

A Look at E-mail Management System Solutions

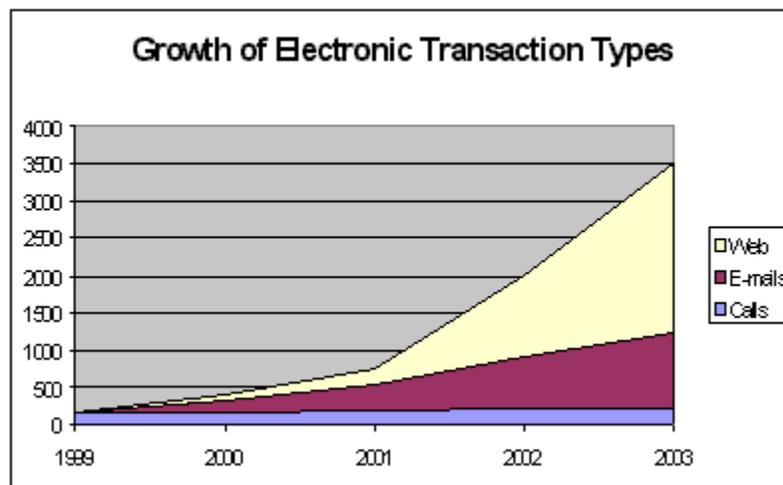
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By David M. Peterson, RCDD



Just when Call Center managers thought they could see the light at the end of the tunnel, it turns out that it's really a run-away train full of e-mail that's barreling down the tracks toward your Call Center.

And it's just the beginning. Forrester Research projects that the number of e-mail users will grow to 130 million in 2001, while the number of e-mail messages is projected to grow to 500 million per day. Many of these messages will be delivered to the Call Center, requiring managers to devise processes for distributing and responding to this growing volume of e-mail. (Figure 1 illustrates the anticipated growth of these transaction types in the Call Center.)

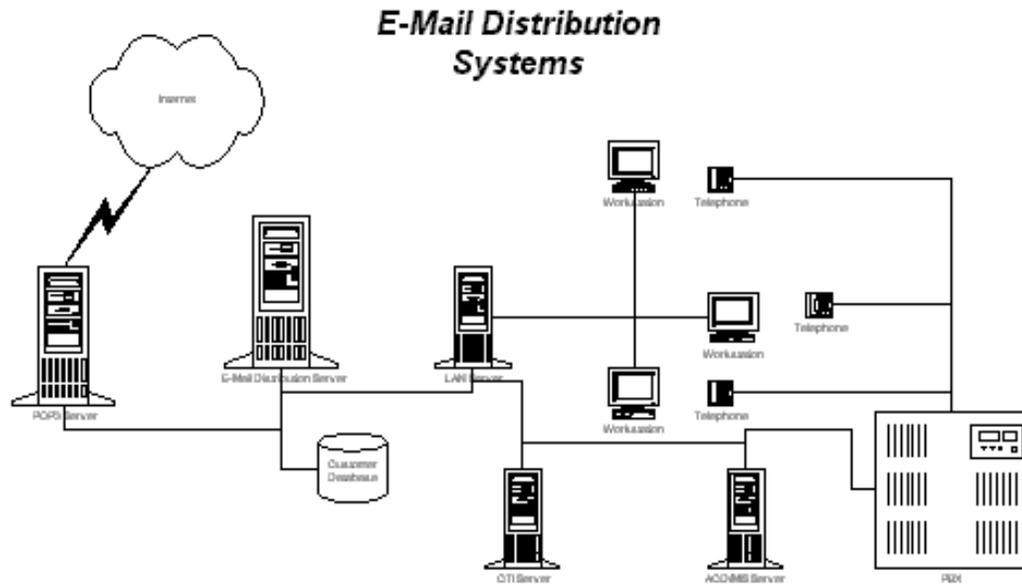


Today, there are two major approaches to handling e-mail distribution - stand-alone systems or integrated systems. While the decision on which approach works best for your Call Center must be part of your corporate planning process (involving Operations, IT, Marketing and Human Resources), this article will give you an overview of the technology available, architectural differences inherent in both, as well as solutions offered by major players in each arena.

Key Management Benefits

The major advantage of using an e-mail distribution system is the ability it gives you to manage the anticipated electronic workload. The solutions you select must include the ability to accurately measure the traffic in the same manner in which we measure incoming calls. This will allow the ability to create forecasts and staffing plans to handle the anticipated load in service level (since the same techniques for determining service level apply to these communications). Any decision on a technology purchase must include the same evaluation process as an ACD procurement decision.

The architecture for all of the e-mail distribution systems is remarkably similar. The key component is an e-mail distribution server, which contains the specific routing instructions for the enterprise. This server communicates with the enterprise POP (post office protocol) server across the LAN (local area network). In some cases, there is a requirement for a separate database server to store transaction information for archives and reporting. This requirement is often due to the number of transactions, which the system handles. Figure 2 illustrates most e-mail distribution system topologies.



