

# Virtual call centres open up possibilities for SMEs

Running a virtual call centre removes many of the challenges that managing a physical call centre entails. Riaan Pietersen of TeleMasters explains that it is easy to become a contact centre and focus purely on the business of delivering a customer service, with a virtual call centre.

Creating a contact centre is an expensive exercise. One needs office space, hardware that should include telephony and computing hardware, high connectivity, appropriate software solutions and some agents. All of this could cost several hundred thousand Rands or more. This effectively shuts down the ability for smaller companies to field their own contact centre or for entrepreneurs to start up a small contact centre business.

Pietersen, head of enterprise division, argues that with the ability of the technology to operate a professional contact centre into the cloud the game has substantially changed. "That goes all the way down to the agent - when every piece of software is in the cloud, all the agent requires for effective operations is a connection and an access device."

## Home-based call centres

The very concept of 'call centre' changes when the applications are virtualised and located in the cloud. That is because the agents no longer physically occupy the same centre.

"They can sit at a desk in the comfort of their own homes, taking calls to a designated 0800 number, powered by an Interactive Voice Response system, to route them appropriately, while accessing relevant information and systems belonging to the client for which the agent works."

While the convenience and flexibility such an arrangement delivers to the agent has clear appeal in a time where work/life balance is highly sought-after, he says the real benefit is that more organisations than ever before can enjoy the benefit of a professional contact centre.

"Would the local auto repair shop benefit from an inbound contact centre to handle bookings? What about an outbound one, to check customer satisfaction levels or follow-up with clients to get them in for scheduled maintenance? The benefits of such facilities should be quite clear."

Virtual technology means it is now possible to put in place a professional call centre manned by as little as one or two agents.

## SME opportunities

Perhaps even more appealing given the dramatic removal of the need for capital expenditure running into hundreds of thousands of Rands, is the possibility for entrepreneurs to start up a business offering contact centre services.

"Prior to virtual call centre applications, serious capital would be necessary. Not only does that limit starting such a business to very few people, it also raises the spectre of risk. Should that initiative fail, for any reason, the losses would be substantial."

A hosted solution completely averts that challenge; individuals with a good idea of a sound service to offer to any market sector can do so - and that without risking their life savings. "That really provides impetus for entrepreneurship." The ability to create such business models is entirely dependent on the availability of low-cost connections. "That's why the tenacious monopoly in the telecoms sector remains an impediment to business growth."

There is one further advantage to hosted applications, which may to some appear somewhat esoteric. "There's a tendency to look for branded products as the only solutions for contact centres; hosted applications are completely white-labelled. Users are not buying any one vendor's products; they are paying simply for the service delivered. This removes many of the diversions associated with service provision and allows for a clear focus on what is required - while also future-proofing contact centre applications, as it falls to the service provider to retain customers with appealing services."

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