



# Improving Customer Service Representative Effectiveness Demands a Unified Agent Desktop

## Executive Summary

Contact centers engage in CRM projects for a variety of reasons. Many do so because they can increase revenue by better understanding their customers. Others focus on improving operational efficiencies and agent effectiveness. When we surveyed large contact centers on their use of CRM applications, the top two goals that respondents identified clearly validate our assumptions. More than 60% of contact centers continue to focus on:

- Improving or maintaining operational/agent efficiencies (number one answer)
- Increasing revenue driven from contact center operations (tied for number two)
- Improving the customer experience (tied for number two)

### Exhibit 1

Operational Efficiencies, Increasing Revenue and Improving Customer Experience Win Top Spots

Source: Yankee Group, 2006



Note: Total doesn't equal 100% due to rounding.

Not surprisingly, operational efficiencies had a substantial lead over all other choices (see Exhibit 1). However, issues such as improving customer satisfaction, increasing revenue-generating activities and customer retention all ranked highly among CRM project goals. But many CRM implementations have done little to meet the top goals and objectives of contact centers. In fact, CRM applications have become yet another silo of information for many companies. Our survey of large contact centers revealed that 42% of contact centers using a packaged CRM implementation are not satisfied with their current CRM initiatives. Even worse, 72% still have not attained a single view of customer transactions across all touchpoints. Yet effective implementations of CRM are critical to the success of just about every company. After all, the customer is any company's most important asset.

This Yankee Group Report focuses on how companies can leverage the paradigm shift occurring in enterprise technology to meet their top goals of improving agent efficiency, increasing revenue and improving the customer experience. By consolidating critical applications into a single, unified, role-based desktop, contact centers can improve the agent's ability to provide quality customer service on a timely basis.

Unified desktop technology leverages the latest advancements in service-oriented architecture and composite application frameworks to enable the assembly, distribution and management of business solutions in a way not possible before—easier, faster and with a lower TCO. These solutions leverage the best of existing packaged applications or in-house developed applications to deliver a process-oriented interaction to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the customer service representative.

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## I. Contact Center Operations Are Critical to Overall Customer Relationship Strategies

The convergence of customer service, sales and marketing technologies that has occurred during the last few years has led to the general acceptance that the call center should and will evolve into the “contact center.” The contact center—a high-touch interaction channel—must continue to provide quality customer care, while also acting as an individualized marketing channel to push new products and services. Our research reveals that 41% of contact centers are evolving from cost centers to profit centers.

Competition in many markets increasingly is based on the level of service—so much that customers are gained and lost in the contact center. A widely discussed topic among company executives is turning companies into “customer advocates” to gain customer trust and reduce churn. Customer advocacy initiatives meet reality in the contact center.

Providing superior customer service across all interaction channels is essential for all organizations. More than 75% of contact centers polled consider contact centers very important to their overall customer relationship management strategies.

When a customer contacts a company, businesses must manage that customer interaction quickly and accurately across any touchpoint. A poor service experience will have a negative ripple effect on customer satisfaction. Over time, it could potentially:

- Increase costs by forcing multiple interactions with different employees over multiple channels—customers will create multiple service requests through the phone, web, e-mail or chat
- Decrease potential wallet share by losing valuable cross-selling or up-selling opportunities
- Force the customer to look at competitive offerings

## CRM Implementations Have Room for Improvement

During the last few decades, many companies chose to invest in CRM specifically to provide superior customer service. Although 47% of packaged CRM initiatives met expectations and 11% performed slightly above expectations, not one participant said it exceeded expectations, and more than 42% stated that it was below or did not meet expectations.

It’s difficult to make CRM work in a contact center given the challenges associated with streamlining customer-facing processes. Many contact centers have:

- Significant current IT investments
- Outdated legacy or homegrown software solutions
- Siloed applications and data repositories
- Constantly changing customer demands

Depending on the scope and complexity, many contact centers’ CRM initiatives have faced lengthy implementation timelines of at least 12 to 18 months to a multiyear endeavor with cost overruns and budget constraints.

