



HELLO... IS ANYONE THERE?

ENSURING AVAILABILITY OF CALL CENTER OPERATIONS

AN EXECUTIVE WHITE PAPER

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HELLO...IS ANYONE THERE? ENSURING AVAILABILITY OF CALL CENTER OPERATIONS

THE CALL CENTER HAS EMERGED AS A STRATEGIC FUNCTION WITHIN AN INCREASING NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS. NO LONGER PURELY VIEWED AS A COST CENTER, CALL CENTERS TODAY ARE OFTEN REVENUE GENERATING ENTERPRISES.

Numerous factors have converged to spur on this change, among them changes in technology, the competitive landscape and customer perceptions. Taken as a whole, these issues have now elevated the stature of the call center into a customer interaction center. In fact, according to research conducted by Gartner, more than one-half of organizations report that their call center and customer relationship management applications are among the five most critical applications within their organizations.

The growing importance of the call center function has put added emphasis on its availability. Downtime is quickly becoming intolerable. Even just a few hours of disruption in call center operations can quickly translate into hundreds of thousands of dollars of lost revenue and significantly diminish customer satisfaction.

This white paper explores issues that are raising the importance of call centers within organizations, the implications this has on an organization's business continuity planning and steps companies can take to include call centers in continuity programs.

FROM CALL CENTER TO CUSTOMER INTERACTION CENTER

The call center has evolved significantly from the days of merely fielding complaints. Today, it's often the first line of interaction with the

customer (and if the experience is poor, the last before the customer goes elsewhere).

Why all of this emphasis on call center operations? Simple: It's easier to keep the customers you have than to win new ones. Industry estimates peg the cost of acquiring a new customer at about five times the cost of cultivating an existing relationship.

The need to serve and keep customers is becoming even more important in today's increasingly competitive global markets. Henry Ford was successful manufacturing one car in one color, but businesses today can't afford an "if-we-build-it-they-will-come" business model. Every company faces competition and, with global markets, it's only increasing. When it comes to products and services in many markets, customers have many options. In fact, the true differentiating factor often is no longer the product or service itself, but the customer service that's wrapped around it.

The adoption of customer relationship management (CRM) initiatives in virtually all types of industries, from financial services to retail to manufacturing, has played a large role in helping companies achieve customer-centric objectives and has begun to significantly change the call center landscape. The focus behind CRM is to optimize profitability, revenue and customer satisfaction by organizing the business around customer segments and fostering customer-satisfying behaviors.

Technology certainly plays an important role in enabling CRM and other programs designed to enhance revenues and customer satisfaction. With CRM-supporting technologies, companies now have the capability to capture more information about their customers, house it in back-end systems and integrate it into the call center environment to provide a competitive differentiator. Over the next three years, it's expected that companies will spend \$90 billion annually on expanding CRM, according to International Data Corp. And, it's likely that the call center market will grow in tandem with CRM markets as the "front door" to all other CRM services.

In that front-door call center environment, organizations are increasingly relying on technologies such as interactive voice response (IVR) and computer-telephony integration (CTI) applications, integrated into back-end databases and CRM technology to both reduce the cost and improve the quality of service to customers.

While all this emphasis on customers has improved customer service, it's also raised the bar. Customers have infinite expectations. They expect to do business with you at any time from anywhere on their terms. Companies have responded and often offer 24x7 call center services and increasingly are integrating e-mail and Web support into their call center operations—all in an effort to ensure that they're available, with the means to service customers when and how customers want to be served.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AVAILABILITY

So, what happens when a disruption brings call center operations to a standstill? Where are these customers with infinite expectations going to turn?

For many companies, this is an increasingly significant concern because, along with this raised level of importance of the call center, comes a raised level of vulnerability.

Protecting your call center operations from significant disruption requires that you evaluate the importance of the call center to

your business and then develop a program that reflects that level of importance. Among the steps to move your call center from vulnerability to availability are:

Conducting a Business Impact Analysis (BIA).

The foundation of an effective continuity program is based on identifying the impact a disruption would have on your operations—both in terms of quantitative and qualitative losses. For example, working with managers from the business functions the call center

supports, you should be able to come up with a dollar amount that you would lose as a result of downtime, as well as salary and other costs you'd incur for having idle call center staff.

But for many organizations, it's the indirect costs of call center

downtime that are even more important.

