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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2009

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Rightsizing IT Costs

Verteks Consulting helps Bernie Little Distributing slash its IT budget while maintaining optimum levels of support.

Information technology is essential to the operation of most businesses these days. Having someone on staff dedicated to IT may not be. According to Ken Daley, president of Bernie Little Distributing, it's a matter of how much IT support the organization really needs versus the cost of a full-time salary.

In June 2008, downsizing forced the Ocala, Fla.-based distributor of Anheuser-Busch products to take a harder look at its IT budget. That's when the company called Verteks Consulting for help in better aligning its support costs with its business needs.

"For six or seven years we had an internal IT coordinator who did a very fine job for us but it was kind of like a 'Maytag repairman' situation. We had a full-time person and not quite a full-time need," Daley said. "Then about a year ago we sold part of our territory, which was located in Brooksville. We downsized somewhat, and unfortunately had to make the tough decision to eliminate our internal IT resource.

"We had already been working with Verteks for several years, and asked them how they might be able to help us fill this gap. We learned that they had invested in software that allows them to monitor a network like ours from their location. Long story short, they offered us a solution that provided us with on-demand support for roughly half of what we had been paying for our full-time employee."

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Dollars and Sense

Some small to midsize businesses maintain an internal IT staff capable of handling workload spikes and emergencies, with the tradeoff of inefficiency when that staff sits mostly idle. Others keep their IT support "lean" in order to save money, leaving the organization vulnerable when issues surface unpredictably. After crunching the numbers, Bernie Little Distributing found that neither model made good business sense.

"In the IT world, you never know when things will decide to go funky on you and break. But we sat down and estimated how much IT support time we needed when we signed up with Verteks in June of 2008. And when we renewed with them in June of 2009, we came in pretty much on target in terms of our estimated number of hours," Daley said. "From my perspective, it hit our objective, which was to rightsize our IT budget. In this day and age, you can't always afford the luxury of having IT support within your four walls — especially given the difference in the cost of outsourcing. The Verteks solution was exactly what we were searching for."

Rick Lindquist, business manager for Bernie Little Distributing, says that using Verteks for managed IT services minimizes business risk while lowering overall costs. The Verteks team is highly responsive, and has the skills and experience to resolve problems rapidly.

"Like Ken said, sometimes things can go haywire, but a lot of our needs don't require immediate attention," Lindquist said. "We laid it out in our contract with Verteks what sorts of issues required same-day response, next-day response and so on. Their responsiveness is excellent and when they get here they tackle the problem in a short amount of time. We've been very happy with the results we've gotten with Verteks."

Perfect Choice

Finding the right partner is the key to success in IT outsourcing. For Bernie Little Distributing, Verteks Consulting was the perfect choice. Founded in 1997, Bernie Little Distributing employs about 100 people and covers a five-county area in Central Florida. Strong ties to the local community and a proven track record of success set Verteks Consulting apart from other providers.

"I met them through the Chamber of Commerce four or five years ago, and since then we used them for a number of projects — I think the first thing they did was upgrade our server," Daley said. "It was very helpful to have them come in and expand the internal expertise that we had. They have a wealth of knowledge, much more than you would expect from the typical IT services firm."

Budweiser
Bernie Little Distributing, Inc.

SOLUTION SUMMARY

- ◆ Comprehensive monitoring, management and maintenance services delivers the benefits of an enterprise-class IT team at a fraction of the cost.
- ◆ The responsiveness and expertise of the Verteks team minimizes downtime through rapid problem resolution.
- ◆ Monitored security solution ensures that systems are protected — day in, day out.
- ◆ Flexible services accommodate customer's specific requirements cost-efficiently.
- ◆ Strong local presence and extensive experience sets Verteks apart from other managed services providers.

"Verteks has a lot of customers here in the Central Florida area that we could call to discuss their capabilities, security, and so forth," Lindquist said. "It was a no-brainer for us to let them remotely monitor our systems on a daily basis. They can take care of routine maintenance and resolve problems without having to send someone over here — all with a high level of security. Verteks has also implemented a WatchGuard security solution that detects viruses and other risks and notifies them immediately. That gives us confidence that our systems remain secure on a day-to-day basis."

Right on Target

Some firms worry that their unique IT needs cannot be supported adequately by a third-party provider. Verteks Consulting offers customers the cost benefits of efficiency and economies of scale without forcing them into cookie-cutter solutions.

"Our sales people use handhelds for communication and to access the information they need," Lindquist said. "Even though these devices are unique to our market, Verteks ramped up on this technology immediately. There was no concern about downtime whatsoever."

