Call Centre Evolution in the Digital Government

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INTRODUCTION

Public administration is undergoing a radical transformation. Citizens, rather than administrative documents, will be the primary and active subjects of the process of service supply. A new attitude toward administrative service is emerging. Citizens interact with public administration through new channels such as *unified administrative counters*, *multifunction administrative counters*, *citizen liaisons offices*, and *Internet*. Furthermore, having in mind the goals of shortening the distance between citizens to public administration and improving efficiency and efficacy of public bodies, the use of *call* and *contact centres* is quickly spreading out. It is worth to recall the recent case of *Allô Service Public*, the unified call centre of the French public administration, which on its first day of activation has been contacted by more than 100,000 people, more than any optimistic expectation.

For a public administration, a *call centre* represents a simple way for interacting with citizens. Call centres provide many advantages such as improved efficiency, increased hours of operation, and reduced costs. The main advantage for citizens is that call centres can provide the information they need, as fast as possible and reducing waiting time.

Call centres and contact centres are based on an innovative use of the phone channel, on one side, and on multi-channel strategies of access to service and information, on the other side. The combination of these two aspects allows public administration to develop and activate new modes of managing interaction with citizens. A phone-based information service is often the first channel chosen by citizens that want to get in touch with a public body. Call centres, on the other hands, have a relevant role for implementing the link between *front-office* and *back-office* services.

BACKGROUND

The call centre concept evolves through four main phases (Bagnara, 2000; Kowarsky, 1998).

Phase 0

In the sixties, a call centre was a complaints office equipped with a toll free number. As the aim of call centres was to reply to standard complaints, human operators had a limited base of knowledge and basic communication skills. The first service of this kind was activated by Ford, as a consequence of a sentence pronounced by an American judge in 1968, in a lawsuit initiated by a consumer association.

Phase 1

Around the mid-eighties, call centres adopted ACD (Automatic Call Distributor) technology. An ACD is a system to receive a large number of phone calls, especially optimized to equally distribute them to the available operators. At this time, human operators had a still limited, but now specialized, base of knowledge. In 1981, General Electric activated the so called "GE Answer Centre" with the aim of facilitating customers that need, or simply desire, to get in touch with the company. This centre quickly became a benchmark for all the other American companies with a large number of customers. Between 1984 and 1989, while many call centres were opened in U.S., General Electric activated 52 different call centres for its primary business divisions. The success of this new way of providing services to customers was so large that, in the eighties, more than 4 million job positions were created in the newly activated US call centres.

Phase 2

In the nineties, call centres adopted the emerging Information and communication technologies, thus providing a service that fulfills the three major consumer's requirements: easy access, closeness, personal information. Under this perspective, the development of call centres is considered a basic opportunity to know and address customer's needs, rather than being an additional cost. The main business goal was to differentiate and increase the value of the company offers with respect to competitors. In this phase, human operators have high level communication skills.

Phase 3

At the beginning of the new century, call centres are considered as places where new value is created both for a company and its customers. The technology used by call centres evolve, in order to provide a personalized service based on the phone and the newly available communication channels. Physical front desks, surface mail, fax, electronic mail, WAP (wireless application protocol) based interface, are channels simultaneously used to grant access to the call centre. Combining these channels with automatic and interactive phone answer systems, Web applications, and the like, the call centre becomes a sophisticated reference point. In this context, human operators play the role of specialized consultants.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CALL CENTRE

In the public sector, call centres have followed a more recent evolutionary path. The citizen liaisons office, a front desk entirely dedicated to communication activities, has been introduced at least ten years ago and has been used as the basis for the first public call centres. Starting from this kind of unidirectional channel (information are simply given upon a specific request), public administration has moved into a phase characterized by more interactive services to citizens.

The change of attitude towards this form of communication channels is due to two main factors: the commitment of public administrations to facilitate the interaction with citizens and private enterprises, the needs of citizens to obtain services with the same quality levels of those provided by the private sector, where call centres are already widespread. Furthermore, public administration is more and more interested in knowing citizen's needs as a concrete base for providing services that address real and concrete expectations (Call Centres in the Scottish Public Sector, 2001).

The goals of a public administration call centre are the following:

- To facilitate contacts between citizens/enterprises and public administration (removing physical queue lines, freedom to choose the preferred mode for getting in touch with public administration, chance to receive desired information in time frames different from the traditional ones) (Controller and auditor general, 2002)
- To improve quality level of relationships with citizens/enterprises by means of timely and trusted answers
- To standardize quality levels and contents of given answers, by means of trained, qualified, and motivated personnel and the fulfillment of high and predefined service levels (Baird, 2004)
- To gather and process information coming from citizens/enterprises, in order to improve and simplify internal procedures and organization
- To constantly enrich the amount of knowledge and competencies available in the public bodies, through sharing and spreading of given answers, best practices in the management of relationships between citizens and enterprises
- To improve and promote the external image of public bodies

In the actual scenario, the number of public bodies involved in innovative experiences based on advanced communication modes that integrate different channels such as phone, physical front desk, fax, electronic mail, Web, SMS messages is rapidly increasing. *Information quality* is the common factor of these initiatives. Information, in fact, is exchanged, processed, exploited in the transactions between citizens and public administration and among different public bodies (Bagnara, Donati, & Schael, 2002).

The other relevant issues are *usability* and *accessibility* of the services to citizens and *universal access right*. In some cases, these issues are handled by *Web call centres*. The feeling of loneliness and uneasiness induced by the use of Internet (or by automatic answering systems, as well) is reduced, or at least mitigated, by virtual front desks implemented with the current technology (Controller and auditor general, 2002).

FROM WEB TO CONTACT CENTRE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The Web call centre is a solution that allows Internet navigators to get in touch, through a vocal connection,

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