



**THE NEW GOVERNMENT AGENCY CONTACT CENTER:  
BLENDING PHONE, EMAIL, WEB, AND CHAT TO EXPAND  
AND IMPROVE SERVICES WITHIN EXISTING BUDGET CONSTRAINTS**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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People communicate with government agencies in many ways. They call. They send email. They visit a website. That's why agencies try to make each communication channel as effective as possible.

**But it has become critical to manage these channels in a more integrated way.** That's because people now use phone, email, and the web interchangeably. They send emails about problems they already discussed with someone by phone. They visit websites to double-check information they received via email. To meet the needs of their channel-hopping constituencies, agencies must therefore manage communication across all channels in a common manner.

There are basically two requirements for integrating phone and online communication channels:

- Applying common case management across all channels
- Applying a common knowledge base across all channels

The impact of this integrated approach is substantial. **Cross-channel contact centers enable agencies to provide more responsive service, support more programs, and deliver consistently accurate information—within existing resource constraints.** That's because an integrated approach makes each channel become more efficient and drives more and more interactions to the most efficient and scalable channel: the web.

Cross-channel contact centers also provide agencies with greater visibility into the top concerns of their constituencies—whether those constituencies are citizens, businesses, other agencies or internal staff. This visibility enables them to more proactively address these concerns, resulting in both service improvements and a reduced volume of incoming inquiries.

Agencies that fail to adopt this integrated approach suffer. It will be harder for them to handle their growing communication workloads. The information they provide will be inconsistent from channel to channel. Frontline staff will have to spend time repeatedly answering the same redundant questions over and over. And more expert staff members will continually get pulled away from their primary responsibilities to help out when more difficult questions are asked.

Fortunately, it's not difficult to implement an integrated cross-channel contact center. Private-sector companies have already done so in large numbers and are now enjoying the benefits. Their successes serve as a model for public-sector organizations seeking to deliver better service at a substantially lower cost-per-interaction.

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## THE PROBLEM WITH “STOVEPIPE” COMMUNICATIONS

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Human beings naturally communicate through multiple channels. We talk. We write. We use signs and symbols. We’ve developed all kinds of media to exchange information—print, radio, television, the internet—in order to address our various needs and preferences.

Government agencies and the constituents they serve also use different channels at different times. They use the phone. They use email. They use the web. They use chat.

Unfortunately, at most agencies, these communications channels are separate stovepipes. Phone calls are handled one way. Emails are handled another. Management of the website is handled separately from either of those channels. And chat may not be provided at all.

In many cases, there may not even be any formal system in place for managing one or more of these channels. So once an agency employee gets into a one-on-one email exchange with a constituent, for example, there is no easy way for anyone else at the agency to help resolve that issue—or to leverage the results of that interaction to expedite the resolution of similar problems or questions in the future.

**Any interaction on one channel is therefore completely separated from any other interaction on any other channel.** When agency staffers are on the phone with someone, they have no way of referencing any previous relevant email exchange. The information that someone views on the agency website may not exactly match the information he or she was given earlier over the phone. Each channel is isolated from the others—to the detriment of both the agency and citizen.

Here are some specific problems that agencies and citizens experience every day because of stovepipe communications channels.

### The “I explained this in my email” syndrome

Someone with a problem takes the time to carefully describe that problem in an email message to the agency. The next day, that person gets a helpful reply. So far, so good.

But this person has a follow-up question and now decides to pick up the phone to get a quick answer. Here’s where things take a turn for the worse. **The agency employee taking the call can’t see the original email exchange.** So instead of just asking a follow-up question, the caller has to explain the whole situation all over again. In some cases, they may even be given information that contradicts the original email reply!

**Agency impact:** Staff person spends 15 minutes on a call that should have taken only three.

**Constituent impact:** Quickly goes from being happy to being upset. Becomes unsure about the accuracy of information received.