Additionally, although investments in enterprise applications have helped eliminate islands of automation, these implementations have not truly helped achieve the vision of a complete cross-channel customer experience. Now, instead of islands of automation, companies must bridge continents to remove disconnected business processes that increase agent call handling times and decrease customer satisfaction.

## 360-Degree View Creates Challenges for Finding the Right Information at the Right Time

Almost universally, large integrated application suites and best-of-breed CRM application software have failed to deliver a 360-degree view of the customer in the contact center. Many businesses agree that achieving a 360-degree view of the customer is essential. Yet although many organizations have invested in technologies and processes to create a 360-degree view, efficiency and effectiveness have not necessarily improved as a result of these initiatives.

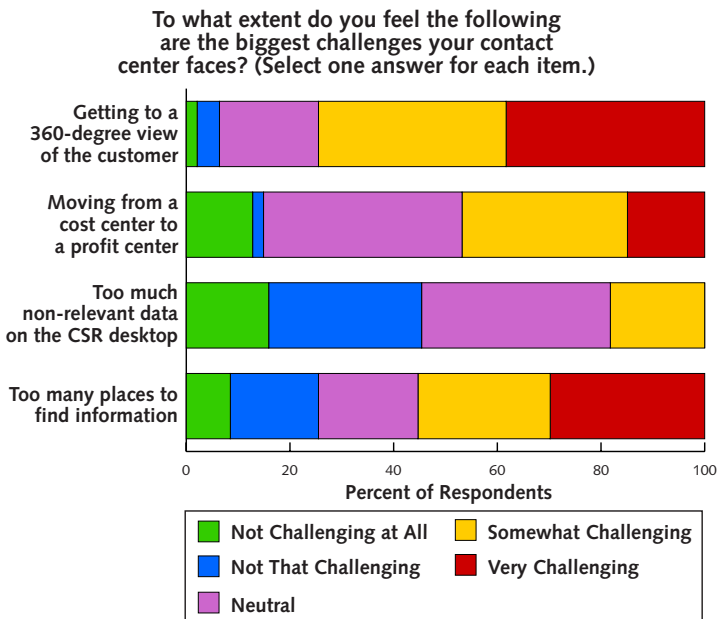
Seventy-six percent of respondents stated that getting to a 360-degree view of the customer is somewhat challenging to very challenging (see Exhibit 2). Since the 1990s, many businesses have focused on achieving a 360-degree of the customer. However, this emphasis has led to a flawed CRM strategy that has hurt efficiency and has decreased the ability to provide effective customer service, which increases the profitability of customer relationships. Contact centers don't necessarily have too

much non-relevant data on the customer service representative (CSR) desktop. Rather, they have too many places to find the information the agent needs.

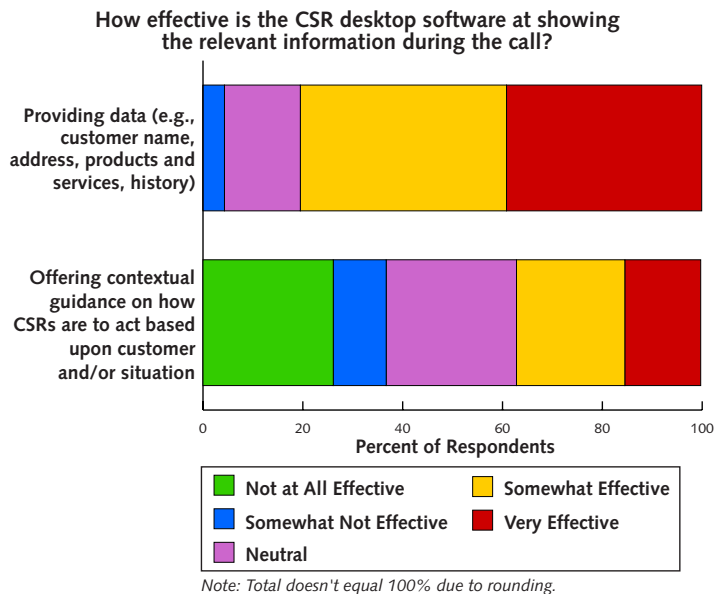
Although a 360-degree view of customer information is still a very important strategy, the application used by frontline CSRs should provide in-context information to increase interaction profitability. A critical point is to increase efficiency and effectiveness by having the right actionable information. More than 60% of respondents stated that their agent desktops were not effective at providing the right information in a timely manner based on the current situation or customer.