In today's economic environment, many organizations are seeking to lower costs, increase productivity and squeeze every drop of value out of every dollar they spend. Outsourcing to Verteks Consulting helps them do that by replacing unproductive IT overhead with highly efficient services that maximize the value of their technology investments.

Verteks Consulting Earns Customer Satisfaction Award

With a nearly perfect customer satisfaction rating, Verteks Consulting recently was announced as the winner of a ShoreTel Top 10 Customer Satisfaction Excellence Award. Verteks had a customer satisfaction score of 99.68 percent during ShoreTel's 2009 fiscal year that ended June 30. The score ranked among the top 10 world-wide in ShoreTel's Champion Channel partner program.

"I feel honored and humbled to receive this award on behalf of my team of dedicated professionals," Don Gulling, CEO of Verteks Consulting, said following the award presentations at ShoreTel's global virtual partner ceremony July 20. "Our commitment to 100 percent customer satisfaction has allowed us to grow and succeed in this challenging economy, and I'm grateful for the hard work and professionalism of my entire team."

ShoreTel's highly qualified partners consist of resellers, integrators and interconnects that help customers navigate a world of voice over IP options, including LAN, WAN, call center, voice and data application integration, technology deployment, and training and support. Customer Satisfaction Excellence Awards are presented to channel partners that have achieved world-class customer satisfaction scores of 95 percent or better as measured by an independent third party.

"I'd like to thank Verteks Consulting for their continued focus on customer satisfaction, and their team commitment to 100 percent satisfaction from every customer," said Don Girskis, senior vice president of worldwide sales at ShoreTel. "Customer loyalty, product excellence and effective marketing are key to overcoming current economic uncertainties, and Verteks has done a fantastic job with their focus on customer satisfaction combined with their passion for marketing at local seminars and other awareness events."

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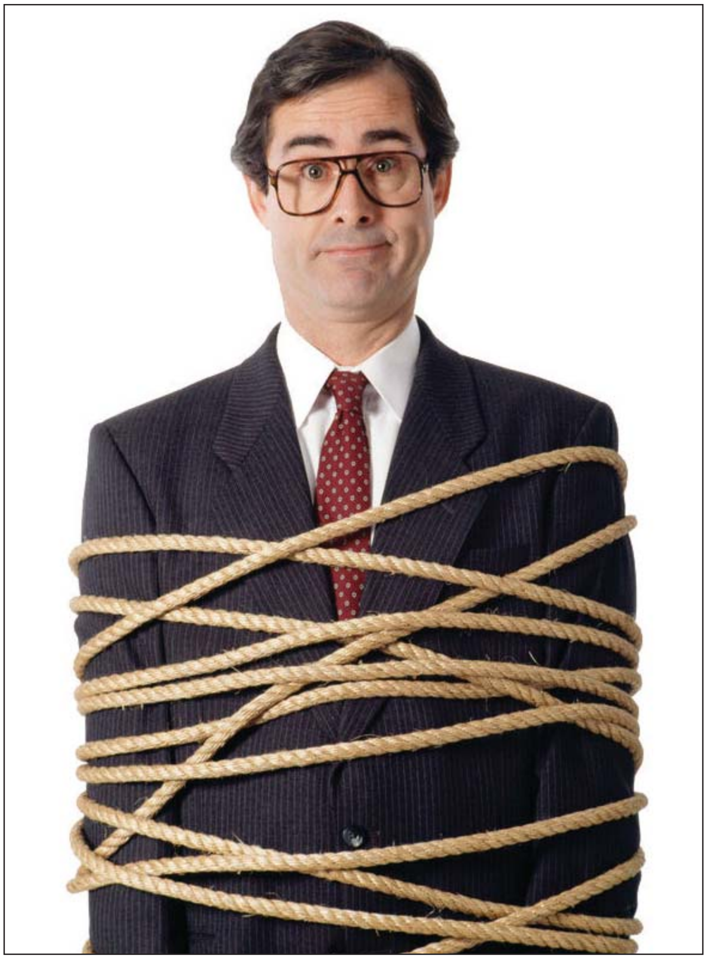
Reining in Risk-Takers

Employee education needed to combat growing threats from user errors, studies say.



As the reliance on centralized offices shifts to distributed business models and remote workforces, lines are blurring between work life and personal life. Unfortunately, this overlap frequently results in employees engaging in behaviors that can place corporate data at serious risk — and recent surveys indicate that organizations are dramatically underestimating the threat.

