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Enterprise contact center
A strategic opportunity for health care providers

What's at stake?

A new customer interaction model can lead to an increase in revenue and market share for health care providers

Consumers have never had so much choice: Choice of products and services, choice of channels; or information at their fingertips: Information about suppliers, products and services, and their performance. The influx of choices and information have made today's consumers very selective — they discriminate among companies with whom they do business — not just based on products, but also on the service they receive and their overall experience. This consumer behavior, which was mostly limited to other industries, has now started to penetrate the health care industry as well.

The outcome of this can be seen in analysts' customer satisfaction studies as health care companies consistently rank at the bottom of the table. While the health care provider industry was not evaluated, the health plan industry ranks next to last in customer satisfaction — reflecting the state of customer experience across the health care industry in general. As providers look to reverse this trend, the contact center may be a good starting point.

Evolving Role of Contact Centers

For virtually all businesses, consumer interaction is delivered through a wide range of channels including in-person, telephone, email, websites, mobile devices, social media, video, etc., through a mix of live, self-service, and even peer-to-peer engagement methods. And for most businesses, the hub of these capabilities is an enterprise contact center.

Long considered a cost of doing business or a "necessary evil," a contact center is now seen as a key strategic asset, critical to delivering a differentiating experience, helping drive loyalty and increasing market share.

Unlike other touch points such as advertising and channel partner relationships, the contact center gives companies a direct, two-way voice in the consumer interaction — enabling relationship building. It often serves as the "sensory unit" for the enterprise to identify broader issues the consumer might be facing, as it is on the front lines of consumer engagement outside of the direct care engagement.

The role of a contact center is becoming much more important for providers, as it serves to deliver an integrated experience across the major contact points in the patient's lifecycle (Figure 1), generally performed across various facilities and locations largely operating in siloes.

85% of organizations view customer experience provided through contact centers as a competitive differentiator.[1]

50% of organizations believe that the contact center plays a primary role in customer retention.[2]
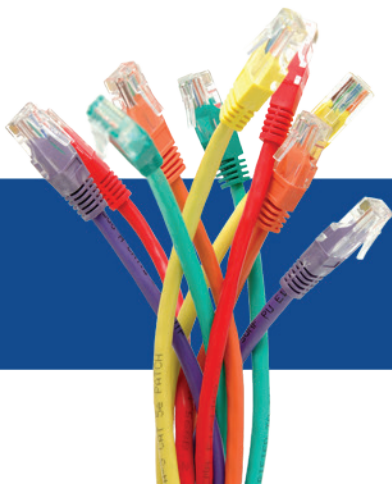
Instant Insights

Solving your most pressing business challenges starts with knowing the landscape. Instant insights offers you a digest of vital knowledge and practical steps you can take now.

Our take

Health care providers have started to leverage contact centers to unify the fragmented experience

Many health care providers today operate across a large distributed network of hospitals, physician practices, ambulatory centers, diagnostic centers, etc. In addition to the clinical interactions, the majority of the non-clinical ones are also performed independently at each facility — under a different set of policies and procedures, by people with many other responsibilities, using inadequate technologies. Their performance is not measured or incentivized to deliver the desired outcomes.

While the resources at each facility are doing their best to serve the consumers, there are no enterprise-wide governing principles on how these interactions should be handled and no metrics established to learn more about customer satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the individual locations do not have the scale to justify investing in leading consumer engagement technologies. As a result, the experience the consumers receive at different stages of their lifecycle (Figure 1) with a health care provider is inconsistent.

A patient's loyalty in such an environment is at best limited to a particular physician; certainly not to the enterprise or the overall brand. In fact, in many cases patients do not even know what enterprise a particular physician or office belongs to. And if that physician ends up leaving the system, the patient might follow them instead of seeing another physician within the organization.

A contact center can unify the disjointed experiences across the geographically distributed networks that many providers operate across.

This situation is aggravated with merger and acquisition activities in the provider sector. Hospital systems are buying physician practices, ambulatory centers, diagnostic centers, and home care services to manage risks and control costs along the entire care continuum.