### The “That’s not what it said on your website!” syndrome

In this case, someone first attempts to get information on the agency’s website. The person finds some apparently relevant content, but it is unclear or doesn’t perfectly apply to his or her exact situation. So this person calls the agency for clarification.

The agency staffer taking the call, it turns out, has more up-to-date and accurate information than the website—and so is able to help the constituent. The call takes a little

longer, because the caller has already absorbed the older, less helpful information from the site. The caller expresses this confusion during the call.

**Agency impact:** Will always have to service the constituent via costly phone calls rather than the substantially less expensive web channel, because of this single bad online experience.

**Constituent impact:** Confusion and aggravation. Will never fully trust the accuracy of any agency's website ever again.

### The endless repetitive phone calls syndrome

Agencies without integrated contact center strategies have great difficulty developing effective self-service content for their websites. When agency staff members discover or recognize that the agency's constituents as a whole need some particular piece of information, they have no fast and easy way to capture that information and publish it as a knowledge item on the agency's website. So instead of being asked a question only once on the phone and then creating relevant web content to automatically answer that same question online in the future, these agencies condemn themselves to answering the same questions over and over.

**Agency impact:** Inundated with constant repetitive questions that could be answered via the web. Unnecessary high resources consumed by phone calls. Slow responses due to insufficient resources and/or inefficient call management.

**Constituent impact:** Often can't find answers to their questions on the website. Get into the habit of picking up the phone and calling every time they have a question—even in cases when the information is, in fact, on the website.

These are just a few examples of how typical stovepipe communication channels adversely impact agencies and constituents alike. There are many others. The overall negative business impact of these problems can be classified into four areas:

- Individual cases take much more time and effort to resolve
- The long-term effectiveness of the agency is undermined
- Inconsistent information can be provided by each channel
- Constituents are frequently annoyed, angered and confused

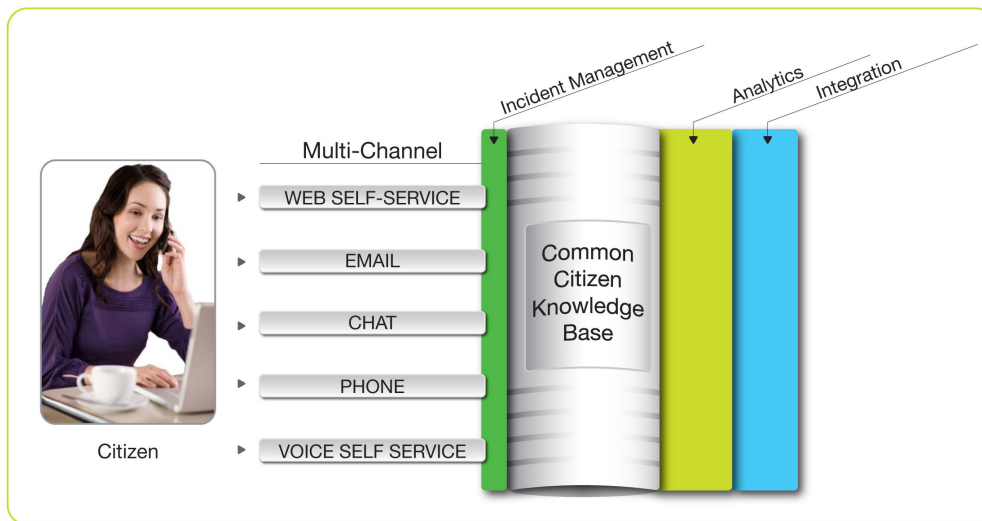
Stovepipe channels also deprive agencies of insight into the issues that most concern their constituents. It's difficult if not impossible to get that insight if you can't capture and report on interactions across all of your communication channels.

When use of the internet was minimal, these problems weren't critical. But the number of people using the internet continues to grow, and those people are using email, the web, and chat with increasing frequency. **Their expectations about the ability of government agencies to communicate across multiple channels are growing as well.** That's why it is no longer acceptable to handle phone, email, and the web in an ad hoc and unintegrated way.

