STATE, LOCAL AND EDUCATION (SLED)
Resolving COVID-Related Communication Challenges in Style

CISCO
Partner

Over the past year, contact centers saw exponential call volume spikes nearly overnight. By integrating legacy call systems with new cloud-based communication technology infused with AI, agencies can work smarter and serve their constituents more effectively.

From K-12 schools to public sector agencies at the stateand local levels, these SLED (state, local and education) organizations and institutions play a mission-critical role in society.

After the global pandemic hit home last year, SLED contact centers were put through an unprecedented test. The week of March 21, 2020, was an economic implosion: The number of people applying for unemployment compensation in the US increased 11x, and the following week it doubled. This scenario played out in every state, practically at the same time.

Unemployment call centers weren't the only ones overwhelmed during this time. Other SLED agencies were also flooded with calls regarding the distribution of masks and other personal protective equipment and questions regarding testing, contact tracing, and scheduling vaccines.

Adding to agencies' stress was the fact that while helping constituents, they had to ensure the safety of their employees, which led to massive work-from-home (WFH) initiatives. At the same time, agencies had to hire and train new employees to assist with the overwhelming increase in call volumes.

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CASE IN POINT: STATE EMPOLOYMENT AGENCIES

The pandemic compressed a decade of technology upgrades and business process changes into a much shorter period for many government agencies, especially unemployment offices in many states. According to Gov. JB Pritzker, the Illinois Department of Employment

Security (IDES) was operating on systems built after the 2008 recession, based on the idea that "nothing could ever be worse." This is a perfect example of how some states were impacted.

Over the first three weeks of March, some states received over 130,000 unemployment benefit claims, an increase of close to 400% compared to the prior year's corresponding weeks. The department received close to 115,000 claims for the week of March 21 alone, an increase of nearly 1,400% compared to the corresponding week the prior year. The surge was compounded by the state's shelter-in-place order, which prohibited residents from visiting offices to file their claims in person.

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CONTACT CENTER AI VIRTUAL AGENTS ASSIST CONSTITUENTS

As overburdened unemployment agency's contact center agents struggled to answer phone calls (literally hundreds of calls per minute, per day) and respond to web inquiries, constituents contacting the agency for unemployment assistance waited for hours on the phone or didn't get through.

Realizing the urgency of the problem, this state mobilized a cross-functional response team to find and deploy a solution fast. They selected Presidio to recommend the right technologies and assist with implementation.

Presidio recommended a comprehensive array of solutions, such as:

Contact Center AI

A conversational AI solution from Google Cloud that sits at the intersection of speech analytics and quality management, using speech technology and natural language processing to transcribe and analyze support calls at a massive scale.

Cisco Contact Center AI (CCAI)

Artificial intelligence solutions powered by Cisco's proprietary AI and Google Cloud Contact Center AI that give agents the context, insights and intelligence to deliver timely, accurate responses that improve customer satisfaction, loyalty and lifetime value.

Cisco Contact Center Enterprise (UCCE)

Call center software from Cisco that bridges traditional telephony systems with modern IP infrastructures offering a combination of multichannel contact management, intelligent routing and network-to-desktop computer telephony integration (CTI).

One of the Presidio team's first initiatives was to add the state's online FAQ document, comprising hundreds of pages, to the Google virtual assistant (VA). Next, it added RPA (robotic process automation) functionality to ensure updates made to one part of the multichannel communications system (e.g., web) updated other components (e.g., Cisco IP phone systems) automatically. Presidio also programmed the VA to simulate the workflows between constituents and human agents. The Virtual agent interacts with constituents in the methods they choose. This powerful tool enables programming the solution in the cloud and allowing users to interact over the phone with a natural feeling conversation or via the chatbot via the web.

"The primary goals of the solution are to leverage the cloud for quick scalability and remote work enablement and to offload as much of the communication burden onto the technology as possible," says Aaron Thatcher, Business Development Manager at Presidio.

THE RESULTS ARE IN

With the new solution in place, constituents are greeted by a VA chatbot when they contact the State's Unemployment department.

The VA isn't just a fancy auto-attendant designed to help callers press the right button to be directed to the correct department. It allows constituents to begin the unemployment compensation process, including gathering the required documentation and filling in all the essential information. "Since they started using the VA, agent call times have dropped from 15 minutes to 11 minutes," says Thatcher.

The state unemployment agency reports that the virtual agent consistently processes an average of 40,000 constituent phone calls per night. And the web chatbot interacts with upwards of 100,000 constituents a day.

