



# Contact Center Continuity

By Robert Camastro

*The next best thing to avoiding an outage is knowing how to fix one. Here are some tips.*

Samuel Johnson, the 18th Century English writer said, "the next best thing to knowing something is knowing where to find it." This pearl of wisdom not only offers a practical alternative to having first-hand knowledge of life's infinite questions, but it also imparts a couple of related lessons. One of them is that it is not likely you would ever know every answer to every question. The other is that such a condition is reasonably acceptable in the real world.

Calling upon an 18th Century writer to begin a discussion of outage avoidance and management in contact centers may be a little weighty, but given some creative license, this quote can be easily modified to provide a true appreciation of the issue at hand. With Mr. Johnson's permission, I'll declare the following variation on his theme: the next best thing to avoiding an outage in your contact center is knowing how to resolve it. This proclamation would imply that you will probably not be able to avoid outages in your contact center, and that such a condition is reasonably acceptable in the real world. Coming to terms with this notion will help you avoid setting unreasonable expectations for yourself and others and may even save you some money.

Most of the outages you experience will be caused by garden-variety problems such as failures in telephone service or computer systems. If you are as lucky as I am, your outage experiences also will be spiced up by cable cuts, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, biohazards, bomb threats, fires, union strikes and civil unrest. You may also have some fun with partial outages from snowstorms, flu epidemics and cable mite infestation.

Remarkably, I even know of a contact center that was brought to its knees by a two-cent computer part. Like something out of a technician's nightmare, the ground screw on the rear panel of a modem was backed out just far enough to make contact with the rack space in which it was mounted. The unruly screw caused all of the units in the rack to short out, disabling the entire center. It was such an inconspicuous and unusual problem that it took three days for a very well qualified group of systems experts to figure it out.

Although contact center outages can be a source of entertaining war stories and dark water cooler humor, managing such outages is anything but amusing. To help prepare you for these stressful experiences, let's take a look at the tactical aspects.

### THE TACTICAL

Your contact center has its own unique configuration of voice, data, facility and human assets that make up the critical components of your operation. Since a failure in any one of these areas will likely result in an outage, the ultimate way to avoid such an occurrence is to build redundant resources across the board. Unfortunately, this approach is normally cost prohibitive, so as a practical matter, another method of minimizing your exposure is needed.

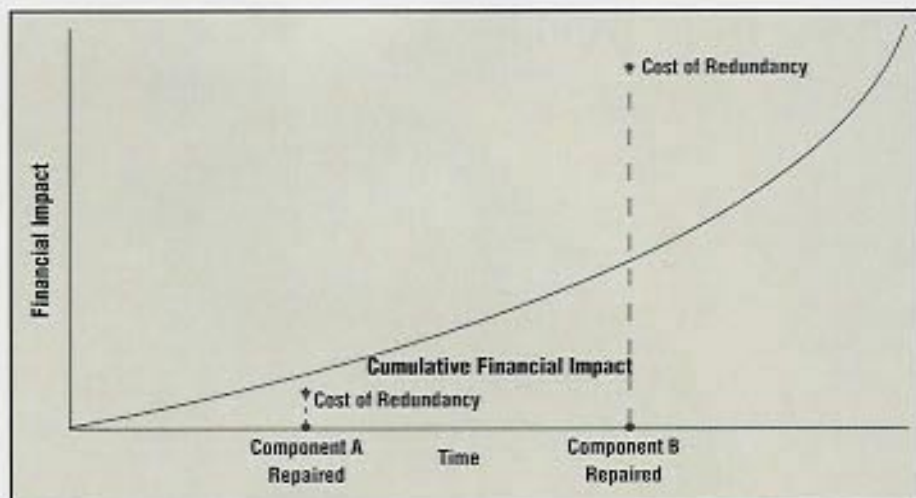
To this end, you can start by assessing the financial impact of outages on your business. As part of this exercise, do your best to assign financial values to qualitative factors that are at risk during an outage, such as customer goodwill. This analysis will likely form an exponential curve as the outage ages. For example, customers will tolerate short duration outages and will even be willing to call back later. As the outage carries on, however, they will start to get frustrated and may temporarily look for other options. Finally, if the outage lasts long enough, customers may permanently take their loyalties elsewhere.

Each component on the critical path of your operation has three unique properties related to failures. The first two are (1) the time to repair and (2) the cost of redundancy. These properties, along with the financial impact of an outage (as explained earlier) can be plotted on a decision matrix similar to the example provided herein.

Two hypothetical components on the critical path of your operation, A and B, are illustrated. As you can see, in the time it takes to repair component A, the financial impact of the outage would be greater than the cost of redundancy for that component. Therefore, a decision might be taken to go ahead and make this component redundant. In the case of component B, however, the financial impact of the outage would be less than the cost of redundancy. In this case, a redundant system might be ill advised.

Before making a decision, however, the third component on the critical path of your operation needs to be considered which is (3) probability of failure. It is more likely, for example, that a backhoe operating somewhere in the neighborhood will dig up your telephone cables than your late model ACD will go down. As such, all other variables being equal on your decision matrix, you are probably better served by putting in redundant cable paths than you are by maintaining a spare ACD.

Since the next best thing to avoiding an outage is knowing how to resolve it, there are also a few things you should



think about relative to managing your way through one of these events:

- Have a comprehensive set of written outage procedures in place with troubleshooting trees that account for as many conceivable outage scenarios as possible.
- Just as important as written procedures, ensure that an experienced, creative and forceful outage manager is on call to handle outage situations. While it is important to have procedures, I would much rather have one hotshot outage manager at the controls than an army of inexperienced procedure readers.
- Don't allow your technology providers to pass the buck on the source of trouble just because they don't see any of their system alarms going off. More often than not, the cause of the problem is not initially obvious to the technical support person who eventually finds it.
- Remember to manage the people resources as well as the facilities and systems issues. Bad weather, mounting illness, labor strikes or anything that keeps people from work can be just as devastating as a facility or system failure.
- Develop a relationship with a qualified outsourcer who is willing to back you up. Whether your trouble is with systems or human resources, a good outsourcing partner can provide a valuable insurance policy against outages. In fact, working with an outsourcer is arguably a more reliable and cost effective approach than building redundancy into your contact center.

Speaking from experience, I hope you never have to deal with an outage in your contact center. But if you do, I hope this column and the spirit of Samuel Johnson help you with the next best thing. ■

*Robert Camastro is president and co-founder of Virtual-Agent Services, a contact center service provider with 10 North American locations. A 25-year veteran of customer care, he is the architect of the distributed workforce concept and former director of planning and development for United Airlines' worldwide call center network.*