HEALTHCARE CONTACT CENTERS: READINESS ROI AND WHAT'S NEXT

Don't ignore the lessons learned from COVID-19. Give readiness and state-of-the-art investment a place in ROI calculations.

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WFH... work from home. Everyone knows this acronym by now. Just about everywhere you look, people are "working from home." Yet, this is not the way it was intended to happen! While many folks at all levels in all industries are working from home, this article focuses on contact center agents within healthcare environments moved home during the COVID-19 outbreak.

I can't count the number of folks who, in January, would have said "NO" to a WFH program—and not just in healthcare: "Our company doesn't allow it," "Our data is too sensitive," "IT won't hear of it," etc., etc. Well, these issues evaporated suddenly when we were confronted with this vicious pandemic. Many healthcare contact centers were able to move frontline agents home in record time, although there were varied levels of readiness.

Disaster recovery plans were launched, some crafted in record time. One IT vice president told me that he owed lots of people dinner and many more drinks for all the work it took to move (in some cases) literally hundreds of frontline agents home. The level of effort, cost and time was impacted by the level of readiness.

Some were ready, while others... well, not so much. We are seeing readiness failures due, at least in part, to ROI obsessions that have stretched analysis to the point of paralysis on some critical, yet small cost items. The consequence is the inability to respond nimbly to our current situation or any other disaster or opportunity.

From Analysis to Paralysis

For example, one organization debated literally for months the decision to upgrade and deploy softphones, CTI and online job aids. (Yes, this is the 21st century!) Softphones and CTI are not edgy or new, and the cost is in the low to mid TWO digits!! But committees needed to be formed and ROI analysis had to be undertaken. By the way, this was not IT stalling; IT understood and endorsed the "upgrade." The stall was at the COO and CFO level where ROI requirements and "state-of-the-art" investment were seen as "trendy" and the risk underestimated.

Enter the pandemic and this long-drawn-out conversation became a true stumbling block, an urgent matter to deal with in order to launch a work-from-home program. Softphones embed all the telephony functions on the desktop, so there is no need to deploy actual telephone sets. This makes work-from-home a relatively easier move to accomplish. Softphones also require USB headsets. Try to find any of these on the market, since the current urgency is not limited to healthcare operations. As well, CTI requires a certain level of connectivity and integration (again, by no means trendy or new). This was also stalled... stalled by exhausting analysis.

Online job aids, knowledge management systems, and guided conversation tools all represent various means to support frontline agents via access to relevant, actionable information necessary to complete a call/contact. Many agents moved off-premise in ill-equipped environments and struggled to collect and deploy their own "Post-it note" knowledge management system. Some did their best to peel each note from their monitor, each taped-up, curled-edge contact list, and each printed bundle of documents to add to their home setup. Certainly, investing in a robust online knowledge management system couldn't provide an actionable ROI!

What's the ROI on Readiness?

Lack of readiness is what happens when ROI "keeps every penny a prisoner." So, what is the ROI on readiness? Peace of mind and the

ability to respond. And, I know one thing for certain; the cost of NOT having a high enough standard for technical infrastructure required for an emergency situation ultimately increases cost and delays deployment when it must be done DURING the situation!

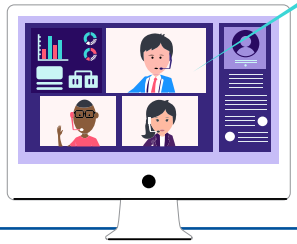
IT/telecom resources have serious limitations while trying to address an entire institution's needs during this pandemic or any emergency. Then there are the vendors. Required adapters, hardware or software must be purchased and the competition is fierce. This causes further delays and increased costs. What is the ROI on state-of-the-art infrastructure?

I, for one, hope that this lesson is... well, a lesson. I fear, however, that folks stuck on ROI will have difficulty seeing themselves as unprepared. After all, it's pretty easy just to blame the circumstances. I recently spoke with one executive who suggested that the lack of readiness was OK because "everyone is in the same boat." This is simply not the case. There are plenty of healthcare organizations that did not suffer from the delays associated with a lack of readiness and they have different questions to ponder.

Take the example of NYU Langone Health. The Healthcare system oversees all aspects of ambulatory interactions, from finding a doctor to paying a bill. This model allows for close oversight and engagement at each step in the ambulatory patient journey. NYU Langone Health has several hundred contact center agents in multiple locations handling a variety of tasks, including physician referrals and scheduling appointments. When these folks moved to work-from-home, both the environment and the workload changed. The contact centers were able to seamlessly move agents due to a superior level of readiness at the executive/management level and a state-of-the-art technical infrastructure. Agents have a smart desktop that provides information at their fingertips, enabling them to handle inbound scheduling calls.

So What's Next?

NYU Langone Health's readiness has enabled the organization to focus on "what's next" in real-time. Like many other healthcare institutions, NYU Langone Health has been transitioning patients to telehealth visits since regulations and insurers now allow for reimbursement. Agents are now scheduling between 4,000 to 5,000 telehealth appointments daily. Contact center agents also made outbound calls to more than 9,000 patients to reschedule appointments when the stay-at-home directives were issued.



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NYU Langone Health has multiple initiatives to keep the WFH workforce engaged. There are frequent updates from NY headquarters as well as a newsletter celebrating successes. The April newsletter shared photos from frontline home workstations, noted birthdays, and included newsy items such as, "I just moved into my new apartment," and "My daughter-in-law is pregnant." Since this is news that folks share at work while physically together, it maintains a sense of emotional closeness and camaraderie. There is also a section for recognition: "Our staff is 100% dedicated," "Our IT team is amazing," and "Our agents are balancing their children, parents, spouses and pets." These efforts demonstrate a level of care and attention found in the most successful operations navigating these troubled times.

I posed the "What's Next?" question to Andrew Rubin, Vice President of Clinical Affairs and Ambulatory Care at NYU Langone Health. Andrew has kept a close eye on the front line, as great leaders do. He is present, available, straightforward, provides frequent updates, and is willing to share and be quoted. For that, I personally am grateful.

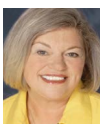
"Agents working from home has been amazing" is Andrew's first response when asked what's next for work-from-home. It is not, however, on the table for the long term. He went on to say, "The value of a contact center in healthcare is having people working together. After all, the nature of healthcare interactions is vastly different than buying a sweater." Andrew understands that agents working together with their teams, coaches and managers in the contact center support each other in taking care of patient needs. They are able to help one another solve problems, promoting efficiency, effectiveness and camaraderie.

So what's next?

So what's next? NYU Langone Health will ramp up ambulatory services beginning in May (hopefully) and be back to full ambulatory operations by midsummer. At that time, the Access Center will also be back at work in their center. I expect that, for many, these will be emotional reunions. Agents will appreciate the opportunity to be back with their colleagues and part of a fast-growing and well-run organization.

Asking "What's Next?" is the first step in building a plan for moving forward. Many have experienced enormous difficulty and challenges in navigating the path to work-from-home during this crisis. What happens next requires thoughtful and careful planning. While many have been delighted with the WFH program, I hear that agents' most frequently asked question is, "When will we be back in the office?"

It is great to have the satisfaction of successfully moving many people to work from home to meet this unique situation. But don't ignore the lessons learned. Give readiness and state-of-the-art investment a place in any ROI calculations. We now have an abundance of evidence of the risk if we don't. I am an optimist. So I'm hopeful that reflection on this horrible event will encourage the value of readiness and that it becomes part of what comes next.



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