## THE NEW GOVERNMENT AGENCY CONTACT CENTER

So what does the new multi-channel agency contact center look like?

The first thing to understand is that multi-channel agency contact centers don't require agencies to make huge changes to their existing staff structure or take on large-scale technology overhauls. The point of creating a contact center is not to disrupt current operations or unnecessarily force agencies to re-engineer their communication environments. Agency staff members still take phone calls. They reply to emails. They escalate calls and emails as required. They launch chats with people who visit the website. And web managers still maintain appropriate controls over site content.



The difference is that, in a multi-channel contact center, these former stovepipes are unified in order to optimize operational efficiency and provide more effective and consistent service. This channel unification takes place on two levels:

- Common case tracking, reporting and histories
- Common knowledge base authoring and access

These cross-channel commonalities have already been proven to be invaluable to private-sector companies—which, although for different reasons, must also maximize both the quality of the service they deliver and the resource-efficiency with which they deliver it.

## COMMON CASE MANAGEMENT

Agencies manage communications in different ways. Some use “trouble-ticker” applications to ensure that callers don't “fall through the cracks” and that those who call more than once about the same case are handled correctly. Some agencies also use email management applications to track the progress of email inquiries through reply and resolution. Others handle calls and emails on more of an ad hoc basis. This lack of accountability tends to result in slow response times and missed commitments.

Unfortunately, few agencies use a common system for both calls and emails. This results in problems such as those described in the previous section.

**In a multi-channel contact center, on the other hand, all phone, email, and chat events are handled by a common system.** In some government-to-business applications, website visitors may even be asked to log in when they use online self-service tools. This enables their web interactions to be tracked in this same system, too. So, regardless of which touchpoint someone may use, every service interaction is logged into a single database. The result is one single view of all interactions with all constituents in one place.

It sounds so simple and logical that it's surprising more agencies don't do it. But many agencies implemented their call center systems before anyone ever even heard of email management software. So those legacy systems have remained in place while email, web and chat management were added as separate functions.

An effective multi-channel case management system actually integrates events on three distinct levels: case tracking, case reporting, and constituent histories.

### Common case tracking

In a multi-channel contact center, cases are assigned a common tracking record regardless of how they originate. Each time someone calls or sends a message about that case, it is logged into this common record. Agency staff therefore has access to all information relating to the case even if the constituent moves between channels.

This ensures that staff members always have all the information they need to resolve constituent issues. **It also ensures that a trouble ticket opened in one channel doesn't remain open after it has been successfully closed via another channel.** Agency staff and constituents can thus move freely from channel to channel without jeopardizing the integrity of service processes.

### Common case reporting

Common service records enable agencies to document and analyze activity across all channels. This integrated reporting is essential for a wide range of management decisions. For example, a staff member who is very good at resolving phone calls may be slow with emails. Cross-channel reporting quickly highlights this disparity so that it can be addressed. Or, a report may reveal that people frequently send help requests immediately after viewing a specific knowledge item on the website. This would indicate that there may be some kind of problem in the content or wording or that knowledge item.

In fact, by tracking the site content that people most commonly visit—and tracking the frequency with which they then either launch an email or leave the site with their question answered—**agencies can make appropriate adjustments to site content in order to maximize the percentage of visitors who find the answers they need on the web without any human intervention at all.** This significantly reduces costs while providing people with the information they need on a 24/7 basis.

Cross-channel reports also provide high-value feedback for other aspects of agency operations and policy. This feedback can be used to determine whether or not programs are meeting their objectives and/or whether specific changes can be made to better fulfill agency

mandates. Data generated across all channels is far richer and more useful for such purposes than that from any single channel alone.

### Common constituent histories

Government agencies have different mandates when it comes to working with their various constituencies. Some have to closely track interactions with specific constituents in order to ensure proper distribution of benefits or to effectively manage appeals for regulatory exemption. Others are specifically proscribed from gathering or retaining too much constituent-specific data.