Dissatisfied customers and lost reputation may not translate into immediate revenue losses, but can over time. For example, customers seeking support for a product they already own may have little immediate choice but to wait for your call center to resume operations. However, over the long term, they do have an option not to purchase their next product from you. They may also tell others about the experience, dissuading these individuals from ever becoming customers. In fact, according to Gartner research, the most common reason organizations have business continuity programs is to maintain customer service. Specifically, 78 percent of companies said the most important reason for continuity planning was to assure customers of continued services, while 51 percent cited it was the costs of downtime.

THE MAIN REASONS ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BUSINESS CONTINUITY PROGRAMS IS TO MAINTAIN CUSTOMER SERVICE. SPECIFICALLY, 78 PERCENT OF COMPANIES SAID THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR CONTINUITY PLANNING WAS TO ASSURE CUSTOMERS OF CONTINUED SERVICES, WHILE 51 PERCENT CITED IT WAS THE COSTS OF DOWNTIME.

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As part of the BIA, you should also examine what some of the potential causes for disruption could be and their anticipated impact on the call center (see sidebar).

The BIA serves two key purposes. First, it allows your organization to establish accurate recovery time and recovery point objectives (discussed in more detail below). Second, it provides a concise measurable reason for proceeding with the development of the continuity program. Making the BIA available and communicating it clearly will likely be essential in helping to gain management understanding and buy-in for the initiative.

Establishing Realistic Recovery Time and Point Objectives. Whether a BIA is formally undertaken or there is a clear prior agreement as to the criticality of the call center function, establishing a recovery time objective (RTO) and recovery point objective (RPO) is essential before advancing with a call center recovery strategy.

The RTO is the amount of downtime your organization can tolerate as a result of a disruption, while the RPO is the amount of data loss you can tolerate. The more critical the applications, the more stringent the RPO and RTO should be.

RTOs and RPOs are unique to each company and each business function. However, on average, companies typically target RTOs of between four and 24 hours. One in five companies have RTOs of less than four hours, according to the 1999 Comdisco Vulnerability Index®. As for RPOs, many companies have more stringent objectives, with one in four saying they can tolerate no loss of data under any circumstances.

Developing the Program. With an understanding of what the impact of a disruption would be on your organization and the RTOs and RPOs established to determine how quickly you need to recover your operations, you now need to put a strategy in place to achieve this. Three core areas to focus on are ensuring availability of call center functional operations, the data, and the network. A Continuity Program Management process also

should be employed to ensure effective implementation of the recovery strategy.

AVAILABILITY OF FUNCTIONAL OPERATIONS

This entails identifying a suitable place from which your agents can resume operations. Among the criteria to consider in selecting the site are:

- **Capacity** – Does the alternate site have the space to house your agents and the appropriate equipment for them to perform their jobs? For example, a company with multiple call centers opting to use them as back up to one another may quickly realize each center has the optimal set up for its own use. But in the event of a disruption, they don't have the excess agent space or equipment to handle the overflow.
- **Flexibility** – Can the alternate site be quickly established and does it have the network and other technological capacity immediately required to resume operations? While building out a warehouse or other cold-site is an option, it often can be time consuming to do so and may not have the network connectivity nor capacity required for a call center function.
- **Diversity** – Is the alternate site on a separate power grid and served by a separate central office than the call center? Although it may be convenient to have the alternate site close by, it can prove ineffective. In the event of a power or phone outage, that site will likely also be affected. And, in a regional outage, the site may be inaccessible.

Availability of the Data

In the call center environment there are essentially two types of data that have to remain available.

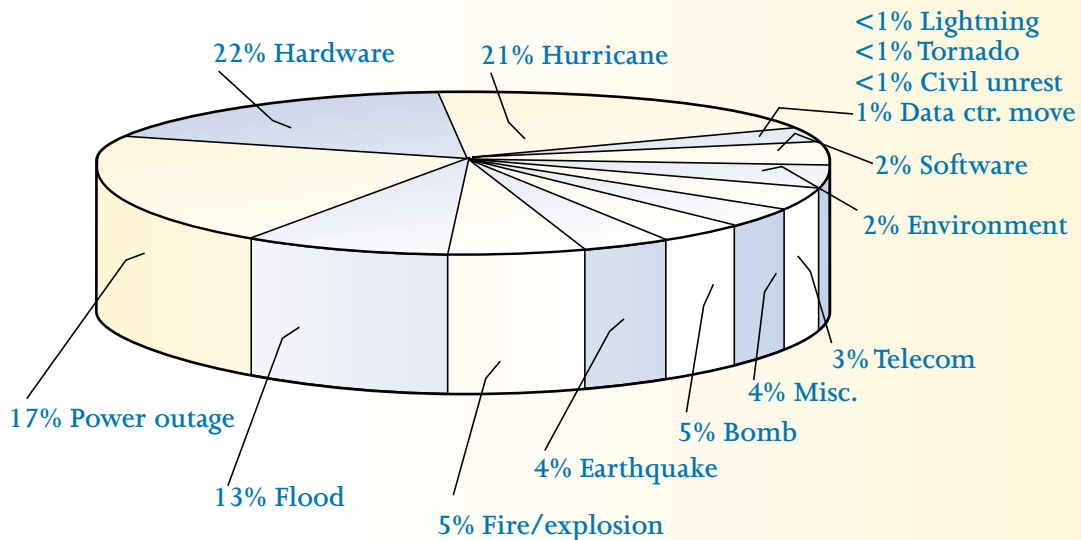
First, is the typical database information, such as customer accounts and orders, that resides on an organization's data center servers. As a result, your continuity program should include clear guidelines for re-establishing connectivity to the data center from your alternate call center site.

