing best-in-breed approaches. System maturation and obsolescence issues abound. Moreover, when one considers the costs associated with learning multiple graphical user interfaces (GUIs), dealing with multiple databases, and maintaining multiple computing platforms and multiple operating systems, it becomes increasingly apparent why tightly woven, interoperating solutions provide cost-of-ownership advantages.

The argument in favor of integrated point systems also is flawed on a second count. This second fallacy pertains to the quality of the results that are achievable. Witness Systems believes that end-to-end solutions are inherently structured to produce superior results.

To help envision why, imagine that the four cornerstones of workforce optimization — quality monitoring, workforce management, performance management, and e-learning — are coins. Architecturally speaking, integrated point systems are like coins spread out on a table-top with their edges touching. The integration points are narrow and well-defined. The database and user interface are unique to each coin. In contrast, end-to-end solutions are like a stack of coins, totally overlapping. There is only one user interface and one database. Moreover, each cornerstone application is fully in touch with and informed by the others.

With so many enterprises scrutinizing total cost of ownership even more carefully than initial ROI, end-to-end solutions not only reduce system integration costs, but also translate into simplified service and support agreements while delivering full interoperability among quality monitoring, workforce management, performance management, and e-learning systems. This synergistic approach helps contract center management to finally start getting ahead of the game.

7. Components of a Complete, End-to-End Quality Monitoring Solution

According to industry analysts, 85 percent of business-to-business relationships and 75 percent of business-to-consumer relationships forged by Global 1000 enterprises involve three or more communication channels. More than ever before, enterprises are hard-pressed to deliver a consistent, unified customer experience while delivering the same level of quality service, regardless of the communications medium their customers choose.

Ideally, an end-to-end quality monitoring system reliably captures, stores, and retrieves customer interactions across multiple channels and sites

Ideally, an end-to-end quality monitoring system reliably captures, stores, and retrieves customer interactions across multiple channels and sites. The solution delivers high-volume recording functionality and advanced data storage, retrieval, and presentation capabilities, along with tools to enhance agent training and performance. A browser-based solution helps to ensure that the solution meets the needs of a broad set of contact centers, from a single center or multiple centers, regardless of whether they deliver service via the telephone, voice over IP, e-mail, and the Web.

Flexibility is the hallmark of an end-to-end quality monitoring solution. Consequently, such a solution includes business-driven recording capability to capture and evaluate customer interactions. Ideally, the user can define the types of telephone interactions that the system records and can record from 0 to 100 percent of any type of call that comes into the contact center.

Moreover, an end-to-end quality monitoring system provides real data on product and service introductions, upselling and cross-selling techniques, and customer contacts through newer communications channels, such as e-mail and collaborative Web chat. With the proper security levels, individuals and teams throughout the enterprise can review these interactions. Moreover, contact center supervisors can evaluate the performance of their customer service representatives and the effectiveness of business processes, and then use this valuable knowledge to better train and optimize the workforce.

The specific functionality that comprises an end-to-end quality monitoring system includes:

7.1 Voice and Data Recording
The system captures the CSRs' voice interactions with a customer and their corresponding computer desktop activities, such as data entry, screen navigation and data retrieval. Moreover, the system synchronizes the captured voice and desktop activity during replay, allowing supervisors to observe and analyze complete customer interactions as they actually occur. This facilitates easy evaluation of the performance of CSRs, enabling supervisors to determine whether the CSRs are making effective and efficient use of the technology resources.

7.2 E-mail Recording
An end-to-end quality monitoring system allows managers to evaluate how well service and sales representatives are performing by monitoring the accuracy and efficiency of e-mail responses. The system should integrate with leading e-mail response management applications.

7.3 Web Chat Recording
By allowing Web and collaborative chat interactions to be recorded and analyzed, an end-to-end quality monitoring system enables you to gauge the effectiveness of the CSRs' Internet skills, refine newly implemented Internet processes, and optimize Web technology deployments. Recording is triggered through tight integration with collaborative chat and co-browsing products, generally based on specific "begin chat" and "end chat" commands.

7.4 Evaluation and Reporting

An end-to-end quality monitoring solution allows contact centers to create and customize forms to evaluate contact center interactions. Forms can be tailored to the specific needs of the contact centers and can then used to produce accurate evaluations of the people and contacts within the enterprise. Additionally, the system should provide an array of reports that can help managers analyze and report on contact center performance.

7.5 e-Learning

An end-to-end quality monitoring solution includes an online learning management system created for the Internet-enabled contact center environment. E-learning systems are becoming increasingly important in the contact center because they deliver personalized, cost-effective online learning while allowing mangaers to manage and track the content provided to agents.

7.6 Performance Analysis

Performance analysis is a critical component of an end-to-end quality monitoring solution, providing data that can help contact centers gain efficiencies while maintaining high quality standards. This includes gauging and exploring the relationship among various technology metrics (such as ACD statistics and adherence data), tracking trends, and identifying areas of opportunity or improvement. Ideally, the solution enables CSRs and other users to create their own custom scorecards for a succinct view of their progress against the goals that are important to them.

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8. Summary

Quality monitoring has evolved over the past thirty years and today must meet new business requirements that are necessitating a reinvention of traditional quality monitoring systems. As a result, contact centers are moving to a more strategic position. Unlike today's typical centers, these reinvented centers will focus less on addressing one-off customer issues and more on correcting the underlying root causes that are prompting the customer interactions to begin with. In doing so, the reinvented centers will help reduce operating costs while enhancing service and fostering long-term customer relationships.

About the Author

Oscar Alban serves as principal global market consultant for Witness Systems — a global provider of workforce optimization software/services for contact center, IP telephony and back office environments. With more than 20 years of contact center experience, he regularly serves in a speaking capacity at industry trade shows and conferences, and performs consulting engagements at customer sites worldwide, where he focuses on the mission critical aspects of capturing customer intelligence and optimizing workforce performance. Contact the author at oalban@witness.com.

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