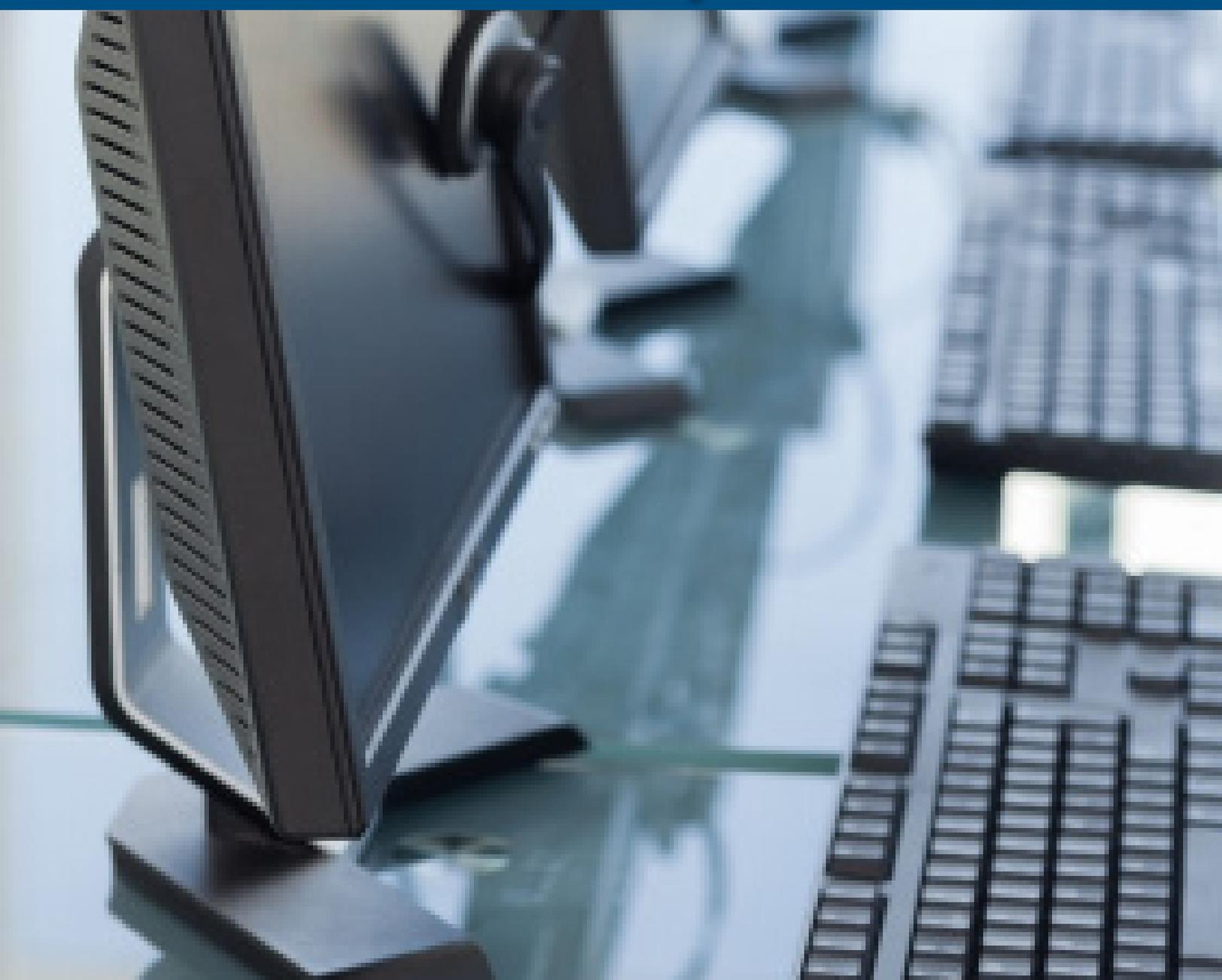




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# Omnichannel ready?





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## How federal contact centers can become fully engaged

Citizens reach out for government services from across the communications spectrum. While many still pick up the phone and call, an increasing number are coming to government through different avenues. Just as individuals turn to the internet when they need help as consumers, there is a rising expectation that government will be able to meet citizen needs via tools such as online chat, texting and video interactions.

The phenomenon is clearly visible in the private sector. In one six-month period, customer service software company Zendesk saw 54 percent of consumers try to resolve a query by calling customer services, while 48 percent emailed customer service, 27 percent used online self-service portals and another quarter went into the store.

