

Moving the contact centre to the cloud

 By Paul Fick

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Cloud services and hosted services have been talked about for many years, but only recently, since bandwidth has become more available and affordable, have they become a viable option in South Africa.

The promise of cost savings and multiple business benefits is luring many enterprises to explore various aspects of cloud offerings and, for a number of reasons, one area that is of great interest for organisations is the hosted or cloud contact centre.

However, moving the contact centre into the cloud is not a simple matter of unplugging on-premise contact centre solutions and adopting a new cloud-based service. There are many factors that organisations need to take into consideration when moving their contact centres into the cloud, not least of which is the service provider chosen, to ensure that this often-critical aspect of business continues to deliver.

In South Africa, adoption of cloud has been slow, hindered in part by lack of available, affordable and reliable bandwidth. Other reasons for slow adoption include the high investments that organisations have already made in their on-premise infrastructure, security concerns, the perception that control will be relinquished and, very often, a lack of understanding of the concept.

Exponential growth prediction

Worldwide, analysts are predicting that cloud services will grow exponentially in the next few years. Apart from the ever-increasing availability and affordability of bandwidth delivered through resilient networks, another factor driving the adoption of cloud services is the growth of virtualisation, specifically on the server side, enabling service providers more readily to build the type of infrastructure required to deliver hosted and cloud services. The increased availability of cost-effective and reliable bandwidth, along with the increased readiness and ability of service providers to deliver solutions through the cloud, imply that South Africa is poised to take advantage of the benefits of the cloud across all areas, including the contact centre.

Premise based contact centre infrastructure is capital intensive to build and yet the contact centre is a vital function for many businesses. The cloud, or hosted model, offers the benefits of moving to an OPEX model, having instantly scalable services, choosing the applications and services that meet their needs and more, making it a highly attractive option for the contact centre. Services can be accessed without a large capital investment and functionality can be switched on and off as needed. As an example, if an organisation needs outbound functionality for a single campaign, this service can be delivered and then switched off, unlike the on-premise model, which requires this infrastructure to be in place whether services are being used or not. Contact centres also often evolve in a haphazard manner with various locations employing disparate solutions. Having a hosted contact centre means that systems become standardised and a consistent brand experience is delivered to customers across an enterprise.

A few considerations to take into account

However, while there are multiple benefits to the cloud and hosted contact centre model, and the South African market is now ready to adopt these services, there are a few considerations for organisations to take into account before moving these services into the cloud. Organisations wishing to adopt the cloud contact centre model need to consider the business case very carefully. The reality is that cloud contact centres are a relatively new offering, and service providers still need to build or pay off the expensive infrastructure required. This means that services may be more expensive initially, to allow the service provider to amortise the cost of the infrastructure. Scale still needs to be reached in many instances, which will

impact pricing models as well, and advanced functionality, such as self-help, may still need to be built, further increasing the cost. In the short to medium term, if an organisation has an existing, established contact centre, moving this into the cloud may not provide immediate cost benefits and the cost of services may even be higher to start with.

Another disadvantage is that, by its very nature, a hosted model pre-assumes the services that will be needed and there is not much room for customisation. Often organisations have to use the standard services that are on offer, in the format that they are being offered by the service provider. The problem with this model is that one size does not always fit all. Integrating third-party applications and solutions such as CRM and other business systems can also prove difficult, particularly if these systems are premises-based.

However, for organisations without a contact centre, especially small to medium enterprises (SMEs), the cloud model enables these businesses to deploy contact centre services rapidly and take advantage of large enterprise-grade technology without the huge capital outlay usually associated with this. The cloud enables smaller players to access world-class contact centre functionality, opening up the market for such businesses. The business case for the cloud contact centre is very specific, however, and organisations need to make sure that the costs and benefits are in balance before jumping on the proverbial bandwagon. Once this business case has been carefully considered, choosing the right provider is the next critical step.

Be careful when selecting service providers

While hosted service providers abound, the reality is that this is a very new service model for many, and organisations need to be careful when selecting service providers for any hosted and cloud service, and particularly for critical applications like the contact centre. Contact centre providers may not be experts in hosted services and hosted services providers may have little knowledge of the contact centre. As a result, organisations may end up buying a service, but not getting the expertise they require, especially when entering the contact centre space for the first time. Integration is an important aspect of this, including physical, business and technical integration. Without these, the cloud contact centre solution may end up becoming a very basic system that fails to add value to the organisation. Cloud contact centre service providers need to have experience in the business of contact centres, as well as offering systems integration to ensure the solution works for the business.

When looking to move the contact centre into the cloud or adopt a hosted services model, organisations need to examine carefully the business case for the move and then take care to partner a service provider that understands the intricacies and needs of the contact centre, as well as having a solid understanding of the hosted services model. Without these two factors, organisations may find themselves in a situation where the reality of the cloud fails to deliver on the expected benefits.

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