For agencies that need to closely manage specific individuals and/or cases, multi-channel contact centers provide a complete, integrated view of communication with specific constituents. This cross-channel view can be extremely useful. For example, consider a citizen who has been engaged in an extended email exchange with an agency for several weeks regarding a particular problem. One day, that citizen picks up the phone. Without a cross-channel contact management system in place, the person answering the phone would have no way of referencing the previous email “conversations.” That lack of information will result in an unnecessarily long and complex call.

In a multi-channel contact center, on the other hand, the agency staff member could immediately see the entire history of email messages—including both factual information and any emotional tone. This contact data would enable the staff member to handle the call more quickly and effectively.

## COMMON KNOWLEDGE BASE AUTHORIZING AND ACCESS

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The other key aspect of multi-channel integration is the use of a common knowledge base. This integration is essential for ensuring that all information provided to constituents across all channels is complete, accurate, up-to-date and consistent.

### Common knowledge access

In a multi-channel contact center, a common knowledge base is used by agency staff for answering questions on the phone, for replying to emails, and for expediting chat sessions—as well as for web self-service. **This way, the information people receive is consistent regardless of how they contact the agency.** It also means information only has to be maintained in one place, rather than three or four.

This solves a common agency problem: people who call, send emails and check the agency website until they “get the answer they want.” Having totally consistent information across all channels eliminates this loophole-seeking behavior.

Of course, some of the knowledge items that agency staff members need for their own reference may not be appropriate for publication on the web. So agencies can choose to “filter” some of the content specifically used in each channel. But the superset of knowledge items from which all channels draw is a common one.

Use of a common knowledge base brings particular efficiencies to the email channel. Rather than putting a conventional email address on their websites, agencies can have site visitors submit their questions via webforms. These forms can then be automatically “scanned” to

determine if any existing knowledge items on the website answer the person's question. The person can then be directed to those items, thereby pre-empting the need for a manual reply. If the site visitor doesn't bother to check those items and send the form anyway, the staff member who replies to it can simply click on the appropriate knowledge item and send it to the constituent—eliminating the time it takes to type a “one-off” response.

**The internal use of these knowledge bases by agency staff themselves has proven to be very effective.** By referring to a knowledge base, trainees and external contractors can quickly become capable of answering common questions. The knowledge base can also be easily accessed by staffers at other locations, working from home, or on the road.

### Common knowledge authoring

One of the biggest obstacles to the effective use of the web as a self-service channel is the creation of timely, accurate and complete content. Agencies can spend weeks trying to get their subject-matter experts to develop appropriate content.

But much of this content is soon out-of-date. At the same time, new information becomes important to citizens, businesses and/or other agencies—but never makes it to the website.

Multi-channel contact centers directly address this critical knowledge management issue by making the creation of new knowledge base content an “organic” component of all communication processes. **When agency employees answer a question that doesn't already exist in the knowledge base, they can automatically author a new potential knowledge item.** That item can then be quickly reviewed and/or edited by appropriate policy experts and content managers who can then easily add it to the knowledge base.

This integrated approach provides two powerful benefits.

- **The time and effort required to create content is reduced.** With the process described above, knowledge items are created as problems are solved. Little or no additional action is required on the part of individual agency employees. Content creation doesn't become a huge ordeal—which means it actually gets done!
- **Knowledge items are driven by people's real concerns, not the guesswork of internal content authors.** When you guess what's important to the people you serve, you only have a limited chance of being right. When your content is driven by the actual questions they ask every day, you can achieve online self-service rates of 90 percent and higher. That's because the overwhelming majority of questions that agencies have to answer typically revolve around a very narrow set of issues. If an agency's knowledge base consistently addresses those issues, its site will act as an extraordinarily effective self-service channel.

It's important to note that **superficial integration of stovepipe channel management applications won't provide the full benefits of a true multi-channel contact center.** Such integration provides only limited channel links: sharing of records, the ability to launch one application from within another, etc. This is not the same as having a true common knowledge base and true common case management. In fact, integration projects often require major effort and expenditure while providing only a fraction of the benefits delivered by a truly unified contact center platform.