Although Exhibit 3 shows that agent desktop systems are effective at providing data during the call, many contact centers still don't effectively provide CSRs with systems that offer contextual information and guidance.

**Exhibit 2**  
Contact Centers Still Challenged by Achieving a 360-Degree View and Too Many Places to Find Information  
Source: Yankee Group, 2006



**Exhibit 3**  
Contextual Guidance Is Not Available for CSRs  
Source: Yankee Group, 2006



Because contact centers are extremely important to CRM strategies, leading companies have invested in improving their contact center operations with targeted investments to improve their customer management initiatives, such as:

- Communications improvements (IP, computer telephony integration, routing)
- Workforce management improvements (quality management and training)
- Knowledge management systems
- Training
- Agent incentives

But even after the investments and incentives, a large problem still exists in the contact center that is a significant bottleneck to achieving customer satisfaction and operational efficiency: the contact center agent desktop.

Most of that critical data is stored in disparate enterprise software applications designed to automate individual, discrete business tasks, and it is not optimized for complete customer-facing processes. Sixty-two percent of current investments for CRM have only somewhat or not at all improved operational efficiency and customer satisfaction, but most are still having problems because CRM does not capture all customer interactions. Because most CRM applications were brought in to help sales and marketing improve the customer experience, they became yet another silo on the contact center agent desktop.

Regardless, our research with businesses—including direct experience in several cases with their CRM projects—indicates that CRM in various guises continues to be a priority for many businesses. Consequently, organizations are beginning to evaluate alternatives to solve the never-ending problem of delivering a unified agent desktop that supports the goal of attaining a single view of the customer.

## II. Ensuring Contact Center Agents Become Customer Advocates

Although the future is brighter today than it was during the 1990s, contact centers still face many significant efficiency and effectiveness challenges. Contact center agents should personify customer service and become customer advocates.

Strong customer relationships are critical to the success of many businesses. Businesses rarely have a second chance to make a quality first impression. Because 77% of today's interactions are conducted by phone, it's still important that frontline customer service representatives can operate as customer advocates.

Contact center managers are expected to balance budgets while maintaining excellent customer service levels. Nowhere else in an enterprise are costs and performance levels so closely scrutinized. However, many companies still struggle with increased service costs. Escalating costs are directly associated with the cost of maintaining and upgrading disparate systems and manual, disconnected business processes that increase agent call handling times and decrease customer satisfaction.

During the past year, Yankee Group discussed with many contact center managers their goals and future objectives. The recurring theme was the pressure to transform into a profit center. Agents are not well equipped to meet their objectives because their operational environment is a hodgepodge of tools, which causes inefficiency.

Although there are many projects underway to facilitate the transformation, such as agent training for cross-sell and improved self-service for call deflection, many contact centers are also focusing on agent desktop improvements as a high priority for improving agent performance and assisting in the profit center transformation.

