Harnessing workflow and mobility

By Richard Firth   30 Mar 2015

The need for connectivity, anywhere and at any time, has driven the need for organisations of all sizes to look for ways to automate business processes and ensure seamless and measured communication between the company, employees and consumers.

In addition, these needs have forced businesses to provide mobility to their workforce in order for companies to take their services to consumers rather than vice versa. This can only be done by enabling access to workflow applications in what is essentially becoming a virtual workplace. There are many factors driving this change - service levels, communication, travel costs, petrol price and expensive office space.

However, businesses today can't take advantage of the myriad benefits mobility offers unless they understand how to harness workflow effectively and how to properly automate business process functions. I believe that this will become the single biggest risk to the burgeoning call centre industry being rolled out in many third-world countries.

Mobile-based initiative

Workflow has been high on the CIO's agenda for some time now, as it has long been heralded a solution for improving business efficiency, measurement and improved processes. However, with applications and systems becoming the front end of business, devices potentially become the front end, too. Companies need to strategise how their consumers communicate with that front end rather than through expensive call centres. Call centres only exist because 85% of most businesses consumer questions and answers can be automated and responded to by using relatively low cost people.

The next logical step is moving the call centre from a resource-based initiative to a mobile-based one. Call centres traditionally used cheap labour to answer 90% of company FAQs. In most cases, business would bring in third-party contractors to set up, run and manage their call centres, and their call centre agents would handle queries, complaints and suchlike. However, today social media has created a paradigm shift, and organisations of all types and sizes need to get a handle on social media and sharing apps and sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube as these have become the primary interface with customers and the de facto way consumers reach out to brands with complaints and queries.

This new mobile world is bringing added requirements, and that's where workflow becomes important. No business can be automated 100%, but there has to be an interface between apps and traditional back-end business administration systems. The ideal mix is 95% workflow and process automation and 5% human.

The impact this new means of interaction could have on countries such as South Africa and India, which have put massive strategic importance on, and rely on, call centre investment, is huge - and not in a good way. This could result in hundreds or even thousands of jobs being lost as a result of increased self-service capabilities. We have a desperate plea to government that a 35% pass rate is producing call centre agents, not people who run a knowledge economy, and call centre agents are increasingly endangered as a result of the relationship between technology, apps and workflow systems.

Workflow solutions

Ultimately, this trend in mobility brings with it the Internet of things (IoT) and 'devices for devices'. Devices are now talking to each other, and not only to the back-end workflow processes. Ultimately this leads to improved efficiency and automation of systems and consumer communications.

Both automation and devices for devices are leading to a plethora of new functions that can be measured, risk rated, and assigned to service levels. This is once again highlighting the importance of employees within an organisation. For example, workflow solutions can now measure keyboard keystrokes for worker output and quality management of business processes.

With workforce mobilisation and instantaneous communication becoming vital to business success, workflow solutions are rising to the top of every CIO's priority list.

ABOUT RICHARD FIRTH

A stalwart of the South African IT industry, Richard has been involved in the technology arena since 1989. With diplomas in Information Technology and Business Process Re-engineering, his successful career in IT has spanned various roles, including programming, IT implementation, and various management positions culminating in his current responsibilities as Chairman & CEO of MIP Holdings. He sits on the Boards of both Itemate and !Waytag.

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