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Hosting tackles local challenges

By Leigh-Ann Francis
Johannesburg, 13 Apr 2010

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Hosted contact centre solutions address skills and cost issues in local call centres, says 1Stream's Bruce von Maltitz.

South Africa's call centres are faced with a number of challenges, but issues around skills shortages, costs, and lack of focus can be solved with hosted call centre solutions.

This is the view of Bruce von Maltitz, director at contact centre hosting provider 1Stream. Von Maltitz' comments follow the recent announcement of a partnership between 1Stream and ICT solution distributor Kathea to offer hosted contact centres in SA.

Von Maltitz explains there's a major skills shortage of IT professionals globally and particularly in SA.

"Call centres are highly technical environments that require specialist IT skills to manage the technology component of running a call centre. In order to remain competitive and ahead of the curve, call centre operations need to attract and retain top IT specialists," he states.

Von Maltitz notes that in a hosted environment, this is no longer the call centre's problem. It is the hosting provider's responsibility to maintain the technology platform.

Kathea's Western Cape MD, Richard Henn, agrees: "Managing the technical aspects of running a call centre can be complex, and it's far from

the core business for most companies. With a hosted contact centre solution, we manage the entire technology platform including all hardware, software, maintenance and upgrades. That leaves our clients free to concentrate on managing their people and services."

Von Maltitz points to the issue of cost in SA's call centres. "There are an increasing number of countries marketing themselves as outsourced call centre destinations and as such cost is a key evolution criterion," he explains. Von Maltitz argues that hosting can be 30% to 45% cheaper than premise-based solutions.

Issues of skills and cost in turn lead to lack of focus in the call centre, opines Von Maltitz. "Focus is lost when call centres rely heavily on technology. As a result, managers end up focusing on the technology and not the people."

He argues that 65% of a call centre's operating budget will be spent on staff salaries; management of staff should therefore be a core focus for call centres. "In a hosted environment the technology is the responsibility of the hosting provider which frees up the call centre manager to focus on staff."

While hosted solutions may address some key call centre challenges, concerns remain around its uptake versus fixed infrastructure. Security fears are seen as one of the main hurdles in the uptake of hosted contact centre solutions, explains Von Maltitz.

"IT managers will be concerned about the security of their client information. In a hosted environment, it is the role of the hosted service provider to ensure it can provide adequate security with encryption to properly secure client data," he continues.

Von Maltitz also points to reservations on the part of the solution provider regarding the lack of understanding about the total cost of ownership of the technology. "Buyers may find it difficult to directly compare the cost of premise-based solutions with hosted solutions because one is regarded as a capital outlay (premise-based) and the other as an operational expense (hosted).

Commenting on the partnership between 1Stream and Kathea, Henn concludes by saying: "The 1Stream offering is a niche service offering that will complement existing call centre operations and our existing partnerships. We both believe that hosted contact centre services are a growth market for the future."

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