COULD YOUR CALL CENTER RECOVER FROM THE MOST COMMON BUSINESS DISRUPTIONS?

WHILE MANY COMPANIES THINK THEY'RE IMMUNE TO ANY LONG-TERM OUTAGE, MORE THAN ONE-FOURTH OF COMPANIES HAVE EXPERIENCED A DISRUPTION IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, AVERAGING EIGHT HOURS, OR ONE BUSINESS DAY, ACCORDING TO THE 1999 COMDISCO VULNERABILITY INDEX.

WITHIN THE CALL CENTER ENVIRONMENT COMMONLY PERCEIVED CULPRITS FOR DISRUPTIONS ARE POWER OUTAGES OR NETWORK FAILURES. THE BELIEF THAT GENERATORS AND REDUNDANT NETWORK ROUTING CAN AVERT THESE OUTAGES ISN'T COMPLETELY BULLET-PROOF. FOR EXAMPLE, IF YOUR PHONE COMPANY DRAWS STREET POWER FOR ITS EQUIPMENT, YOU MAY HAVE POWER VIA YOUR GENERATORS BUT YOU WON'T HAVE PHONE SERVICE. SIMILARLY, WHILE REDUNDANT ROUTING WILL HELP PROTECT YOU FROM THE UBIQUITOUS BACK-HOE, IT CAN'T SHIELD YOUR CALL CENTER FROM A PBX FAILURE OR A CENTRAL OFFICE OUTAGE.

NEITHER OF THESE SOLUTIONS WILL OFFER ANY HELP IN THE EVENT THAT YOUR BUILDING IS DESTROYED OR UNINHABITABLE. THAT'S NOT SUCH A RARE OCCURRENCE. IN FACT, APPROXIMATELY ONE-HALF OF ALL RECOVERIES COMDISCO HAS SUPPORTED HAVE BEEN CAUSED BY SUCH DISRUPTIONS. FOR CALL CENTERS THAT DON'T HAVE A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM IN PLACE, SUCH A DISRUPTION COULD BE FATAL.



The second type of data that must be recovered is the actual configurations on the IVR and CTI systems. Just as companies have procedures for backing up and storing data center information off-site, they also should take similar precautions for the applications critical in their call center operations. In the event of a disruption, having backups of the IVR scripts, for example, is essential to restoring operations.

Availability of the Network

From the voice perspective, the network is the easy part. The most important aspect is putting a plan in place with your carrier ahead of time. Make certain you have the ability to reroute your 800-service. Also, make certain your local numbers can be remotely call forwarded because if you have no access to your building and no remote call forwarding built in, most carriers will not forward your calls for you.

Continuity Program Management

In order to ensure effective implementation of the recovery strategy, as well as the ability to measure the ongoing effectiveness of the recovery program, a Continuity Program Management (CPM) structure should be put in place. CPM encompasses the development and maintenance of recovery plans, management of the testing cycle, change management coordination between production and recovery sites, and establishment and tracking of success metrics.

KEEPING OPERATIONS GOING

One of the most important questions for call center managers to answer is how to handle calls between the time a disruption occurs and the time their call center is back in operation at an alternate site. For many companies, it's simply intolerable for calls to go unanswered for even the time it takes to relocate agents to an alternate site.

However, one of the greatest challenges many companies face in call center continuity is recovering their IVR—typically, the first

interaction point between the customer and an organization. Today, there are more than 20 major IVR vendors, each using proprietary operating systems and applications. Having a strategy to recover this technology should be a central part of

your continuity program.

