



The Top Six Considerations When Evaluating On-Demand Call Center Technologies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Enterprise call centers are at a crossroads with regards to their technology infrastructure. As management attempts to balance the goals of improving the quality of customer interactions while lowering costs, they are often hindered by outdated technology that constrains their business users from responding quickly to business change. Even if these companies were to invest millions of dollars in costly upgrades, it would not result in significant improvements in call center agility, efficiency, and effectiveness.

That's why businesses are turning to Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) - or on-demand technologies - to step up the functionality and flexibility of their call centers. A new generation of on-demand call center solutions now offers innovative ways to address the top challenges and priorities associated with managing call centers, including:

- **Optimizing infrastructure to manage fluctuations in call volumes**
- **Obtaining integrated visibility into call center operations**
- **Rapidly responding to changes in business conditions**
- **Optimizing agent workforce productivity with advanced tools and virtualization**
- **Delivering a uniform customer experience across all channels**

This white paper discusses recent technology innovations in the SaaS model that support mission-critical areas of the enterprise with high reliability and security. It also discusses the top six considerations you need to keep in mind when selecting an on-demand call center platform.



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The Top Six Considerations When Evaluating On-Demand Call Center Technologies

On-Demand Technology: Ready to Meet Enterprise Call Center Requirements.

Call centers have reached a cross-roads with their technology infrastructures. Aging technologies, which have served well for many years, are reaching their end of life and forcing costly upgrade decisions. As they evaluate their technology options, many companies are deciding to break away from the constraints of disparate, fragmented technology in their existing call centers. They want a flexible call center solution that helps them react quickly to business changes such as spikes in call volumes and more aggressive customer interaction goals.

At the same time, the global economy and relentless pressure to differentiate their business have heightened executive awareness of the quality of customer interactions. Economic drivers are also pushing management to reduce call center costs: the ripple effect from the credit crunch has caused companies to tighten budgets as economic uncertainty looms. As a result, businesses are relying on on-demand technology as a way to shift from high up-front capital expenditures to an operational expenditures model.

It's no surprise, then, that on-demand call center technology is attracting considerable attention - including yours, given you are reading this paper. Often referred to as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), on-demand solutions are driving productivity in other areas of the enterprise, including CRM, human resources, and finance, and the trend is toward use in call centers as well. In fact, Gartner predicts that adoption of on-demand software models will increase, stating that: "Internet technologies and a renewed interest in the hosted delivery and operating model offer early adopters the opportunity to innovate and benefit from significantly reduced deployment times."¹

On-Demand Technology Has Matured.

The concept of network-based, hosted call centers is not new. This type of call center was first offered as a managed service in the late 1980s. However, it failed to gain wide acceptance because service providers were unable to address enterprise concerns around complexity, lack of flexibility, and most importantly, control. But new innovations, including Java, Internet technologies, open source, and distributed grid computing, have been proven

across the enterprise as well as in massive commerce hubs such as eBay. These technologies have reached the call center, addressed enterprise concerns, and opened the way for organizations to seriously consider adopting on-demand solutions. Advanced platforms can:

- **Provide enterprise-grade security and availability**
- **Provide scalability and variable capacity in an as-needed model**
- **Deliver greater operational efficiencies by implementing new, deceptively simple improvements that radically improve customer interactions**
- **Make a single-vendor, single-platform solution possible**
- **Provide unprecedented visibility and control to business users**
- **Leverage continuous innovation through IP-based technology**

In short, on-demand models have matured to the point where they can easily support mission-critical call center requirements and provide access to unique capabilities and ongoing innovation.

¹ Drew Kraus, Research Vice-President of Enterprise Communications Applications for Gartner



Successful Early Adopters

Did you know that a substantial number of early adopters are realizing the value of on-demand technology to drive labor productivity, reduce the costs of traditional customer-premise equipment (CPE) models, and drive down facilities costs? They are also experiencing faster and continuous innovation, as well as greater return on investment by using technology that offers unprecedented simplicity. On-demand solutions are easy to use, and business users can reconfigure them on the fly. Because of these trends, analysts are expecting rapid growth in on-demand call center solutions. For example, Datamonitor predicts that hosted agent positions will grow at 45.3% compounded annual growth rate between 2007 and 2012, which will amount to well over 1.5 million hosted agent positions by 2012.

Top Six Considerations When Evaluating On-Demand Call Center Platforms.

Not all on-demand call center platforms are the same, so you need to carefully evaluate your options. The traditional areas of concern around availability, security, and integration, for example, are still relevant, as not all providers of on-demand solutions

have necessarily addressed these concerns with the right technologies and best practices. Other concerns—for example, ease of implementation and breadth of feature sets – are also important to consider as you investigate on-demand technology.