There are many features/functionalities that all e-mail distribution systems share, (the distinctions reside in the extent that they impact the distribution). Some of the most common features are:

- Time/date stamping of receipt
- Automatic acknowledgement to sender of receipt of message
- Distribution based on key words
- Automatic escalation of messages that are past service level agreement thresholds
- Tracking of message metrics (number of messages received, handled, etc.)
- Ability to use canned responses

Additionally, several packages include advanced capabilities like automatic responses based on content and automatic suggestions for agent responses.

Do a Little Research to Determine Your Needs

When evaluating the addition of one of these solutions, it is imperative that you begin with a baseline assessment of your current technology, call load, e-mail load and work flow processes.

Use your existing data on growth patterns, market intelligence and forecasts to build a model for your future load and to enable you to assess your requirements by performing a gap analysis.

Also, be sure to involve all affected parties in the evaluation: Call Center management, the

telecommunications team, the IS team, and your vendor representatives.

Once a consensus is reached with all members of the team, put together an implementation plan that leaves plenty of time for pilots, testing, training, and a phased approach to implementation. The time spent in the planning process will bear fruit in the efficiencies gained by these applications.

E-mail Distribution Solutions - A Look at Four Key Players

The two main approaches to handling email distribution are stand-alone systems and integrated systems. Players in the stand-alone application world include Mustang.com, Kana and others. However, the ACD vendors are also developing integrated approaches (sometimes in partnership with stand-alone solutions). The chart below provides example solutions as well as some of the features and functionalities.

Mustang.com

Mustang.com has developed software with two major components. The Mustang Message Center is comprised of several related modules that can integrate e-mail into a "blended" distribution environment; create agent profiles and rights; display real-time status of queues and agents; alert managers of threshold violations via pagers/e-mail; and offer historical reporting of queues and agents.

The Mustang Agent includes modules that provide a standard client interface to Mustang at the desktop; a GUI add-in to Outlook client that enables Mustang Agent capability; access to libraries of scripted responses; access to customer email history; and automated response to e-mail messages based on keywords.

There's also a Web self-help module called Mustang KnowledgeLink, which allows the libraries created for the AgentPro application to be used in a Web self-help scenario.

Lucent Technology

Lucent Technology's strategy incorporates its CentreVu suite of Call Center applications to allow Call Centers to utilize the strength of Lucent vectoring capabilities to direct electronic communications to agents with the designated skills for handling them. The system monitors the Call Center's mailboxes to detect new messages, which are then copied to an ODBC database. An automatic acknowledgement is sent which may include the standard response time anticipated and tracking information. The application then initiates a call to the Definity ECS using the Vector Directory Number (VDN) that has been assigned to that mailbox. The VDN controls the priority and skills associated with the message. The CentreVu CMS begins to track the transaction as it would a voice call. When the Definity ECS selects an available agent, the CentreVu CT software sends a call-answered notification to the e-mail applications which uses internal lookup tables to correlate which agent to push the message to. The agent has various options, such as: creating a free-form response, selecting a canned response, transferring the message, closing the message with a reason code or disposing of it.

There are certain hardware and software requirements in the Definity ECS platform that must be in place to accommodate this application so, be sure to ask about exact configuration options.

Nortel

The latest entry from Nortel is the Symposium Web Response Server, Version 2.0. This product, running on a Microsoft Windows NT server, allows Call Centers the ability to interface with a Microsoft Exchange E-Mail system and blended e-mail transactions along with voice calls to agents. This approach, called Dynamic Transaction Handler (DTH), allows skills to be assigned in

the Symposium software which specify the agents capabilities in either type of transaction. The messages are "pushed" to the agent utilizing a browser based graphical user interface. In addition, the Nortel Symposium Web Response Server software supports both First Party Call Control and Third Party Call Control "soft-phones" via TAPI, SP, Active X Controls, OLE or DDE integration. There are several pre-requirements of the Meridian 1 ACD hardware/software, so be sure to contact your Nortel Account Executive for configuration details.

Siemens

Siemens has recently added e-mail distribution capability to their ProCenter Resume Router suite of applications. This package, MX Email, is available today as a stand-alone e-mail distribution system and will soon be offered as a component of the Resume Router skills based routing application.

The product was developed in partnership with Mustang.com and has all the attributes described in the Mustang.com section, as well as the ability to track metrics in a unified reporting format under Resume Router. In addition, Siemens has the tools in place to allow hooks into customer relations management packages like Siebel or Remedy. This functionality enhances the Call Center agents' ability to respond to e-mail inquiries by viewing the history of that customer in order to respond more appropriately.