Actually, the implementation of a multi-channel contact center should not be an arduous or disruptive process. On the contrary, it reduces the aggravation and effort associated with critical tasks such as handling phone calls, replying to email, developing web content, and generating reports. By better managing communication with the outside world, the multi-channel contact center opens up a world of possibilities for agencies now facing greater pressures than ever to do more with less.

## **FIVE REASONS WHY EVERY AGENCY NEEDS A MULTI-CHANNEL CONTACT CENTER STRATEGY**

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As attractive as the benefits of a multi-channel contact center are, agency managers still need compelling reasons to move ahead with such an initiative. After all, there are plenty of needs competing for limited agency resources.

There are at least five compelling reasons why every agency should embrace a cross-channel contact center strategy.

### **Reason #1: Significantly reduced communication workload**

Multi-channel contact centers resolve problems more quickly and are better able to provide the right information the first time. They also promote the use of the web as a self-service channel by ensuring that the information available there is exactly the same as what an agency subject-matter expert would provide on the phone. The resulting reduction in phone and email workloads allows agencies to handle more responsibilities at less cost—and frees agency staff to spend more of their time on issues that truly warrant their personal attention.

### **Reason #2: Consistent, accurate and up-to-date answers**

Government agencies assume serious responsibilities when they answer people's questions. The answers they give may significantly impact someone's ability to get quality healthcare, avoid legal exposure for their business or pursue their education. A piece of bad information can even have an impact on environment quality or national security. That's why it's essential for agencies to manage and deliver knowledge effectively across all channels.

### **Reason #3: Rising constituent expectations**

People are dealing with private-sector companies that have implemented a new generation of customer experience (CX) solutions. By implementing CX solutions, these companies are now able to respond to emails in hours instead of days and are able to resolve problems over the phone in minutes. These experiences affect the expectations that people have of the agencies they deal with. They may not hold agencies to the exact same standards for responsiveness and personalization, but they aren't going to wait two days to get an answer to their email anymore, either. Government agencies that don't raise their service levels across all channels will find themselves dealing with more unsatisfied people more often. That's not good for agency performance, staff morale or the constituents who depend on the agency for essential services.

### **Reason #4: Better insight into emerging issues**

Agencies that implement multi-channel contact centers know more about the people they serve than those that don't. They can track on a weekly or even daily basis what people are

asking about by phone, email, the web, and chat. They can respond to that information with better policies and processes. They can also use that information to improve their website content, and thereby deliver better service at less cost. If you can immediately notice that people are suddenly asking about some story they heard on the news, for example, you can quickly respond by posting relevant content and circulating an appropriate statement to agency employees who answer your phones and email. Multi-channel contact center can pick up on any such trends faster and respond to them more effectively.

#### **Reason #5: It's very do-able**

Multi-channel communication management requires some new thinking about how inquiries are managed and how knowledge bases can be most effectively leveraged. But it doesn't require major investments in technology infrastructure and may not even require the involvement of IT at all. That's because today's on demand CX solution providers enable you to acquire all the functionality you need for your multi-channel contact center via the internet. Instead of deploying a complex CX application in your own data center, you can get multi-channel case management and knowledge base management capabilities delivered to your users' PCs using nothing more than your web browser. Under this hosted delivery model, the service provider manages all the software and underlying server infrastructure for you.

The entire thrust of government IT directives and legislative mandates is to have agencies improve both their productivity and the quality of service they provide. The multi-channel contact center fulfills these dual purposes. By integrating and streamlining communication with the general public and other agencies—and by enriching that communication with accurate, relevant knowledge resources—agencies can meet their performance goals within current budget limits.