1. Security

When evaluating on-demand technology for your call center, you need to ensure that the on-demand solution you choose addresses security in all the layers of the stack, including the physical, network, application and data levels. Each layer plays a vital role in protecting your organization in the following ways:

- **Physical security** Because your data resides in a network operations center hosted by the SaaS vendor, you need to ensure that their data center is protected by several security perimeters, such as mantraps, surveillance cameras, and security staff. You should also enquire about how many security experts they have on staff and qualify their credentials, as best practices are typically driven from the top down.

- **Network security** Before selecting a SaaS vendor, ensure that their network is protected by multi-layer firewalls and intrusion detection systems.

Weak network security is one of the biggest threats to your corporate data.

- **Systems-level and application-level security** It's also important to ensure that security is an integral part of how your potential SaaS vendor designed and built their call center technology – not just an afterthought. Effective security at system and application levels requires careful planning and execution through every stage of the software development lifecycle. In addition, developers and testers need to perform thorough code testing to prove that their software adheres to industry-standard security processes. You should also fully understand their data encryption standards, as not all vendors are able to meet the industry standards and can inadvertently place your organization at risk.

- **Data security** You should also explore how your potential SaaS vendor handles data encryption. Many vendors still do not encrypt their customers' sensitive data, which exposes customers to unnecessary risk.



2. Availability

Mission-critical call center applications and platforms that take a distributed grid approach have essentially eliminated the concept of a single point of failure, as well as minimized the impact of any type of failure. Mission-critical components are protected by hot failover, while other components are highly distributed to ensure low impact of failure. When delivered on demand, these solutions can provide higher availability than even on-premise solutions can offer. When evaluating on-demand technology for your call center, ensure that your vendor has designed a solution for mission-critical availability. Ask about their service-level agreements and their maintenance windows (for example, on which days do they occur, at what time, and how many times a quarter). Any down time of more than an hour or two every three months is most likely unsuitable for your business, as it will impact the ability for your call center to answer customer calls.

You should also get an understanding of their architecture and the likelihood of single point of failure, as well as the extent of the impact of failure should it occur. Generally, you don't want a solution with a monolithic architecture, as this leads to a higher probability

of single point of failure (and also increases the impact of any failure). You will achieve the highest availability when you choose a SaaS provider who has:

- **A highly distributed, redundant architecture**
- **Multiple, geographically redundant data centers and the ability to provide fully redundant operations centers for any disaster recovery in a true, active-to-active configuration**
- **Operational excellence and investments in proven, high-caliber staff and carrier-grade equipment**
- **100% control over the code base and a proven depth of understanding of the code (This is only possible if the code has been built from the ground up by the team that manages it.)**
- **Automatic failover across multiple carriers, which eliminates down time due to any carrier outages Very few companies whose core competency is not the call center can afford to pay for this level of redundancy, operational excellence, and mission-critical availability.**

3. Integration

When evaluating SaaS options for your call center, understand how potential vendors plan to integrate with your existing call center and enterprise applications, as well as the expected cost of the integration. For the easi-

est, lowest-cost integration, choose a SaaS vendor that provides open APIs and pre-packaged integrations. SaaS vendors that have built their solution using a service oriented architecture (SOA) often offer accelerated integration with enterprise applications. Those vendors using an integrated, Web services-based architecture can essentially turn your call center into a web service, which further accelerates integration of their on-demand call center functionality with your existing, on-premise applications.

4. Maturity and Unification Feature Set.

The maturity and integration of feature sets among SaaS vendors varies considerably. As you evaluate providers, look for those service providers offering an end-to-end, integrated solution that supports the full call center lifecycle - from recruiting and scheduling to management and call routing. Otherwise, you'll be forced to integrate missing functionality using point-to-point integration, which drives up costs and ultimately limits visibility and control. The goal is to make full use of SaaS and



SOA-based platforms, which, when fully exploited by vendors, enables them to offer you diverse, highly useful functionality as part of a unified, soup-to-nuts, on-demand call center solution. Ideally, you want to be able to implement this functionality in an array of configurations – individually or in groups – to best suit the needs of your organization.

5. Deployment Flexibility to Support Gradual Innovation

The beauty of on-demand call center technology is that it doesn't require a massive rip-and-replace effort just to try it out. You don't have to make massive investments in technology and expertise because it offers a low-risk, pay-as-you-go model. As you evaluate

different SaaS providers, however, take into consideration the level of flexibility you have in deploying their platform.

Can you innovate at your own pace by simply leveraging selected functionality to enhance an existing call center? Or are you forced to deploy the entire platform all at once? Can you roll out the solution to specific line groups or for certain call types – rather than as part of a blanket rollout?

Ideally, you want as much flexibility as possible – one of the key benefits that SaaS models can potentially provide. Find out if your potential vendors enable you to implement all at once, in stages, or feature by feature as needed.

For More Information

On-demand technology is ready to support your mission-critical call center operations and give you a competitive advantage by providing access to unprecedented innovation, flexibility, and control.

For more information about on demand call center solutions from Stringcan, please visit www.Stringcan.com