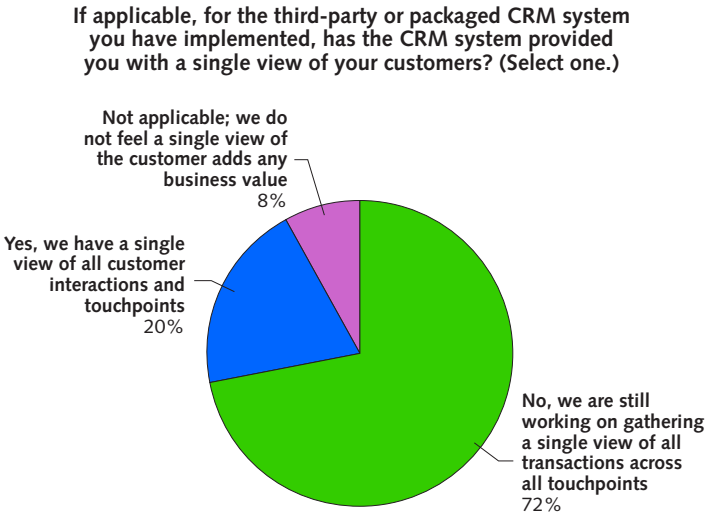
The current agent desktop fails because:

- The agent is focused on how to mechanically assist customers versus focusing on the customer’s needs.
- The agents rely on memory to navigate the 10 to 20 applications on their desktop to serve a customer in a 3- to 5-minute call.
- There is no single view of the customer.
- There is no single view of a business process.

Although contact centers already have invested heavily in technology, current investments still don’t satisfy management’s desire for decreased costs and increased agent efficiency. CRM, billing systems and knowledge bases contain valuable information about customers for CSRs. CSRs often must look at multiple systems to enter or find relevant customer information and step through business processes manually, which results in low first contact resolution rates and long call handling times.

**Exhibit 4**  
 Most Surveyed Are Still Working on a Single View of the Customer

Source: Yankee Group, 2006



CRM and customer care solutions promised a single view in the contact center. Why have these solutions failed to deliver?

Yankee Group research has discovered that only a handful of contact centers require agents to learn less than three or four applications. Most contact centers have at least 10 and sometimes 20 different information sources, which makes it difficult for CSRs to find the correct information quickly. Our survey showed that 72% of the respondents using a CRM system still had not achieved a single view of the customer across all touchpoints (see Exhibit 4).

Many contact centers agree that customers can remain on a call for 10 to 15 minutes as the CSRs research an issue. In some cases, CSRs are forced to end the call, which requires a follow-up call to resolve the case. In most call center environments, CSRs must access, manage and interact with a variety of packaged, custom and legacy applications running in a variety of environments that range from green-screen mainframe to Windows client/server applications to handle the different aspects of a single call. Navigating multiple applications and departmental silos creates the following issues:

- Redundant data entry and manual processes including after-the-call processes (e.g., order fulfillment process) increase average handle time and decrease first contact resolution rates.
- Multiple interfaces increase agent training needs.
- Lack of actionable insight creates missed opportunities for cross-selling.

More than 66% of call centers require agents to navigate three or more applications. One large contact center had 25 applications on the agent desktop. Consequently, contact centers need a realistic and practical approach to the desktop problem.

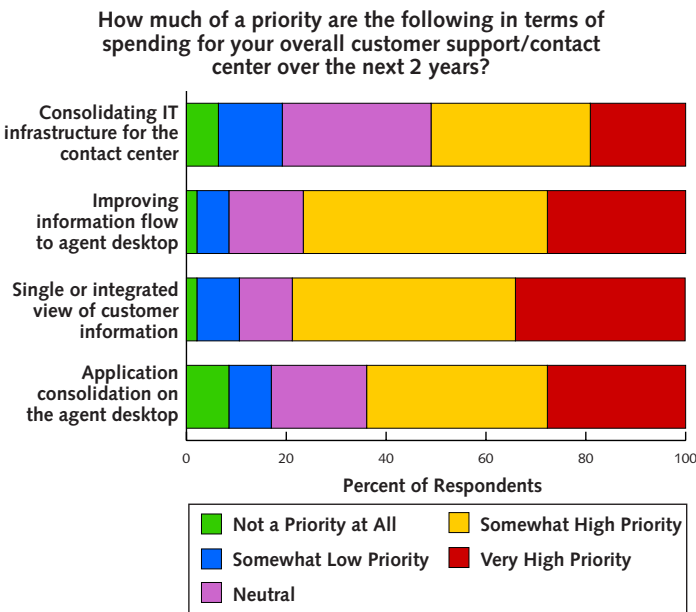
Good news: When we asked contact centers about their spending priorities during the next 2 years, 79% stated a somewhat high priority to very high priority was to improve information flow to the agent desktop, second to an integrated view of the agent desktop (83%). Also, application consolidation on the agent desktop was a higher priority than consolidating the IT infrastructure for the contact center (see Exhibit 5).