In its annual “Trends in Information Security” survey, CompTIA identified human error as the primary cause of the most severe security breaches, yet found that companies were actually de-emphasizing security training for non-IT staff. Only 45 percent of the organizations surveyed provided such training in 2008, down from 53 percent a year earlier.

“Unintentional security breaches by non-IT staff cost companies thousands of dollars in lost productivity and business downtime,” said Terry Erdle, senior vice president of skills certification for CompTIA. “This demonstrates a need for more employee trainings and deeper knowledge of technology functions.”

Beyond IT’s Reach

The proliferation of collaborative devices and applications such as smartphones, laptops, Web 2.0 applications, video and other social media are driving the operational shift, giving employees the tools to become far more collaborative and mobile than previously possible. But removed from direct control of the organization, these tools are also being used in ways that would not pass muster with IT security staff.

For instance, nearly two-thirds of the respondents in Cisco’s global security survey admitted using work computers daily for personal use. Activities included music downloads, shopping, banking, blogging, participating in chat groups and more. Half of the employees use personal e-mail to reach customers and colleagues, but only 40 percent said this is authorized by IT.

“Fueled in part by the rapid adoption of portable hardware like laptops, flash drives and smart phones, and by distributed information technologies such as crowd sourcing, social networks, virtualization and cloud storage, end-users are exposed to new IT security threats every day," said Tim Herbert, vice president of research at CompTIA. "Security threats grow along with the expanding reach of IT, so non-IT employees need to be continually trained on the latest IT security threats.”

Other eyebrow-raising behaviors identified in Cisco’s survey of 1,000 employees and 1,000 IT professionals from various industries and company sizes in 10 countries included:

ALTERING SECURITY SETTINGS: One of five employees altered security settings on work devices to bypass IT policy so they could access unauthorized Web sites. When asked why, more than half (52 percent) said they simply wanted to access the site; a third said, “it's no one's business” which sites they access.

USE OF UNAUTHORIZED APPLICATIONS: Seven of 10 IT professionals said employee access of unauthorized applications and Web sites (e.g. unsanctioned social media, music download software, online shopping venues) ultimately resulted in as many as half of their companies' data loss incidents.

Sharing sensitive corporate information: One of four employees (24 percent) admitted to verbally sharing sensitive information to non-employees such as friends and family — or even strangers. When asked why, some of the most common answers included, "I needed to bounce an idea off someone" and "I needed to vent."

Sharing corporate devices: Almost half of the employees surveyed (44 percent) share work devices with others, including non-employees, without supervision.

Unprotected devices: At least one in three employees leave computers logged on and unlocked when they're away from their desk. These employees also tend to leave laptops on their desks overnight, sometimes without logging off, creating potential theft incidents and access to corporate and personal data.

Storing logins and passwords: One in five employees store system logins and passwords on their computer or write them down and leave them on their desk, in unlocked cabinets, or pasted on their computers.

Losing portable storage devices: Almost one in four (22 percent) employees carry corporate data on portable storage devices outside of the office, which presents high risk if the devices are lost or stolen.

Allowing "tailgating" and unsupervised roaming: About one in five employees allow non-employees to roam around offices unsupervised, and about the same number have allowed unknown individuals to tailgate behind employees into corporate facilities.

Training Needed

"Businesses are enabling employees to become increasingly collaborative and mobile," said John N. Stewart, chief security officer of Cisco. "Without modern-day security technologies, policies, awareness and education, information is more vulnerable. Today, data is in transit, in use, within programs, stored on devices, and in places beyond the traditional business environment, such as at home, on the road, in cafes, on airplanes and trains. This trend is here to stay."

In order to combat the growing risk from unsafe employee behavior, organizations should structure employee education programs, develop risk management plans and establish security best practices.

"To protect your data effectively, we need to start understanding the risk characteristics of business and then base technology, policy, and awareness and education plans on those factors," said Stewart. "Data protection requires teamwork across the company. It's not just an IT job anymore."

