

DMG
CONSULTING LLC

Social

Distancing



Contact Centers Post COVID-19

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I. Post-Coronavirus Considerations

As the coronavirus pandemic recedes and states begin the process of opening up their economies and businesses, it's time to transition from emergency response mode to a "new normal." The question is what this means for contact centers, and the first issue service leaders are facing is whether to leave their agents working at home or bring them back into the office. Either way, most companies need to tighten and clean up their operations. Once this is done, they need to apply the positive and negative learnings from their pandemic experience to their ongoing operations, business continuity (BC) plan and work-at-home guidelines. This white paper will help you create a roadmap to succeed in the post-COVID-19 era by creating a "new normal" for your contact centers that enables your organization to deliver an outstanding customer experience in a cost-effective manner.

II. Creating a "New Normal" for your Contact Center

In the first two to three weeks of the pandemic, when governments around the world ordered non-critical businesses and functions to close down temporarily, most contact centers sent their agents home to work. A small number of companies had effective BC plans with guidelines and the necessary equipment and network capacity to support this move. A majority of companies, however, did not have a BC plan that addressed the need for all of their contact center employees to work remotely for an extended period of time. From the beginning, these organizations found themselves in crisis mode as they had to determine the system, process and managerial changes they needed to make for their employees to continue performing their jobs productively from the safety of their homes.

Now it's time to reverse the process and figure out how to return to business as usual. Figure 1 provides a list of activities that companies should undertake once they receive the "all clear" from their local government and are confident that it's safe for their employees to return to the office. This list is prioritized, and many of these actions should be performed simultaneously. Most importantly, companies should take their time and carefully plan out the steps to prevent service disruptions for customers while also making the process as easy as possible for their employees.



Figure 1: Tactics for Creating a “New Normal” in Your Contact Center

Return to Business as Usual	
1	Communicate frequently and with transparency to customers and employees.
2	Reach out to customers to let them know your company is back to business as usual and to thank them for their patience and loyalty during the pandemic.
3	Survey customers to ask them to share their thoughts, let you know what you could have done better during the pandemic, and to identify outstanding business issues so they can be addressed right away.
4	Hold a celebratory event to welcome employees back to business as usual and to thank them for their efforts during the extraordinarily challenging times.
5	Survey contact center staff – agents, supervisors, managers, analysts, and specialists (workforce management, quality management and trainers) – to solicit feedback about what worked well and suggestions to improve the BC and work-at-home (WAH) guidelines.
6	Create a process for collecting and completing all outstanding work and actions that contact center staff promised to take care of for customers.
7	Decide if you are going to bring all contact center employees back to the office or if some employees will be allowed to continue to work at home.
8	Create a schedule that brings people back to the office in waves and communicate it to your staff at least two weeks in advance of their move date. (Employees will need to re-establish childcare relationships that were interrupted by the pandemic. Create an exception process for employees who need extra time to return to the office.)
9	Make sure the contact center site is clean and disinfected and all hardware and software is in working order before bringing people back.
10	Try to make it easy for employees to return to the office; send trucks to their homes to pick up bulky equipment and/or send cabs/ride shares to their homes to pick them up.
11	Once employees are where they are expected to be, at least for the time being, reward them with a small bonus for their outstanding work, flexibility and loyalty during the pandemic, if the budget allows.
12	Review and update contact center forecasts and schedules.
13	Modify schedules and hire and train additional resources, as needed.

Update BC and WAH Programs

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| 14 | Create a framework to assess and evaluate all aspects of the contact center’s performance during the pandemic to identify what did and didn’t work with regard to people, processes and technology. |
| 15 | Review and enhance communications plans and methods. |
| 16 | Determine which systems worked well during the pandemic, which ones should be replaced, and which ones were needed. |
| 17 | Determine if it’s time to migrate on-premise systems to the cloud; create a plan and schedule that lays out the time frame for system acquisitions and conversions to the cloud. |
| 18 | Evaluate the performance of your self-service solutions by channel; identify ways to enhance and expand self-service capabilities for customers; consider transitioning from an interactive voice response (IVR) solution to an intelligent virtual agent (IVA). |
| 19 | If all training, procedures and policy documents are not available online, invest in knowledge management (KM) and eLearning solutions. |
| 20 | Critique WAH security guidelines and enhance them, as necessary. |
| 21 | Rethink key performance indicators (KPIs) used to measure customer, contact center and agent performance and create a new list of metrics to measure; make necessary changes to all systems to capture and report these KPIs going forward. |
| 22 | Update and enhance the BC plan to reflect learnings from this pandemic; incorporate findings from customer and employee surveys. |
| 23 | Update and enhance the WAH plan, if you had one, and create one, if you did not have one. |
| 24 | <p>Prepare your staff for a disaster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Prepare a disaster training program and train all employees so that everyone knows what is expected of them should there be another crisis b. Conduct a disaster recovery test every six months |