The private sector sees tangible benefits when it meets this “omnichannel” demand. Research by Aberdeen Group, for instance, shows that companies with a strong omnichannel customer

engagement strategy retain 89 percent of their customers on average, compared to 33 percent for companies weak in omnichannel – and their revenues grew almost three times faster.

But it isn’t enough just to offer multiple means of entry. While a government agency certainly ups its game when it delivers online chat alongside email and phone, that isn’t true omnichannel. In its fullest sense, omnichannel happens when the citizen can move seamlessly between customer contact venues, and when customer service reps have transparent access to information. A query initiated in chat can be picked up by a phone rep and concluded via email, all in a single seamless transaction.

Gartner sees such citizen engagement as a key technology trend, one in which government:

- Uses data to capture and understand citizens’ needs
- Leverages social media to actively engage citizens

- Allows the citizen to engage on his or her own terms
- Understands the citizen’s preferred engagement channels
- Affords seamless transitions among channels

All this would seem to set the bar pretty high for government contact center professionals – and rightly so. Citizen expectation is high. But getting to true omnichannel can be a complex endeavor. Agencies struggle to cross-pollinate their multiple customer contact silos, making information transparent and readily shareable. They may lack the protocols and policies needed to drive seamless handoffs. Outmoded training techniques may hamper effectiveness.

So how can agencies achieve true omnichannel in the government domain? Here are three key strategies to consider.

### **Tear down walls**

Looking across government it is possible to find places where the seeds of

omnichannel are being sewn. Few agencies have gone the full route, but several shows signs that they are moving in that direction.

Take for instance Emma, a computer-generated virtual assistant produced by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). She'll chat with you online on a range of subjects in both English and Spanish. If such capabilities were augmented with, for instance, a seamless transition between the online interaction and an in-person engagement, the agency would be well on the way to true omnichannel.

We see similar movement at the local level. The city and county of Denver, Colorado for example stand out, having garnered accolades from the Association of Government Contact Center Professionals for excellence in mobile customer service. Denver's 311 Contact Center uses a mobile web application to enable payments and facilitate reporting of community issues. The app has helped the call center pare expenses by \$250,000 per year. A next step might help users transition from the app to a desktop encounter or a phone connection, as needed, all while maintaining integrity in the chain of customer information. Small beginnings such as this have the potential to lead government toward a full omnichannel experience.

At the National Cancer Institute (NCI), omnichannel is even closer to being a reality. In the largest of the 27 Institutes and Centers within the National Institutes of Health (NIH), contact center staff does more than work the phones: They actively track and respond to social media input.

"The contact center's experience handling public inquiries from other NCI channels (phone, email) transfers beautifully to social media," blogs Candace Maynard, senior program manager in NCI's Cancer Information Service. "This approach helps NCI maintain consistency and accuracy in its messages across all public-facing

channels and leverages the skill of contact center staff when helping the public."

The IRS has drawn high marks for its ability to engage citizens along varied lines, as has the U.S. Postal Service, which has put in place a range of measures to ease citizen encounters and save folks a trip to the post office whenever possible.

Despite such standout successes, government in general has a long way to go before it can claim victory in the march toward omnichannel. Citizens may have a variety of touch points with an agency, but those channels don't touch each other.

"If somebody opens a chat, they spend a good amount of time trying to solve a problem. Then, oftentimes, they are directed to call into the service center and since those two channels are not connected in some way, that person must start over from the beginning to solve their problem," said John Loughlin, Director, Client Solutions and Delivery. "From a satisfaction standpoint, this person starts out with a satisfaction score in the negative due to the effort involved."

Often this is caused by structural or jurisdictional problems within an agency. The CIO may run the website, but social media comes from the communications department. Individual programs, in turn, may operate their own channels.

**TAKEAWAY:** In the true omnichannel experience all user touch points are connected organically. Customer relationship management (CRM) systems, databases and other fundamental technology knit together the user experience on the back end, while on the front end skilled service representatives are able to track and respond to customer activity across all contact points.

### Establish protocols

Success in omnichannel requires a coordinated effort. By its nature, the omnichannel service organization will likely bring together diverse personnel and disparate data from across a range of systems. Omnichannel in a single agency may encompass multiple offices and programs. It is therefore vital to establish protocols and practices to ensure customers' information is retained across platforms in order to provide continuity of assistance.

In government this can be especially challenging, since regulatory overlays may limit how data is handled and what information can be seen by whom. A key protocol therefore involves establishing guidelines to protect privacy and ensure regulatory compliance when it comes to information that is shared across channels.