#### **CASE STUDY: UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY: CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION**

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As a high-visibility citizen-facing organization, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency (CBP) had the mission to provide CBP customers the information they needed—quickly, cordially and with a high degree of accuracy. The CBP understood that because of the visibility of the organization, it would need to have a citizen-to-government service that offered the citizen multiple choices in requesting and receiving CBP information, including the capability to handle high volumes of phone call and email traffic. CBP also understood that the solution required extensive scalability as well as the ability to efficiently handle high-peak loads.

To accomplish their mission, CBP partnered with RightNow to implement a knowledge base system to increase the availability and accessibility to critical information. Prior to implementation, citizens were only able to obtain CBP information during standard operating hours Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. With the RightNow solution in place, responsiveness to citizen calls and email inquiries increased significantly. In 2007 alone, CBP had 958,438 hits to the knowledge base with 3,543 emails submitted. Additionally, with CBP's high request volume of 6,245 calls offered and 1,196 calls abandoned, CBP improved service by increasing responsiveness with no changes to staff.

Using the RightNow solution for managing email and phone service to the citizen, the CBP has achieved outstanding results, including:

- A 98% self-service rate on CBP's website using web self-service.
- The ability to gather feedback from end-users at the point in time they are interacting with web or an agent increasing the opportunity to receive and respond to customer comments and recommendations.
- Sharing the CBP knowledge base with USA.Gov which provides additional options for citizens to find information they need in a timely manner.

In addition, the RightNow solution provides the CBP a dynamic knowledge base to both internal and external CBP customers. Internally, the CBP utilizes the RightNow solution as the single knowledge base for answering customer questions as well as tracking and routing citizen phone calls and email in a single system. External customers utilize the CBP knowledge base for web self-service.

As a result of the initial benefits received from implementing RightNow's solutions, CBP was able to increase responsiveness, address high volumes of citizen inquiries and handle all complaints and compliments relating to CBP interactions with the general public, including: travelers, industry, Congress, and other government entities. The agency was also prompted to expand the utilization of the knowledge base and RightNow solutions to support two additional CBP programs. The first expansion initiative included the CBP Virtual Interactive Benefits program which provides web self-service capabilities, in addition to contact center functionality in support of the agency's requirements to provide benefits information, anytime, anywhere. With the extension of the solution to support this new initiative, the program significantly improved employee engagement and interactions, while also experiencing a substantial reduction in email and call volumes.

Finally, the RightNow solutions deployed at CBP have been extended to support the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) program, an automated system that determines the eligibility of visitors to travel to the U.S. under the Visa Waiver Program. Once the program began experiencing a high rate of inquiries, it used RightNow solutions to help manage agent workloads and improve responsiveness rates to customer inquiries. Initially, the ESTA website pointed customers directly to the "Submit a Question" form which offered suggested answers, prior to sending a response email to customers. This helped alleviate workload; however, it did not take full advantage of the self-service aspect of the Q&A module that requires an agent to read a Q&A before responding to a question. After some time, the ESTA team re-pointed the link to their Answers page automatically presenting dynamically ranked ESTA questions and answers. This resulted in a substantial adoption of self-service Q&As, while reducing requests for personal assistance by more than 50%.

## Future

CBP is currently redesigning their support site in RightNow's Customer Portal environment to enhance the web experience and streamline the process of registering official complaints through progressive discovery with dynamic forms. Future plans include computer telephony integration (CTI) with Interactive Intelligence to route calls and pop data to the agent desktop, migrating to the FISMA moderate Government Cloud environment, and adding the chat channel.

## ABOUT RIGHTNOW

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RightNow is helping rid the world of bad experiences one consumer interaction at a time, eight million times a day. RightNow CX, the customer experience suite, helps organizations deliver exceptional customer experiences across the web, social networks and contact centers, all delivered via the cloud. With more than eight billion customer interactions delivered, RightNow is the customer experience fabric for nearly 2,000 organizations around the globe. To learn more about RightNow, go to [www.rightnow.com](http://www.rightnow.com).

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Contact us today to find out how we can help you create the best possible customer experience for your customers.

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