Source: DMG Consulting LLC, May 2020

III. Should Contact Center Employees Return to the Office?

This is the number-one issue confronting service leaders today, as mentioned above. There is no simple answer, as it may be just as complex for companies to get people back into the office as it was to make the necessary systems and

operational changes to allow them to work from home. Here is what DMG Consulting expects will happen once companies have government approval and are comfortable that their employees can safely go back to work in the contact center.

- The approximately 5% of contact centers that had 100% of their employees working from home before the pandemic hit will continue as they are.
- The approximately 5% – 10% of contact centers that had a BC plan that took into account the need for 100% of their employees to work from home, and required all staff members to take their PCs and headsets home with them each night, will ask everyone who was not already working at home to return to the office, as per the plan.
- The approximately 30% of contact centers that were using a contact-center-as-a-service (CCaaS) solution when the pandemic hit will ask the majority of their employees to return to the office, if they were not already working at home. 10% – 25% of their agents will be allowed to work from home.
- The approximately 55% – 60% of contact centers that were using a premise-based contact center infrastructure solution (automated call distributor (ACD) or dialer) when the pandemic struck will ask the majority of their employees to return to the office. 10% – 25% of their agents will be allowed to work from home if the technology allows.

From a process engineering perspective, best practice is to return the business activity to normal using the least disruptive process, which in this case means bringing most contact center employees back into the office. But this should only be the first step in creating a new concept of normal, as there were many lessons that companies learned during this pandemic. One insight is that almost all employees, including contact center staff, can work effectively from home if the business has the right systems and processes in place to support them. Once the concerns of contracting COVID-19 pass, DMG expects that approximately 30% of contact center agents will work from home; making this possible will drive another major wave of investments in CCaaS solutions.

IV. Updating or Creating a Business Continuity Plan

Another important lesson learned during the coronavirus pandemic is the necessity of having a BC plan that takes into consideration the need for people to socially distance by 6 – 10 feet. Given the configuration and tight working space



in most contact centers, the only viable way of addressing the need for social distancing is to have agents work at home.

If you don't have a disaster recovery (DR) and BC plan, it's time to create one. And if you have a BC plan, it should be updated to include a scenario where 100% of contact center managers, supervisors, agents, analysts and specialists work from their homes. This requirement is drawing enterprises towards CCaaS solutions and providers of other cloud-based services, due to their flexibility in pivoting where and how they deliver interactions to agents. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Next Steps After the Pandemic



Source: DMG Consulting LLC, May 2020

Once companies recover from the pandemic, they should carefully assess all aspects of their contact center DR and BC plans. In the past, these plans have typically been an afterthought. And even the good ones relied heavily on the ability to route customer interactions to a company-owned or partner-provided facility in a different geography if a primary site went offline due to “acts of God,” man-made or natural disasters.

V. Developing a Formal Work-At-Home Program

Many contact centers, particularly the large ones, had DR and BC plans in place before the pandemic hit, although they were rarely fully tested or updated. Surprisingly few included the need for a long-term work-at-home (WAH) program for all employees. And even those that considered the need for WAH guidelines for agents did not address requirements and best practices for supervisors and





managers, who suddenly found themselves working from their homes. A good DR/BC plan should address everything that a contact center worker needs to do as part of their job (whether they are in a different office or their home), the systems to support these activities, and the security requirements to protect both customer and company information.

The first step in the process is for contact center workers to be sent home immediately if it is deemed risky for employees to come into the office. For this transition to occur seamlessly, without interrupting the customer experience (CX), all contact centers (even those with just a few employees) need to have a WAH program supported by the necessary technology and solutions. The WAH BC guidelines should document all of the arrangements that need to be in place for contact center employees to be able to perform their jobs from home.