At the same time, managers need to establish policies that drive seamless service delivery. Typically, this will begin by establishing an expectation that key information such as name and address are captured early in the process and are incorporated in such a way as to be readily visible. The citizen shouldn't have to repeat that information and customer service representatives on the phone should not have to request data that has already been shared online. Such policies have to be backed up with training: Reps must know what data to collect and must be trained on how to handle it.

Protocols also should cover the fundamentals of archiving conversations within the omnichannel environment. As every customer service professional knows: There are no truly unique situations. If someone calls or emails with a concern, others likely share that need. Systems must be implemented to capture issues, index them and codify top-line responses. The ability to make situations repeatable and teachable lies at the very heart of the omnichannel endeavor.

On its DigitalGov platform, the General Services Administration (GSA) recommends a number of steps agencies can take to ensure a seamless customer experience, including central oversight for cross-channel customer support. GSA also stresses development of scripts for front-line response to common queries, along with boilerplate email responses to frequently asked questions. Specific owners of this content should be identified across the organization.

Feedback loops likewise help to ensure customer experience data is shared successfully across the channels. More than just a FAQ, each customer concern or question should be attached to data analytics that recognize common issues and recommend corrective action.

**TAKEAWAY:** Omnichannel presents a complex landscape that requires thoughtful management. Having the right technology in place is a start, but managers also must attend to the manifold policies and protocols that define behaviors in the omnichannel environment. Adherence to regulations and an emphasis on shareability of information are critical.

### Train for success

Industry averages put turnover rates for customer service representatives at 30 and 45 percent, as compared to the all-industry turnover rate of about 15 percent. It's hard work, it is not high-paying and you spend a good part of every day trying to smooth ruffled feathers.

One way to stem the tide of turnover is with training. Customer service representatives who feel well-equipped and well-prepared are likely to stay around longer. Training drives higher performance metrics and ultimately pushes customer satisfaction upward.

When it comes to omnichannel, training has historically been problematic. Traditional training takes a two-tiered approach, prepping workers on subject-matter details in one class, while introducing them to the mechanics of the customer service systems in a separate training environment.

Omnichannel demands a more holistic approach. "The training has to be indicative of the full picture," Loughlin said. "The agent needs to understand what is happening in all channels at all the touch points. It means having an agent who is more a generalist: They must understand what happens along the journey and then how to resolve the request. On the plus side, once they have that mastery of all the tools being utilized, they will have the world on one screen. So, they will need to have a broader understanding, but in the long run it will make the job much easier for them and the customer."

Contact center advisory firm IMCI says that training for omnichannel needs to take into account not just messaging but medium. A Twitter interaction, for instance, might require special sensitivity, given the brevity of the communication. Reps also must be trained on nuanced multitasking. It may not be wise, for instance, to engage a video chat when you already have three text conversations going. Likewise, those most comfortable on the phone might need to be trained on the conventions of text communication. All these elements of the customer service experience must be defined in the course of omnichannel training.

Given the complexities of the omnichannel space, experts recommend along the way, trainers need to do more than just teach the answers. They need to help workers understand where to find the answers for themselves. In an omnichannel scenario, critical information might reside in multiple places, in various databases across diverse systems. Customer service

**"The more you can simulate the actual job experience, the better this person will be able to perform."**

**John Loughlin**  
Director, Client Solutions  
and Delivery

training needs to emphasize and build upon the rep's ability to seek and secure this information while operating in any of a number of different channels.

Unfortunately, the nature of government procurements is such that training often gets lost in the shuffle. Typically, a contact center RFP will have training bundled up with software and systems, which might cause the education component to be subsumed by other concerns. In an ideal world, managers would bid out training separately from call center operations: Bring in a separate team of educators to handle the education piece. At the very least, any contact center RFP should include specific metrics and details as to how training will be carried out.

**TAKEAWAY:** Training for omnichannel needs to go broader and deeper than the traditional contact center skill set. To achieve the needed level of instruction, managers should consider bringing in high-caliber educators as part of any omnichannel initiative.

### CONCLUSION

Rising demand for omnichannel service represents a unique challenge to the government call center – and also a unique opportunity.

Call center managers must put in place not just a multi-channel infrastructure, but also the CRM and database interconnections that enable and encourage seamless interactions between those channels. They are challenged to organize needed protocols for managing customer interactions in this new shared environment and must also implement appropriate training.

It can be heavy lifting, but the rewards are significant. As the consumer world has shown, people respond favorably to omnichannel. Satisfaction rates rise when customers feel that are able to get their concerns addressed readily through multiple avenues of communication. Omnichannel is good for the contact center, too, promoting employee satisfaction and driving higher retention rates.

When it comes to omnichannel, the opportunity more than justifies the effort.



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Thank you to our underwriter