## Creating a Unified Agent Desktop Using SOA and Composite Application Framework

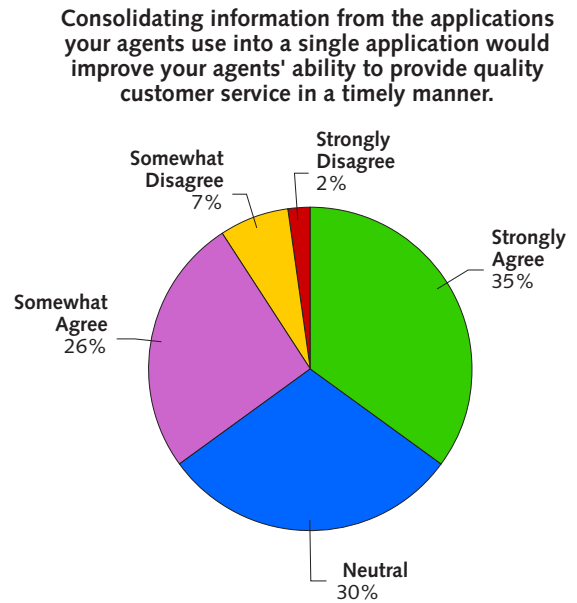
A unified agent desktop represents a paradigm shift in how information throughout the enterprise is accessed and used. Companies can use industry standards that build on existing infrastructure and eliminate hard-coded connections between applications and processes. They can take an incremental approach to continually realize business and IT benefits, while leveraging their existing IT investments. The ultimate plan is to eliminate redundant data entry, streamline the execution and compliance of business processes, and get all relevant information to the CSRs' fingertips.

Many contact centers agree that by consolidating critical applications into a single, unified, role-based desktop, contact centers can improve agents' ability to provide quality customer service in a timely manner (see Exhibit 6).

**Exhibit 5**  
Integrated View of Customer Information and Information Flow to Agent Desktop Highest Priorities  
Source: Yankee Group, 2006



**Exhibit 6**  
Consolidating Applications on the Agent Desktop Will Improve Quality of Service  
Source: Yankee Group, 2006



The unified agent desktop can:

- Improve agent effectiveness by creating user-centric navigation based on real-time customer interaction as opposed to static, siloed, application-centric user interfaces.
- Reduce contact center costs by streamlining processes, which would eliminate redundant data entry, minimize errors and lower agent training costs.
- Improve sales by not only using cross-channel marketing campaigns, but also making it easier for CSRs to identify cross-selling opportunities by matching real-time customer needs with additional products and services.
- Enhance the customer experience across all channels by providing the best possible service and quickly resolving customer issues.

Contact centers cannot be expected to rip out and replace existing IT investments. Instead, any contact center initiative must extend and leverage investments as well as provide flexibility for future projects and enable the adoption of newer technologies, such as VoIP and analytics.

Contact centers can now leverage a new era of applications resulting directly from the convergence of three trends: service-oriented architecture (SOA), web services and XML. This new technology foundation enables the assembly, distribution and management of business solutions in a way not possible before—easier, faster and with a lower TCO. Commonly referred to as composite applications, these solutions leverage the best of existing packaged applications or in-house developed applications to deliver a process-oriented interaction to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the customer service representative.