A contact center can help unify these disjointed interactions by becoming a "one stop shop" for virtual interactions for all consumers, including both patients and physicians. The center efficiently processes the request and directs them to the appropriate destination if escalated support is required. The definition of what a contact center should do must be considered within the broader context of the patient experience across the entire organization. Looking at the key interactions at each step of a patient's lifecycle through a health system (Figure 1), a contact center can enable a single, consistent, and high-quality experience across all facilities and locations — particularly for the front- and back- ends of the revenue cycle.

Figure 1
Consumer experience lifecycle
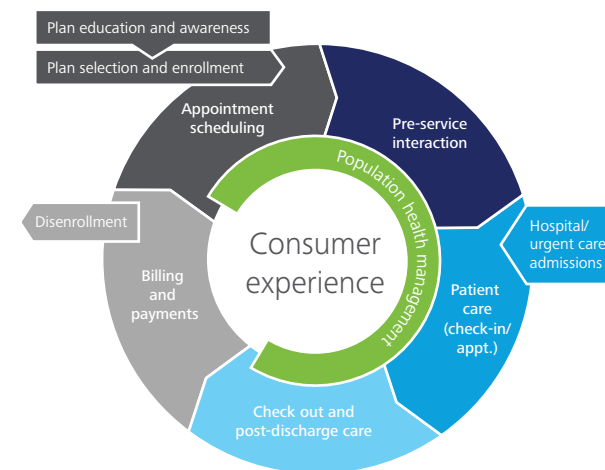
Approximately 50-75% of the key interactions in the consumer lifecycle are virtual and can be more consistently handled by an enterprise contact center.

One health care provider leveraged the enterprise contact center to improve its patient experience by more effectively scheduling patient appointments.

Situation	Solution	Impact
An integrated delivery system experienced declining performance related to customer service, patient collections, and overall level of patient engagement due to: • A decentralized and distributed service delivery model • Inconsistent or non-existent customer interaction policies and procedures • Ineffective customer service workforce training • Inadequate technologies and workforce forecasting tools to support customer service operations	An enterprise contact center function was established and rolled out to the majority of the practices, standardizing policies and procedures for customer interactions and transactions. Adequate staffing was put in place, using enhanced workforce forecasting and scheduling tools.	• Increased revenue related to enhanced customer engagement and collections practices, and improved customer loyalty • A more deeply engaged workforce equipped with customer relationship management skills • Scalable technology platform that enables efficient growth and integration • An improved and consistent patient experience across all sites of care supported by the contact center; specific call handling examples include: – A new patient calls in to schedule an appointment. The patient is told that while this practice is not taking any new patients there are others within 5-10 miles. The appointment is immediately scheduled at another practice within the network, and revenue is saved. – A phone call from an existing patient to schedule an appointment is answered promptly (if they have to wait, they are informed and updated on their expected wait time). The appointment is scheduled with complete insurance verification. The patient understands their responsibility for the payment, eliminating any surprises down the road.

The path forward

Plan and execute the transformation

Plan the transformation

Know where you are and where you want to go

Defining and operationalizing a contact center model is not easy. It requires a broad understanding of capabilities across four key dimensions — strategy, people, process, and technology — and how they all operate in tandem to deliver the desired results.

- *Strategy* — the consumer interaction strategy must be aligned with the broader patient experience strategy and business goals.

- *People* — satisfied employees will positively engage customers. Hiring talent with the right attitude and skillset and creating a customer-centric culture is critical to initial and ongoing success.

- *Process* — the ability of the contact center in delivering the desired experience depends on a clear definition of in-scope processes (e.g., scheduling), an understanding of the unique needs of the practices, and outlining the hand-offs with other functions across the organization. Additionally, the underlying processes for operating the center, e.g., quality management, workforce management, must be clearly communicated and defined.

- *Technology* — ever-evolving consumer expectations, growing choice of channels, and widely distributed network of practices and hospitals necessitate a 360° view of the consumers. Enhanced consumer engagement technologies, in addition to scheduling and other business applications, need to be evaluated for user-friendliness and efficiency.

