QoDSL & Virtual Call Centres

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Abstract

Tiscali is one of the UK's leading Internet companies with a large consumer customer base and a significant share of the business market for ADSL-based Multiprotocol Label Switching (MPLS) IP VPNs.

The company has invested heavily to develop its industry leading Quality of Service (QoS) enabled ADSL service, known as QoDSL, which offers businesses the same level of quality and service as a traditional leased line, at a fraction of the price.

QoDSL enables companies to re-engineer their business processes to increase efficiency and reduce costs by converging their data and voice networks onto a single, low cost, secure QoDSL IP VPN infrastructure.

This document discusses how QoDSL IP VPNs can be used to create highly efficient Virtual Call Centres.

Introduction

Call centres employ an estimated 400,000 people in Britain today, and that number is still growing. But call centres have at times raised controversy, with the media focussing on the stressful working conditions in some larger and more regimented sites, and problems with staff recruitment and retention.

Many of these problems appear to be associated with Call Centres with large numbers of agents concentrated in one location.

Recent developments in communications technology mean that it is no longer necessary for Call Centre agents to be physically located in the same place. Calls to a call centre number can now be re-routed automatically to agents working remotely – from home, for example - but managed exactly as if all calls were being received in a single, large call centre.

Metrics

Call metrics are a key part of Call Centre management. These metrics are used to produce customer care statistics, and are often also cross-referenced against human resources data so that the productivity of individual call centre agents can be measured.

Flexibility

Many Call Centre operators, faced with variable workloads, are looking to introduce flexible working practices to increase their efficiency by reducing both their operational and capital costs. Flexible working is the key driver for the emergence of “Virtual Call Centres” which integrate disparate call centre locations of varying sizes, as well as individual agents working from home, into a single, centrally managed structure.

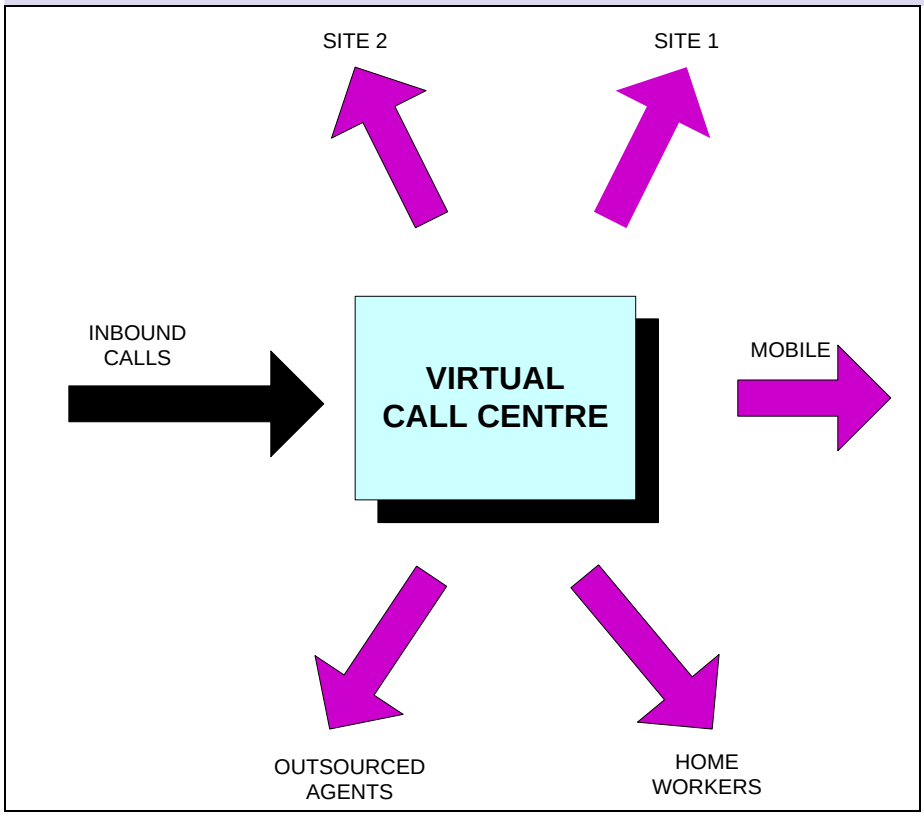
Call Centre Virtualisation

Virtualisation may be defined as the creation of a networked environment, in which separate elements work together and appear to be a single entity. A Virtual Call Centre operation uses agents based in multiple locations, is managed centrally but delivers consistent service regardless of operator location. This is in stark contrast to typical multi-sited call centres which have to be managed separately, and frequently offer very differing levels of efficiency and customer service.

Features of a Virtual Call Centre

In a conventional set-up, inbound calls are routed to the Call Centre, where additional telecommunications equipment routes the calls to individual agents.

A Virtual Call Centre routes calls directly to agents at different sites without any on-site equipment.