Yankee Group has talked about the benefits of an intelligent contact center for many years. However, only recently through the power of SOA approaches have contact centers been able to empower frontline CSRs with actionable information through in-context applications that increase the profitability of each customer relationship while lowering costs.

The recommended approach to create a more unified agent desktop is to use application components that interact with multiple back-end systems and execute business processes more effectively. As a result, the agent desktop becomes more process-oriented. Components are exposed as services. Business processes and data integration begin to enhance the agent experience.

Exhibit 7 on the next page illustrates a unified agent desktop. The following describes the numbers referenced in red:

- 1. Applications, configurations, dashboards:** There is a user-configured application launch for secondary applications along with other links to reporting and preferences for personalization.
- 2. Soft phone, integrated telephony, automatic call distribution (ACD):** This is a call control to initiate, transfer, forward, conference or disconnect calls. This displays the number of calls in the queue, the average wait time and the longest wait time.
- 3. Contextual guidance/navigation:** Based on the current situation, contextual guidance can be displayed, which can guide the agent step-by-step through situations.
- 4. Script with embedded customer details:** This is a pre-populated view of all relevant information, such as customer details, script and next best action. Information entered in a dynamic script can be automatically updated to underlying business systems.
- 5. History:** This window presents a unified view of all customer details across channels, such as IVR, web and contact center.
- 6. Job assignment:** This window displays the current job status. It's critical for call centers that offer universal agents, skills-based routing and presence-based chat.
- 7. Flexible contextual portlets:** Portlets add context and ease of access to information or functionality in other systems, such as knowledge management systems.
- 8. Agent notes:** This scratchpad area is used during a call. All post-call processing happens automatically, such as name changes to other data repositories, relevant activity notes and other workflow items.
- 9. Communication center:** Critical alerts can be displayed in this section of the desktop.

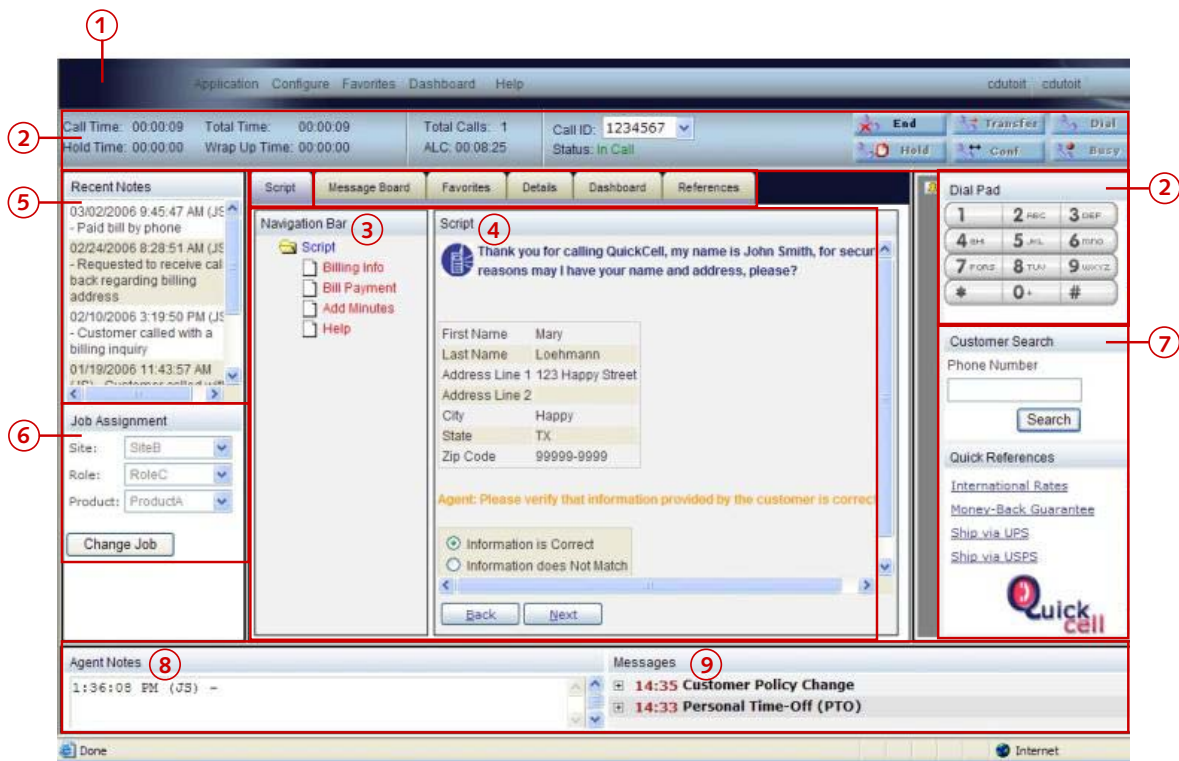
True agent desktop enhancement demands seamless integration at the client and middle-tier. SOA lets IT respond quickly to demands for new and improved contact center processes. SOA will not only assist in service enabling all existing IT investments, but also it will unify the underlying data silos and business processes across multiple applications with a combination of application middleware and portal technologies that call on web services to dramatically improve operations and create streamlined interactions.