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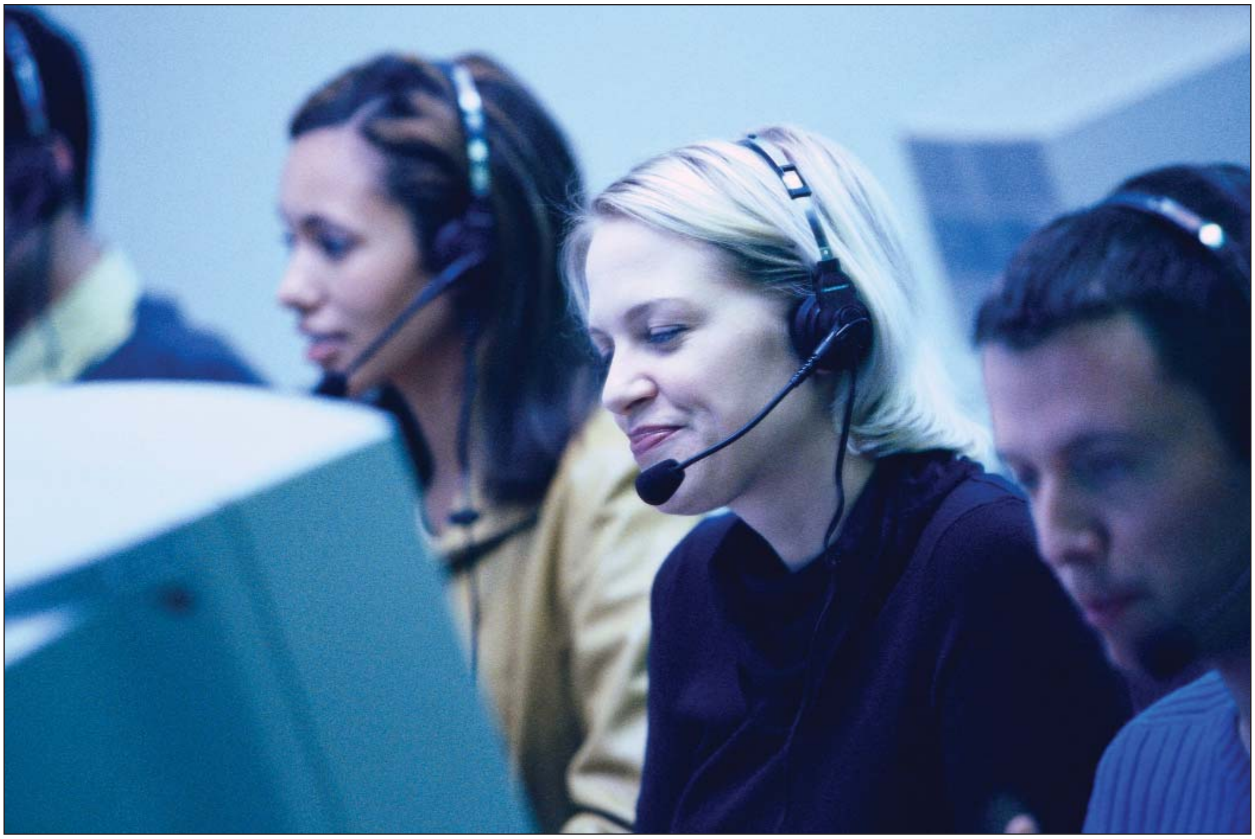

Satisfaction Guaranteed

Modernizing the contact center will increase customer satisfaction, agent retention and competitive differentiation while lowering costs.

For many organizations, the contact center is where the rubber meets the road. It often represents the first interaction customers have with the company, and the success or failure of that initial experience can set the stage for all subsequent interactions.

Although critical to the success of most enterprises, however, the contact center is undervalued by most business leaders, according to Gartner, Inc. This lack of priority is reflected in underfunding of the customer service function and often results in an enterprise's failure to remain competitive.

Gartner Executive Programs conducted a worldwide survey of 1,527 CIOs in the fourth quarter of 2008 in which CIOs identified their top business priorities for 2009. The survey showed that attracting and retaining customers had dropped from second to fifth place.

"Although still highly placed, customer service is receiving less emphasis than cost cutting," said Michael Maoz, vice president and distinguished analyst at Gartner. "Of course cost-cutting is essential in the current economic climate, but knowing how to cut costs without damaging the customer experience is critical, and the role of the contact center is crucial to this."

At Your Service

The sluggish economy has led to a change in strategy in the contact center: the focus has shifted from customer acquisition to customer retention, according to independent market analyst Datamonitor. Tighter budgets, combined with declining consumer confidence and spending, are making it difficult for enterprises to gain new business. As a result, they are concentrating on current customers, improving customer service and seeking out contract renewals and upgrade opportunities. Customer service quality and customer intimacy are becoming increasingly important to achieve good customer loyalty rates.

This means moving beyond the traditional "call center" mentality to embrace a wide range of communications media. While voice calls remain the most popular means of contacting a company, customers in growing numbers want the ability to do business by e-mail or through Web collaboration. Services such as video and wireless access, along with compatibility with personal digital assistants (PDAs) and other smart devices can also help to retain customers, enhance the customer experience and reduce expenses.

