Cardiff Council

Using Customer Interaction Management Technology to Provide Easy Access to Services

BACKGROUND

With more than 50,000 resident inquiries handled each month using a sophisticated telephony and multi-channel call management system, it's hard to imagine that the Cardiff Council's progressive contact centre didn't exist four years ago.

"Ours was a green field site," recalls Isabelle Bignall, head of contact centre services at Cardiff Council, the local government authority serving a population of 320,000 in a southwestern region of the United Kingdom.

According to Bignall, "Before we set up the call centre, none existed. Citizens seeking a service like refuse collection would open phone directories and see 400 different numbers listed for Cardiff Council. Our main switchboard was jammed continuously. When a caller succeeded in getting through, they suffered long delays, were put through to the wrong department and in some cases were forced to repeat their story time and again. There was no contact centre, no trained agents, and just Council employees answering phones with little to no training."

"Contact Center: Enterprise is part of our contact centre, as it enables us to manage, track and measure our interactions with a multi-lingual population of more than 300,000 citizens. The flexible framework allows me to exercise complete control over our contact centre operations."

Isabelle Bignall, Head of Contact Centre Services

CONNECT TO CARDIFF

INDUSTRY
Local Government

GOALS
To have an easy-to-use system that required minimal staff training. Multi-lingual capabilities. One phone number for access to 130 services

SOLUTIONS
Contact Center: Enterprise (Formerly CIM)

Mitel Network Telephony

BENEFITS

- Instantly generate call histories for agents
- Lower overall contact centre costs
- Better utilization of staff and resources
- Comprehensive view of the services citizens are requesting

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Today, a telephony solution based on Contact Centre: Enterprise, formerly Syntellect's (CIM) solution, which is resold as Mitel Commander by partner Mitel Networks and runs on the company's voice messaging system, the Mitel 3300ICP, helps to satisfy the needs of citizens counting on the Council for government services.

Bignall says the completion of a perception study of how and why citizens communicated with the Council changed earlier approaches, which consisted of a combination of phone and in-person support.

"The study examined the methods our citizens used to contact the Council. It also compiled their suggestions regarding how we could improve communications in general."

Ultimately, the study demonstrated that 83 percent of citizens wanted to contact the Council by telephone to access nearly 130 specific services ranging from refuse collection and bill payments to information about free school meals and weather-related school closings.

The same study also revealed the citizenry desired something else: a choice of communications channels to gain help or achieve a satisfactory answer to their questions about Cardiff Council services. In addition to telephone-based support, respondents wanted the ability to interact with the Council using e-mail, text messaging and Web chat.

Bignall says emerging from the study results was a new vision for the services Cardiff Council provided to local residents, one that would support "an integrated strategy for information-age government, where the people of our City could choose how they wished to contact the Council rather than the other way around."

At the new contact centre, realising this vision meant expanding the Council's technology capabilities to provide a variety of communications options for citizens to get their questions resolved upon first contact.

SOLUTION

Cardiff Council took several months to conduct a pilot program designed to produce a desirable citizen relationship management (CRM) system. Then, after considering several different options for call routing and customer interaction management, including various ACD and switchboard systems, Bignall says Cardiff began looking more closely at a combined offering from Mitel and Enghouse Interactive, with the latter supporting full integration with the Council's CRM system.

The joint solution involving Mitel and Enghouse Interactive's Contact Center: Enterprise delivered rich telephony features. It also helped Connect to Cardiff comply with the government's social inclusion directive, which focuses on making public services more accessible to citizens.

"It delivered all desired communication channels, and it could deliver them in both English and Welsh," Bignall explains. "Today, we deliver a capability which includes phone-based support, e-mail, text-messaging service, Web chat, Council voicemail, and the scanning of letters for electronic distribution by Cardiff Council agents.

By linking all these communication channels together through EI's Contact Center: Enterprise, we now have a comprehensive view of the services our citizens are requesting, as well as the channels they are using to access those services."

Previously, there were 400 separate phone numbers listed for the Council. The jargon used in phone directories was meaningful to employees but had no meaning to callers. With the combination of Contact Center: Enterprise (CCE) and Mitel, the new system's routing capability now requires only one main phone number, with CCE providing an easy-to-navigate menu of core Council services.

Within the centre, inbound contacts are handled by an agent staff of over 50. CCE produces screen pops to an agent's desktop, showing the calling line identification (CLI) to identify the caller and to generate past call histories for review. The same system is used to identify citizens accessing Connect to Cardiff online, as it recognizes their inbound e-mail addresses.

"With so little experience at the Council, you would think training would be difficult. But it is refreshing for agents to be trained on the Syntellect CIM system even though they have had no past experience working with customer interaction management software. They cannot believe how easy it is to use, especially the softphone function."

Isabelle Bignall, Head of Contact Centre Services CONNECT TO CARDIFF. Interestingly, Bignall says just five of the original 22 agents that she hired had prior contact centre experience, but ultimately that had no impact on agent training.

One feature agents have put into regular use is a toolbar enabling them to populate a reference directory of their most frequently used numbers, in order to promptly assist callers. The system automatically populates the toolbar with 10 numbers to start, but once agents learned how they could personalise the list and create their own directory of the most valuable "quick help numbers," it became a genuine time-saving device for agents and callers alike.