The cloud-based virtual agent answered 3.2 million inquiries in its first two weeks, helping them pay unemployment benefits promptly to 99.99% of claimants. Seventy-five percent of claimants received their first payment within two weeks. And the project's success is leading to additional discussions about how the state can serve constituents in other ways and viewing each communication channel holistically rather than independently.

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STATE 311 CALL CENTERS UNDERGO SIMILAR TRANSFORMATIONS

To help reduce the number of non-emergency calls to 911 call centers, many states and cities use 311 call centers, which operate 24/7/365. These call centers handle requests for building permits, paying traffic fines, reporting problems and filing complaints, just to name a few. Many of these call centers' shortcomings, such as outdated websites and understaffing, reached a fever pitch in March 2020, when their communication channels were swamped. Presidio was contacted by one (unnamed) mid-Atlantic state 311 center. "They were using a legacy, on-prem contact center system, and even after doubling their staff, they couldn't keep up with call demand," recalls Patrick Wild, Vice President of Sales for the Contact Center Division at Presidio. "Presidio was contacted by a mid-Atlantic state 311 center and end with model."

Presidio implemented Cisco Webex Contact Center and Cisco IP phone systems for the agency's call center. Shortly after completing the first phase of the project, the Presidio team developed a self-service portal for paying fines. It also updated the 311 center's IVR to give constituents the option to pay at the self-service portal or over the phone using natural language processing technology from Nuance. "Within a couple of months, the city saw a 40% reduction in call volume related to ticket and traffic court date inquiries," says Wild. "At the same time, they experienced a 25% uplift in ticket payment revenue."

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF TECH SUCCESS STORIES: PLANNING, ALIGNMENT AND TRAINING

It's exciting to talk about the latest artificial intelligence or cloud-enabled collaboration technology, but hardware and software are only one part of the success equation. According to an article in Forbes, 25% of technology projects fail outright, and another 25% don't show any return on investment. Plus, as much as 50% require massive reworking after the initial deployment. Harvard Business Review suggests these same challenges and shortfalls exist with digital transformation projects. As a digital transformation IT solution provider with more

than 18 years of experience and more than 7,800 customers, Presidio has insights into why so many of these projects fail. Here are some primary culprits:

Planning

One of the biggest draws with the cloud is that you can deploy technology quickly. Need to enable 1,000 call center agents to work from home? A few clicks of a mouse, and you're up and running. But, just like on-prem technology, cloud technologies need to be vetted and strategically planned and implemented to realize their full value. When planning a contact center upgrade, for example, it's critical to understand not just the immediate need but how the upgrade will fit into the existing technology ecosystem. If workers use the technology in their homes, they'll need adequate bandwidth, not to mention QoS, to ensure real-time packets (i.e., voice and video) are given priority over other data streams. And, if an agency only needs to enable remote work for a few months, for instance, it would be a huge mistake for them to lock themselves into a multi-year software licensing agreement.

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Alignment

There are typically multiple departments within an organization, and they often use the same technologies. For example, if the accounting department uses Microsoft 365, you wouldn't expect the HR department to be using Google Office. However, when it comes to communication technology, you're much more likely to see different systems being used among departments, simply because when one department purchases a new system, it doesn't consider how it would impact other stakeholders. Although this error may not be as obvious as the previous example, it still creates unnecessary communication silos and makes the overall IT ecosystem more complex and costly to manage.

Training

Technology has become a lot more intuitive over the years and with it the expectations on contact center agents has risen to new heights. Agents, more than ever, are driving customer experience. This technology change coupled with work from home initiatives, means that training has become absolutely critical to contact center success. "A contact center agent should be trained on much more than just how to handle a call, for example" says Casey Klein, Vice President of the Contact Center Division at Presidio. "Work from home fundamentals, like not working from an iPad or using open, public Wi-Fi netowrks to perform work functions. Besides these basics, agents need to be shown how to leverage real-time guidance, CRM integration and sentiment analysis along with other new AI enabled features to drive an overall better customer experience on all channels."

CONCLUSION

Following the global pandemic, we shouldn't expect the pace of digital transformation to slow down anytime soon. The new conveniences consumers experienced from businesses that invested in new technologies this past year have only raised the bar to what's expected going forward. The very nature of the mission-critical services SLED organizations offer dictates that providing an excellent customer experience through an efficient process should be a top priority. Choosing the right technologies — and technology partner — play an invaluable role in making these goals a reality.