For starters, the WAH program needs to include contractual language that allows employees to work at home and identify who is responsible for acquiring and paying for the equipment they need to perform their job remotely. It should:

- Identify PC and bandwidth requirements and the actions required to make their work environment secure.
- Specify communications requirements for agents and supervisors/managers so that everyone knows how to reach one another and ask for help.
- Clearly specify job responsibilities for all contact center employees, managers, supervisors, agents, analysts and specialists, so that everyone knows what is expected of them when they are working at home. (Job responsibilities may be different when employees are working at home.)
- Document the system modifications that need to be made, identify who is responsible for taking care of them, and who will oversee the solutions on an ongoing basis, when out of the office.

On a related note, the plan needs to include resources and likely a help desk to assist employees in setting up and using their systems outside of the office.

To keep the contact center running and staffed properly, the BC WAH plan needs to allow for training and up-training, even if the site is closed for an extended period of time, as has happened with the coronavirus pandemic. To keep employees engaged when everyone is working remotely, the plan should allow for more frequent virtual team and department meetings and special reward and recognition programs. The plan also needs to address the requirements for the contact center support staff, specifically, quality management (QM) specialists,





workforce management (WFM) administrators and business intelligence (BI) analysts.

The most effective way to ensure that the WAH program in the BC plan works, when it's needed, is to have one in place on an ongoing basis. All contact centers should encourage a certain percentage of their employees to work from home regularly and request frequent feedback on the effectiveness of WAH systems and procedures

VI. System Requirements for the “New Normal”

Once your operation stabilizes at a “new normal,” take the opportunity to evaluate all of your systems and operating policies and procedures. Compile a list of the systems and applications that support the ongoing operation of your organization post-crisis. This is very likely to include cloud-based solutions, as the future of contact center technology and systems is in the cloud. If there were any question about this in the past, the coronavirus pandemic should have removed all doubt as CCaaS solutions have proven their flexibility and reliability in the toughest of circumstances.

Once business settles down in your company (which could take a year or two, depending on the pace of economic recovery in many countries and regions), petition for the systems needed to enable your contact center to deliver an outstanding customer experience in both good and challenging times. We recommend that managers build a quantifiable business case with a return on investment (ROI) analysis to support all system requests. It's likely that anyone who felt the impact of COVID-19 on your contact center, including the CEO, CFO and CIO, will be more open to the acquisition of new systems.

VII. Final Thoughts

Congratulations! You've successfully steered your contact center through one of the toughest times in the history of your industry, but it's not yet time to rest. After you get everyone back into the office and stabilize your operating environment, it will be time to create a “new normal.” As part of this effort, update or draft a BC plan that takes into account the need to have a majority of your employees work from home. Update and/or draft a formal WAH program; incorporate the appropriate steps into your new BC plan and use all of your new-found insights to become an employer of choice. Be sure to take advantage of your success to request the cloud-based systems and applications that will position you to deliver consistently to the essential goal of delivering an outstanding CX, in both good and challenging times.







About Vonage

Vonage is redefining business communications once again. We're making communications more flexible, intelligent, and personal, to help enterprises the world over, stay ahead. We provide unified communications, contact centers and programmable communications APIs, built on the world's most flexible cloud communications platform. True to our roots as a technology disruptor, our flexible approach helps us to better serve the growing collaboration, communications, and customer experience needs of companies, across all communications channels.

Vonage Holdings Corp. is headquartered in New Jersey, with offices throughout the United States, Europe, Israel, Australia and Asia.

About DMG Consulting LLC

DMG Consulting LLC is a leading independent research, advisory and consulting firm specializing in contact centers, back-office and real-time analytics. DMG provides insight and strategic guidance and tactical advice to end users, vendors and the financial community. Each year, DMG devotes more than 10,000 hours to producing primary research on IT sectors, including workforce optimization, workforce management, performance management, knowledge management, interaction (speech and text) analytics, desktop analytics, robotic process automation, customer journey analytics, surveying/voice of the customer, voice biometrics, cloud-based contact center infrastructure and intelligent virtual agents. Our actionable solutions are proven to deliver a lasting competitive advantage, and often pay for themselves in as little as three months. Learn more at www.dmgconsult.com.



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