"Contact centers present the best chance to favorably impress customers, and yet organizations continue to drive customers away from interactions with people," said Maoz. "With better processes and tools to support the system, an organization can demonstrate its competency and its knowledge of the customer's needs."

Keeping Customers (and Agents) Happy

Thanks to voice over IP (VoIP) technology, organizations can create more versatile contact centers — and a more compelling customer experience — without breaking the bank. The converged voice, data and video network underlying VoIP technology minimizes the total cost of telephone services, reduces network management costs, provides consolidated reporting across all media types, eliminates the need for multiple databases and creates the ability to build geographically dispersed contact centers that satisfy "follow-the-sun" business-hour coverage and assure business continuity.

VoIP also enables the development of the virtual contact center model, in which calls are routed to agents working at home or to their counterparts working in the traditional contact center environment. The technology is absolutely transparent to the customer. Leveraging a home-based workforce not only drives down the real-estate costs of brick-and-mortar operations, but allows organizations to break down the geographical boundaries of their labor pools. This opens the door to an untapped pool of highly skilled candidates who might otherwise not have applied for contact center positions, including stay-at-home parents and the disabled workforce. Home agents, overall, have a higher job-satisfaction rate than their brick-and-mortar counterparts.

With a fully integrated IP contact center, customer interactions can originate from multiple channels including voice, Web, e-mail and fax. Customers utilizing the Web to research a product can "click to talk" and be connected to an agent who is familiar with that product and looking at the same screen. Supervisors can not only monitor calls, but can initiate online chat sessions with agents to offer advice while the agents are on the phone with customers. Gartner predicts that, by 2012, managing Web interactions will be a core competency of the contact center, with customers expecting the customer service representative (CSR) to know the customers' Web posts in relevant online communities at the time of a telephone interaction.

You only get one chance to make a first impression. By facilitating multimedia communications, improving the customer experience and providing CSRs with improved tools, IP-based contact centers provide organizations with a powerful edge in their quest to provide better customer service and cement customer satisfaction.

Budget-Wise Contact Center Improvements

Customer service, as delivered through the contact center, currently suffers from an overall lack of commitment to the customer service representative (CSR) in the form of tools, training and compensation. Michael Maoz, vice president and distinguished analyst at Gartner, says that companies need to redouble their efforts in this area and extend the customer Web site, add multiple communications channels, and plan carefully to improve agent performance through the introduction of new technologies.

Gartner has identified four key areas on which contact centers should focus to create a higher impact at lower costs:

Personalized Customer Assistance — In a time of budget freezes, this investment is important because it offers higher revenue and reduced agent churn. Agent attrition is reduced because they have a better feeling of competency and success.

Better Contact Center Application Design — Younger CSRs expect a more compelling, responsive and intuitive customer relationship management (CRM) interface to match the experience with the consumer applications that they take for granted. Gartner predicts that consumer applications will extend to the desktop as well as the Web site to the point that smaller, less-formal customer service centers will enable common technologies such as Facebook to be used as the agent desktop, with the necessary telephony components and business information integrated through such "gadgets."

Integrating Web Interactions/Functionality Into the Contact Center — In a few years, customers will expect an organization to lead them (as required) from self-service on the Web by detecting that they need help, then guide them into an assisted chat session and/or co-browsing session (if necessary), then transfer them into a telephone conversation. At the same time, the organization should be maintaining and transferring the context of each interaction as it evolves.

Speedy, Accurate Service Interactions — With the rise of multichannel and multimodal interactions, Gartner expects most contact center managers to consider either a second monitor for each desktop or a wide (landscape) monitor for better, faster navigation by the CSR.

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The new, video-enabled ShoreWare Professional Call Manager is at the center of what's new in ShoreTel 9.1. The Professional Call Manager opens the door to advanced collaborative applications with industry-leading high resolution video — ideal for bringing together geographically dispersed experts for mission critical activities, such as state-of-the-art telemedicine and design manufacturing.

In addition, ShoreTel has integrated its Converged Conferencing 7.1 solution with the ShoreTel 9.1 Call Manager. The combination dramatically improves day-to-day communications by letting users quickly host meet-me audio and web conferences, chat securely via IM, and instantly share documents — all with a single mouse click from the same interface they use for voice communications.

Contact VERTEKS CONSULTING today to learn more about how Shoretel's Pure IP Unified Communications solutions can transform your business

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