The first and foremost task is to understand the current consumer interaction capabilities across these four areas — what exists and what doesn't, how mature it is, is it scalable for the enterprise, etc. The next step is to understand what the organization's future broader business plans and objectives are, and align with the contact center design and operations with those expectations.

These two activities will help you identify the gap between current and future state, and determine what capabilities need to be built versus optimized.

Rally the executive support

Buy-in from executives, both clinical and administrative, is critical to any initiative. Given the amount of change for the providers, required investment, and competing priorities, any project will require a compelling business case.

A significant amount of work is needed to gather data and facts to show the benefits for your environment, but in our experience, a contact center can directly impact both your top and bottom line.

Top line impact — increases revenue generation by:

- Growing market share by delivering service interactions that focus on improving the consumer experience.

- Retaining patient appointments within the system by having the ability to see physicians' availability across the entire network (versus a single location) and by more effectively managing physician referrals to enterprise as a whole.

- Timely collection of revenue by consistent execution and tighter integration between scheduling and insurance verification processes.

Bottom line impact — reduces operating cost by:

- Gaining economies of scale by leveraging a larger pool of cross-trained agents, decreasing redundant operations and eliminating inefficient processes.

- Aligning customer contacts more appropriately with employee's skillset.

Educate and align the stakeholders

Misaligned stakeholders is one of the top impediments to any successful operating model transformation. Stakeholder support should be acquired from the beginning before the transformation is kicked off — the key stakeholders should be included in the initial discussions to limit surprises and reduce resistance to change.

The biggest resistance to an enterprise contact center we see is the physicians' desire to have complete control of their schedules. They are an important stakeholder group that needs to be supportive of the purpose and process of the change. Our experience is that it takes time and resources for socialization and education — but once the physicians understand the journey and its attributes, they encourage the implementation. Transparency around benefits, potential challenges, and planned mitigation strategies is critical to accomplishing this task.

Hire the right talent

The transformation and ongoing operations require employees with a deep understanding of contact center process, operations, and technologies and the wider scope of the provider sector as well as the current environment.

Appropriate behavioral tools and tests can identify candidates who have the necessary empathy and ability to effectively handle the stress caused by working with patients, who often have major life-impacting issues and illnesses, as well as their families. Identifying and hiring candidates who can demonstrate that they "care" will deliver a differentiated experience.

As health care services and technologies continue to mature, the contact center will increasingly offer advanced services like medical triaging that will require more specialized skills like nursing. Hiring talent with the necessary skills and the right "customer-centric" attitude will be critical to ongoing success.

Execute the transformation

Once executive buy-in is obtained, stakeholders are aligned, and the team with the desired skills is built, it is time to execute. But keep in mind that the contact center transformation is a process — you are changing the way you interact with your consumers — do not rush it.

As providers generally begin this journey with disparate systems and contact handling processes, often due to various mergers and acquisitions, a three-step approach is recommended. Start by implementing strong foundational capabilities, improve and stabilize them over time, and then move toward enhanced and next generation or advanced capabilities based on business needs.

- *Foundational* — capabilities enable more effective contact handling, reporting, and management of contact center functions.

- *Expanded* — capabilities continue to mature, making the operations more efficient and effective at generating a return on the investment.