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RESULTS

The centre handled 6,000 contacts the first month of operation, with just two percent of those contacts coming from non-telephony sources such as e-mail, text messaging or Web chat. Bignall says that the Council wanted to go through a pilot period to start, handling all contacts in steady, sure fashion and as she says, "not go for the big bang. As a government agency, we wanted to handle the needs of citizens and do so smoothly."

Today, the contact centre is handling more than 50,000 contacts each month with more than 20 percent of those coming via e-mail, text messaging, and Web chat. For her dedication in helping to make Connect to Cardiff a success, Bignall was named the U.K. Call Centre Manager of the Year by the Call Centre Management Association, winning the honor over more than 60 other nominees.

Additionally, the U.K.'s Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) is leveraging Bignall's experience as a "Best Practice" reference for other public sector contact centres.

In terms of non-telephony communication adoption, Bignall says that Web chat is by far the fastest growing channel that citizens are using. It has also helped the Council lower overall costs by making its agents more productive, as the more experienced ones can manage multiple Web chat sessions simultaneously.

"We are happy to reach out to the full community with such offerings as Web chat, which is especially helpful to citizens who are perhaps hard of hearing. It makes a big difference for us on the social inclusion front, as the people we serve have taken to it hugely."

Enghouse Interactive
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With e-mail, Bignall says the Council maintains standard responses in both English and Welsh in a knowledge library, which keeps transaction times to a minimum.

Of particular importance to the Cardiff Council is the ability of the combined system to produce useful statistical reports. These serve as valuable aids in monitoring call handling performance, evaluating staff and planning for future needs.

Bignall says that in addition to the standard CCE report views on average call handling times and call peaks and troughs, the reports also deliver important information such as specific times during the day when certain Council services are requested the most, by specific types of callers. Staffing needs at various points during the day can be assessed much more quickly, allowing management to respond in more timely fashion at given hours.

For instance, with Welsh language callers, Cardiff Council carefully tracks who is calling, how often, the nature of the calls and how long those Welsh callers may have been waiting in queue. Through the CCE's reporting capabilities, Bignall detected a recent spike in Welsh interactions, and responded by hiring two additional agents

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But it is the contact centre's unique ability to increase the Council's level of social inclusiveness which most impresses Bignall. She cites the case of Cardiff County's pay phone boxes, all of which are now part of the system. If a resident dials in from a public pay phone box, centre management realizes the caller is not dialing from home and they likely do not own a mobile telephone.

CCE catapults these callers straight to the top of the queue. Why? Answering these calls first is important because all agents realize that the caller may be elderly and ill, or the victim of a crime on a street corner, or may have some other immediate issue while away from home. These calls requiring timely response are routed to one of three specially trained "pay phone box" agents for immediate handling.

"Mitel and Enghouse Interactive Contact Center: Enterprise have teamed to provide Cardiff Council with the ideal solution for us," Bignall concludes. "On the centre management side, CCE is stable and adaptable. It's like a vessel for us. You are not in a situation where it steers you. You steer it."
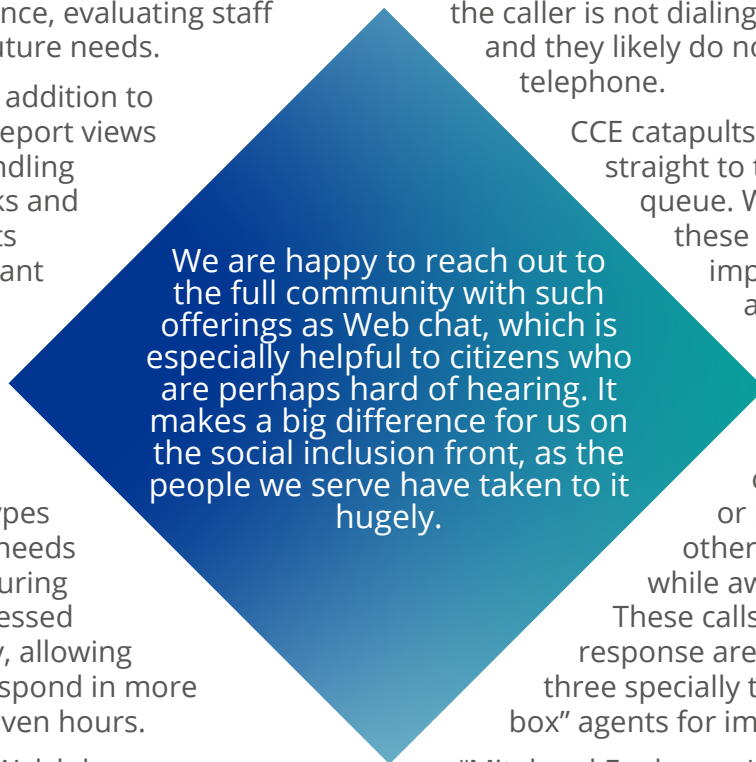
ABOUT ENGHOUSE INTERACTIVE

Enghouse Interactive's integrated suite of solutions includes multi-channel contact centre, self-service, attendant operator consoles and workforce optimisation. This wide portfolio places us in the unique position to offer customers and partners a complete, fully featured solution from a single vendor.

These solutions support the full range of deployment methods from premise-based to private, public or community cloud and even hybrid requirements.