SOA provides additional benefits to contact centers that also use in-house, outsourced and remote agents. By service enabling the legacy applications and creating a thin-client unified agent interface, all outsourced and remote agents can act as efficiently as in-sourced agents without affecting performance. Outsourced agents will also have the benefits of a truly integrated experience, ensuring the expectations of outsourcers' client customers are consistently met.

The ultimate goal is to create a more unified agent desktop using component application standards that interact with multiple back-end systems and execute business processes more effectively.

**Exhibit 7**  
An Example of a Unified Agent Desktop

Source: Yankee Group, 2006



### III. Conclusions

Companies can now transform and expand their customer care operations to reduce costs while improving the quality of their customer service. A redesigned agent desktop increases agent productivity by proactively providing customer information and sharing it more efficiently and effectively between different applications, dramatically cutting the time agents must spend searching for and entering data to complete a call.

Before tight integration, a CSR might need to spend the majority of the interaction time shuffling between different systems to resolve a call, which could take 13 minutes. This is difficult while troubleshooting a product or resolving a billing dispute, as well as during simple routine tasks such as an address change request. However, a tightly integrated desktop can reduce the elapsed time to 4 minutes by consolidating information, providing improved navigation based on context-sensitive information and reducing time for call wrap-up. The new process also enables the agent to provide real-time recommendations to support customer retention and marketing programs.

Using new technologies such as SOA and composite application frameworks enables dramatic improvements in contact center efficiency by delivering better information faster to service representatives through XML, web services, business process automation and data transformation.

Contact centers will realize the following benefits:

- Improved customer loyalty by enabling consistent, competitive service levels across multiple channels
- Enhanced contact center productivity by providing agents with resources and relevant information in an easy-to-use format
- A smoother transition to a profit center through the provision of contextual information and conversation guidance tools that enable productive, revenue-generating conversations
- Extended value from existing investments in packaged and legacy contact center applications by improving their usability and user acceptance
- Improved adaptability in customer service operational architecture for easier business process change management and future technological advancements
- Reduced employee training time and cost by streamlining multiple applications and eliminating application complexity
- Increased employee satisfaction by reducing the complexity of the desktop environment

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### Corporate Headquarters

31 St. James Avenue  
**BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS** 02116-4114  
T 617.956.5000  
F 617.956.5005  
info@yankeegroup.com

### EMEA

55 Russell Square  
**LONDON WC1B 4HP**  
**UNITED KINGDOM**  
T 44.20.7307.1050  
F 44.20.7323.3747  
euroinfo@yankeegroup.com

### North America

200-260 Terence Matthews Crescent  
**OTTAWA, ONTARIO K2M 2C7**  
**CANADA**  
T 613.591.0087  
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