Among the options that companies can choose to address this issue are making arrangements to switch their IVR application to a service bureau or place a duplicate IVR server at the alternate location.

For example, Comdisco has a strategic relationship with Call Interactive providing an

IVR recovery solution that can be activated in as little as 30 minutes after declaring a disaster. This means that while the customer is relocating agents to a Comdisco Technology Services Center (TSC), the IVR continues to be available for customer calls. Typically, pre-developed emergency scripts are used during this period, which allow the caller some, but not all, of the options available during normal circumstances. For example, the ability to “opt-out” and speak to an agent would not be made available until the agents were operational at the Comdisco TSC.

Another option is to place duplicate equipment at the alternate site. While having a separate IVR set up for use only in the event of a disruption may not be cost-effective, placing a development IVR at an alternate site can be a viable solution, allowing for faster recovery while minimizing costs. Under normal operating conditions, developers would continue to do their programming and application testing remotely on the development IVR at the hot site. In the event of a disruption affecting their production IVR however, operations could then switch over quickly to the development IVR, ensuring minimal disruption, if any, to IVR services.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Once you've put a program in place, it's absolutely essential to test it regularly. At a minimum this should be twice a year, but likely more often depending upon the level of change within your call center environment. Regrettably, this is a step that many organizations overlook. For example, only about one-half of organizations have tested to ensure that they actually can attain their recovery point and time objectives, according to the Comdisco Vulnerability Index.

Continuity testing should include bringing up your systems at the alternate site, testing the applications, ensuring connectivity to your back-end data center operations and ensuring data availability. In the case of call centers, special attention also needs to be given to ensuring calls are redirected and that the IVR scripts continue to work.

MORE THAN ONE-HALF OF ORGANIZATIONS REPORT THAT THEIR CALL CENTER AND CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT APPLICATIONS ARE AMONG THE FIVE MOST CRITICAL APPLICATIONS WITHIN THEIR ORGANIZATION.

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Unlike data center recovery, call center continuity programs are very people intensive. Since it's likely that you will not be able to bring all of your agents to each test, it's important to rotate the personnel sent from test to test so that as many individuals as possible become familiar with the process.

FINDING A PARTNER FOR CALL CENTER CONTINUITY

Many organizations do not have all the resources required to effectively build and manage a business continuity program for their call centers. They may lack both the staff expertise to design, implement and manage the program, as well as the technology infrastructure and staff to support it. As a result, it's likely they will look for external support. Among the criteria to consider in evaluating service providers is:

- **Experience in supporting continuity programs for call center operations.** Your continuity provider should have a solid understanding of call center operations as well as the capability to staff your program with the right skill sets, including voice and data technical professionals and project managers, depending upon your requirements.
- **Proven tools, methodologies and program management disciplines.** Your partner must help to ensure the organization has a standardized approach to defining work process, steps, deliverables and responsibilities and that it's scalable to your requirements. Also look for a partner that can provide tools to facilitate your program development, such as business impact analysis and continuity planning tools and the ability to assist with the overall continuity program management.
- **Investment in strategically located centers.** As mentioned earlier in this paper, geographic proximity to your primary call center may not always be the best option, particularly in the event of a regional disruption. Make certain that your provider offers a network

of alternate locations from which you can choose and that these centers are truly designed to support your agents, offering both the work-area space and equipment they need to comfortably carry out their responsibilities.

- **Infrastructure matching your requirements.**

The obvious criteria is that the center offers high-speed network connectivity for your communication services. However, it's also essential that your provider has made an investment in an on-site PBX. The provider also should take responsibility for programming the PBX to your requirements, as it's possible the PBX may not be from the same manufacturer as your internal PBX. Additionally, the provider should offer various options for addressing your IVR, CTI and other call-center-specific technology requirements.

ABOUT COMDISCO

Comdisco provides global technology services to help its customers maximize technology functionality, predictability and availability, while freeing them from the complexity of managing their technology. The company offers a complete suite of information technology services include business continuity, web availability, managed network services, and IT Control and Predictability SolutionsSM. Through its subsidiary, Prism Communication Services Inc., Comdisco is developing a high-speed, always-on digital network, which will provide customers with leading-edge connectivity. Comdisco also offers equipment services to key vertical industries, including electronics, communications, laboratory & scientific, and industrial automation. Through its Ventures group, Comdisco is a leader in providing equipment leasing and other financing and services to venture capital backed start-up companies.

To learn more about how Comdisco can help with your call center continuity program, contact us at 800-272-9792.

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