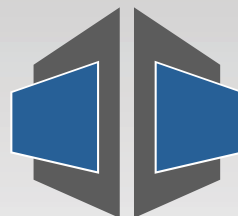# Contact Centers vs. Call Centers

Which Solution is Right for Your Business?

COMPARE BUSINESS PRODUCTS

The phrases "call center" and "contact center" are often used interchangeably as if they were the same thing, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth. While not all call centers are identical to one another, neither are all contact centers, though some generalizations can be made to compare the two effectively. In some cases call centers have evolved into contact centers due to changing business needs, and in others, contact centers have been developed from the start as multi-purpose, multi-channel communication centers. As can be seen there are many differences between these two types of centers for dealing with customer communications.

Types of Communication

Call Centers

Call centers, as their name suggests, usually only offer the service of answering customer calls. This occasionally extends to making outbound calls, usually for a premium fee. A call center may be defined as an office that handles the phone traffic that a company receives. It utilizes call center agents and a public switched telephony network. It is able to handle the calls in the order with which they were received and to keep customers on hold if need be. While customers may make calls via voice over IP (such as through Skype) a call center may not be set up to handle them effectively.

Contact Centers

One of the most important differences between contact centers and call centers is that contact centers offer more than form of communication. Typically, contact centers are responsible for answering calls, but additionally they offer services such as responding to email and communicating via online messaging services ("Live Chat"). A contact center might also accept faxes or web-based calls – such as those made through Skype. This type of center is becoming increasingly popular with companies as they try to meet the needs of their customers who want to communicate via a variety of different channels, not just the telephone. Mobile is another channel that is currently being built into innovative call centers. It is estimated that 44% of organizations have plans to provide customer access to CRM via mobile devices. While a contact center might be responsible for dealing with a wide range of different kinds of types of contact, in many cases calls still comprise the largest share of the customer contacts made with the organization. In fact, a call center might be just one component of what a contact center does and what it is responsible for.

Immediacy of Problem

Call Centers

Call centers are usually faced with dealing with customers that have reached a critical point of interacting with the company. By the time a customer reaches the point of telephoning the company they are usually looking for a clear answer to a problem that they face with the company.

Contact Centers

Contact centers may be dealing with less immediate or urgent customer contacts than call centers. Customers may use types of communication such as email to ask questions that they are just wondering about, rather than those that they desire immediate and pressing responses to. In many cases, contact centers provide an additional service that is used as well as making phone calls, rather than instead of making phone calls.

Management

Call Centers

Management of call centers is relatively straightforward since supervisors are required to manage the phone calls being received at any given time. They are measured on the basis of how well the calls are handled in terms of time.

Contact Centers

Management of contact centers has become more complex than management in call centers due to the increased variety of the job at hand. Managers have to oversee all of the different types of contact and make sure that customer needs are met across each in a timely manner. This can be difficult with some employees having particular strengths in one area over another. For example, an employee might be very good at handling emails or live chat but very poor at responding to a customer on a telephone call.

Measurement

Call Centers

It has been argued that call centers have a tendency to operate on a basis of strict time management which is not necessarily the most effective for meeting customer needs. Call centers have been found to be based on measurement of time taken for the customer waiting in the line, and amount of time spent on each call. The challenge identified with this type of measurement is that of course if the customer's problem is not solved then it does not matter how long is spent on each call.

Contact Centers

Contact centers have moved away from metrics that are based around time spent on each call, and tend to be more focused on customer satisfaction. On using contact centers, customers will frequently find that regardless of the method of contact utilized (telephone, live online chat) they will be asked after the contact to complete a short survey. The survey will usually ask "Was your problem resolved today?" among others. This is then measured to review success rather than simply processing the number of responses a person managed to get through in a day.

Inbound or Outbound

Call Centers

Traditionally, call centers have operated on the basis of taking inbound calls only, though some have extended their services and offered outbound calls for an additional fee. Sometimes call centers are categorized as either inbound or outbound to distinguish types of services offered.

Contact Centers

Contact centers usually offer both inbound and outbound services, meaning that they can make or receive calls, send or receive emails, and engage in two way chat with customers via messenger services.

> Call center success is measured by time taken for waiting customer and time spent on a call.
>
> Contact center success focuses more on customer satisfaction.

Software

Call Centers

Dealing with customer calls is aided by knowledge management. Customer Service Representatives are able to search for appropriate answers in the database by taking the customer through a series of questions.

Contact Centers

It has been reported that as the number of different channels for communication with customers has been increased, the software that supports the contact center has had to become increasingly sophisticated. Knowledge management has also had to advance as a result of this, to accommodate the addition of new channels.

> Contact centers can include "universal agents" that deal with phone, email, and live chat among other things.

Organization

Call Center

In a call center almost all of the employees are focused on receiving calls and speaking to customers on the telephone.

Contact Center

In a contact center, tasks have to be organized according to skill sets. In many cases a contact center might have what are referred to as "universal agents". These are people that are able to deal with phone, email and live chat, among other contact types. Other individuals might be focused on one particular area. For example, a person who can type many words per minute might be put onto live chat. Despite this, it is common that phone calls are prioritized since it is usually possible to delay responses to other types of contact until CSRs are freed up to deal with them.

Efficiency

Call Centers

Call centers tend to be inefficient in the sense that they deal with a considerable range of volume of calls. This may be impacted by a problem with a particular release of a product, seasonal variation, a specific promotion or even the release of the annual company results. A set number of CSRs have to be available to answer calls even if only a few calls are made on a particular day.

Contact Centers

Contact centers can use downtime when call volumes are low to deal with other types of customer contact such as faxes and email. This means that in the contact center, CSRs are likely to be better utilized overall.

> Call center CSRs must be able to find suitable responses to customer questions and issues on the spot.

Customer Service Representative Skills

Call Center

CSRs working in a call center need to have an excellent telephone manner and to be able to use databases to find suitable responses to customer questions and issues on the spot. They have to be able to think on their feet as well as navigate knowledge management databases and follow processes.

Contact Center

Contact center employees usually need all of the same skills as call center employees. However, they commonly also need to be more technically adept so that they can use different forms of technologies to communicate with customers. They need better writing skills than CSRs in customer call centers. In many cases, CSRs in contact centers need to be multi-skilled across a range of different areas so that they are able to work as "universal agents".

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