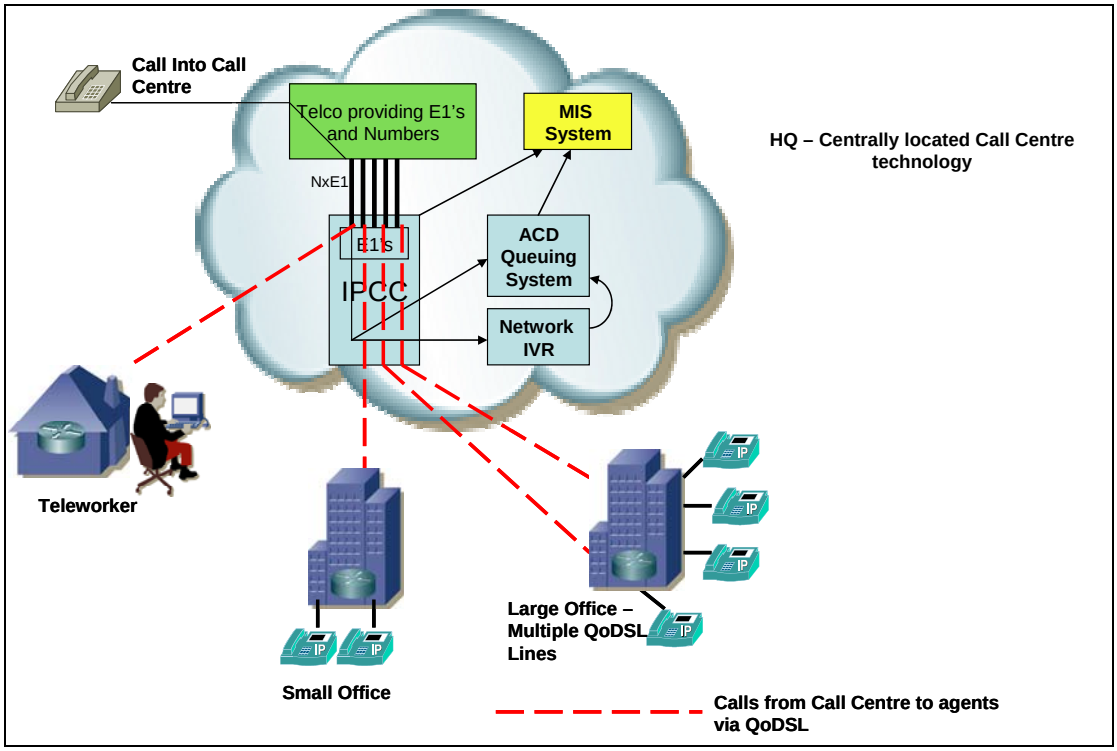
Key Virtual Call Centre features include:

- Inbound calls can be routed to different locations while appearing to go to a single Call Centre
- Agents can be located in a single Call Centre, at multiple Call Centres, or at home.
- A Virtual Call Centre enables efficient load balancing between sites to ensure optimal agent productivity
- Telecommunications equipment for a Virtual Call Centre can located anywhere, providing large potential savings on installation and capital costs and operating expenses
- If equipment has already been installed at a Call Centre, a Virtual Call centre can distribute calls to additional sites and home workers
- Calls can be routed to Call Centres according to the caller's location (location based routing)

Network infrastructure

The underlying network infrastructure on which a Virtual Call Centre is built is critical. A QoDSL IP VPN, which is secure, low cost, capable of carrying high quality voice traffic, and IP-based, is ideally suited to the task.

A typical Virtual Call Centre is designed like this:



HQ

The HQ is the location in which much of the Call Centre equipment and technology is physically housed. It need not be where any call centre agents actually work.

The technology typically enables integration of incoming call data with business applications (such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software), and allows central management of agents and the Virtual Call Centre as a whole. It also includes automatic call distribution functions such as conditional routing, call-in-queue and expected-wait-time messages, enterprise data displays, real-time data, and historical reporting together with integrated Interactive Voice Response (IVR) services

It may provide additional features including skills-based routing and priority queuing, and supervisory features such as silent monitor, coaching, barge-in and intercept, as well as full self-service application support.

Physical Call Centres
Typically the Call Centre geographically dispersed over multiple sites. The size of the ADSL connection, and therefore the amount of QoS enabled bandwidth required, will vary depending on the size of the site. A larger site may have multiple ADSL connections.

Virtual Agents
Agents working from home need not be full time employees, and are often used to provide additional capacity during busy periods. They are connected to the Virtual Call Centre using an ADSL connection with QoS enabled bandwidth reserved to ensure that calls and any related data get through to the agent.

Benefits

A Virtual Call Centre based on a QoDSL IP VPN provides important benefits to Call Centre operators:

- *Low cost infrastructure and fast implementation times:* QoDSL IP VPNs can be installed more quickly and at lower cost than comparable leased lines
- *Lower costs:* Virtualisation can deliver economies of scale through more widespread use of existing resources*ower customer wait times*: Total Call Centre capacity can easily be adjusted to meet call volumes by adding additional call centres or home workers without impacting on customer experience
- *Better customer service*: Customers benefit from more consistent service, and localised agent knowledge when location based routing is used
- *Business continuity*: Virtualisation provides more redundant systems and less reliance on a single contact point
- *Easier recruitment and better agent retention*: Recruiting and retaining agents is a major problem for Call Centre operators. Virtual Call Centres can make it easier to recruit and retain agents because:
    - They make flexible working easier, allowing carers and people with disabilities to work from home
    - They enable smaller, more local Call Centres, improving working conditions
    - Increased flexibility enables additional agents to work during peak times, reducing stress
    - Research shows that virtual centres are liked by agents

- Recruitment can easily be focussed to cover employment hot spots

Conclusion

The availability of low cost QoDSL IP-VPNs combined with Virtual Call Centre technology can free Call Centre operators from the constraints of large, centralised Call Centres.

Virtual Call Centre technology offers Call Centre operators the opportunity to make significant improvements in efficiency, increasing flexibility and customer service levels and reducing overall operating costs. It also provides a way to tackle the problem of staff recruitment and retention.