- *Next generation* — with well-defined and implemented contact handling capabilities in place, differentiating capabilities (e.g., mobile, kiosk, video) enable a robust servicing model and can provide a competitive and differentiated patient experience.
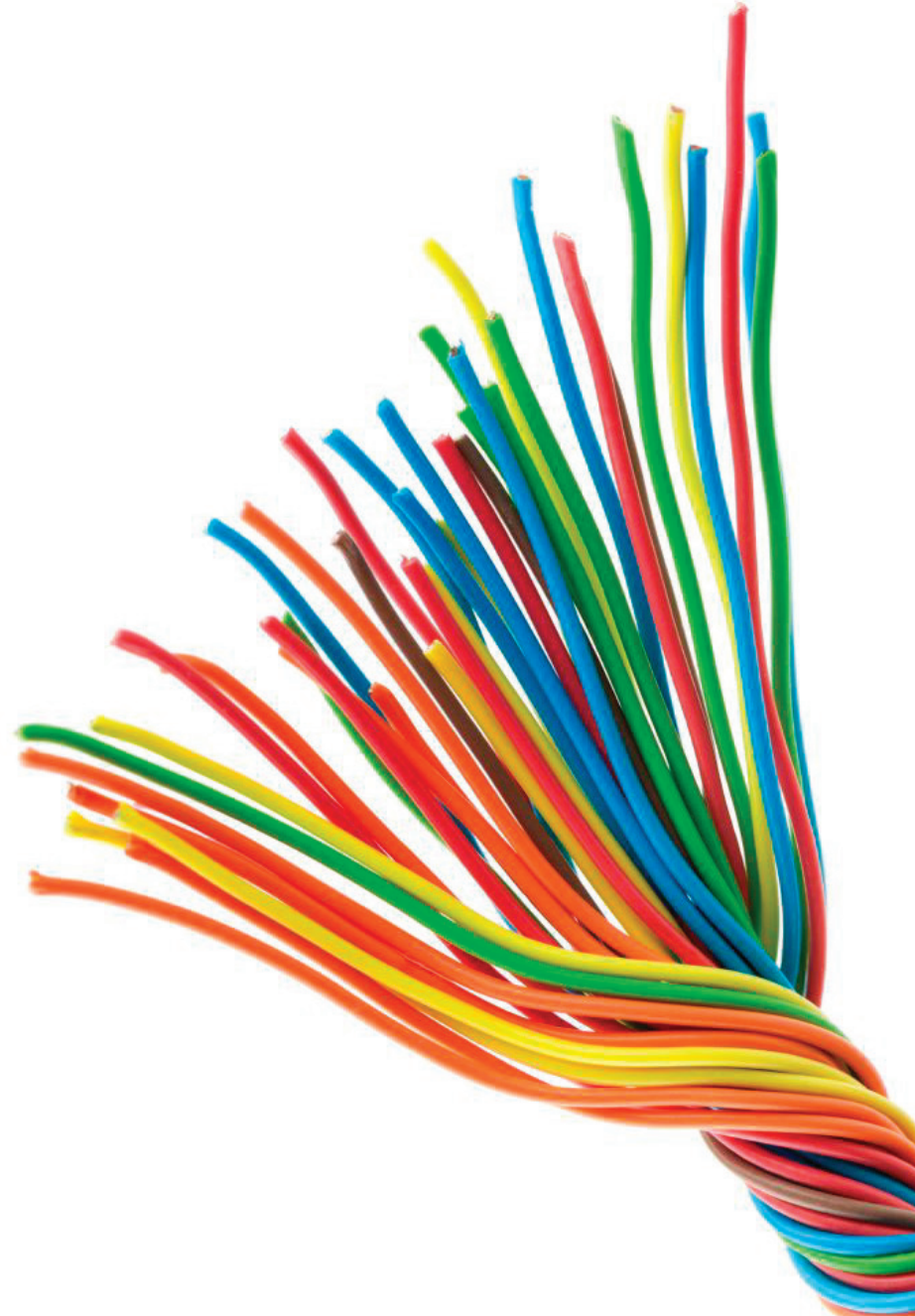
The bottom line

There has never been a more critical time for providers to build enterprise contact center capabilities.

Providers are going through a significant amount of change — health care reform implementation, rising costs, increasing competitive pressure, narrowing operating margins and increased merger and acquisition activity. It will be critical to their success to effectively manage the patient journey during this chaotic time. A contact center can help providers increase their market share by delivering a differentiated and consistent consumer experience while reducing operational costs.

Contacts

You are not alone — many providers are in the midst of preparing and planning for their contact center transformation journey. To prepare your organization for designing and implementing an enterprise contact center, please contact:

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[1] Deloitte Global Contact Center Survey, 2015

[2] Ibid.

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