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**Abstract:**

This study investigates the pedagogical issues that arise from mediating student-academic interaction through a contact centre within university distance education. It is not easy for educational organizations to design or implement a customer service culture, or to adopt business practices to increase cost effectiveness and efficiency and the use of the word “customer” when referring to students is often anathema to academics. However, investment in the design of customer service systems and a supportive culture may be central to the ongoing advancement, performance and position of a distance education provider, as well as contribute to the success of students. Before student-academic mediated contact can succeed within academia, it is important to examine academics’ perceptions and expectations of student support service to determine how changes need to be framed for its successful implementation.

**Description of what took place, including any critique (both positive and otherwise) offered on your paper; and the implication of these comments and the activity on your future work:**

Presented paper to a group of about 25 participants. Had some good questions about faculty buy in to the proposal and what further plans the University has. The feedback I received was positive.

*ATTACH A COPY OF YOUR PAPER/PRESENTATION AS A SEPARATE DOCUMENT*

**NOTE:** The Research Centre will post the abstract, description of what took place & copy of paper/presentation (as applicable) onto AUSpace.
Mediating Student-Academic Interaction
Through Contact Centres in Distance Education

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Abstract: This study investigates the pedagogical issues that arise from mediating student-academic interaction through a contact centre within university distance education. It is not easy for educational organizations to design or implement a customer service culture, or to adopt business practices to increase cost effectiveness and efficiency and the use of the word “customer” when referring to students is often anathema to academics. However, investment in the design of customer service systems and a supportive culture may be central to the ongoing advancement, performance and position of a distance education provider, as well as contribute to the success of students. Before student-academic mediated contact can succeed within academia, it is important to examine academics’ perceptions and expectations of student support service to determine how changes need to be framed for its successful implementation.

Introduction

The roles within postsecondary distance education are changing in response to dramatic growth, resource limitations, new technological advancements and new relationships with government. Students and faculty are separated by distance and time which is pushing the boundaries of educational delivery. New information technology and the world-wide web have provided the means for distance educators to develop new models of student service and investment in the design of customer service systems may be central to the ongoing advancement, performance and position of an educational provider. It is not easy for educational organizations to design or implement a customer service culture, or to adopt business practices to increase cost effectiveness and efficiency. The use of the word “customer” when referring to students is often anathema to academics and most work on the quality of distance education focuses on instructional design and student/faculty interaction while student support for non-academic functions is generally a secondary consideration (Davis, 2004). In many ways distance education is seen as a dangerous harbinger of the commercialization of education. Given this, it is no wonder that leading distance education institutions are sensitive to any developments that further differentiate them from mainstream, face-to-face educational providers. Nonetheless, it is important to question how student learning will be supported in the future.

Distance education institutions have already developed an alternative route to the delivery of post-secondary education and continually push the boundaries of educational delivery. This paper examines the role and management of student support within a distance education organization. It will address the organizational and pedagogical issues that arise from the implementation of an information technology (IT) model of customer service management that mediates the relationship between students and faculty, through a contact centre. Before contact centres can be successfully implemented as a mediator between students and faculty, it is important to examine academics’ perceptions and expectations of student support service to determine how such a model needs to be framed to ensure successful implementation of mediated support services.

It is important to examine the indicators for successful adoption of an innovative business model. Faculty perspectives of how IT can be used to support student learning must be identified. Grounded theory methodology provides the basis for gathering and interpreting the findings of this study. The innovation diffusion theory (IDT) (Rogers, 1995) guided the data collection and analysis. The findings are grounded in the qualitative data of case studies, literature and interviews with faculty regarding academic culture and IT adoption. The findings are also
grounded in the quantitative data of historical student satisfaction surveys. This study identifies a strategy for encouraging the adoption student-academic mediated contact of student support service within distance education.

**University Cultures, Distance Education, and Changing Roles**

University faculty are professionals, espouse professional values, view their work as a craft, see academic freedom in the delivery of courses as a cornerstone of their job and often view the relationship between faculty and students as a personal one where face-to-face interaction is required (Noble, 2000, 2001). Any threat to this state of affairs is considered a major breach of their beliefs about the nature of their work and perceived as a threat to the university and the learning environment. One of those negative developments have included such things as the perceived commodification of academic work and education which has undermined the craft notion of academic work, eroded the democratic structures of universities and impinged on the community of scholars concepts upon which universities are predicated (Menzies & Newsom, 2006; Noble, 2000; Stillwell, 2003). There has also been an increasing use of academic part-time and piece work leading to feelings that Tayloristic and/or Fordist practices are also threatening universities. Larger classes, electronic course delivery, multiple choice exams and increasing use of markers are some of the items cited as examples of negative developments across all modes of post-secondary education.

Also, many universities, as they feel the financial crunch, have increased corporate managerialistic practices within their organizations beyond the classroom in order to increase operational efficiencies (Muller et al., 1997). As mentioned, one major development is that universities have begun to start talking of their students as customers or clients, a practice criticized by many. Universities are also more actively marketing themselves (Muller et al., 1997), producing glossy brochures to espouse to students and parents as to why they are the institution that should be entrusted with their or their offspring’s educational future. They emphasize not only the learning environment, programs and courses but services to students.

Despite the criticisms of distance education, the sector is experiencing dramatic growth and increasing legitimacy. Additional key drivers of distance education growth include the opportunity for students to study at home while working full time, at their own pace at times convenient to them. This increases demand by attracting students at remote locations or that have full-time jobs or have different learning styles. Anderson (2005) notes that “a continuing and expensive problem in distance education is the provision of effective and cost-efficient student support services. There is evidence linking the effectiveness of these services with a host of critical success indicators for distance education systems including retention, satisfaction and successful completion of programs” (p. 77). Students who are interested in distance learning are generally interested in immediate retrieval of information (Howell, et al., 2003). These needs in many cases can be accommodated through the increased use of IT.

Rapid technological advancements and new economic environments require organizations to respond quickly to change to ensure customers continue to receive excellent service. The roles within education are changing in response to dramatic growth, resource limitations, intense competition, increasing need for accountability, new legal requirements and new relationships with government. It is a challenge for institutions to ensure that students are consistently provided with the right information from the right person, in a timely fashion. At the same time, some of these developments may be seen as a threat to the very nature of post-secondary education. The issue becomes balancing the needs of learners and maintaining the essence of education.

**Contact Centres: New Service to Students**

Contact centres have traditionally been implemented in businesses to generate revenue and to improve cost effectiveness and delivery of customer service. Despite their growing popularity they have a bad reputation and have been described as a “modern form of ‘Taylorism’” (Zapf et al., 2003: 311). Specific criticisms include (Batt & Moynihan, 2002):

- Low skilled work
- Poor working conditions
- Machine-pacing of work
- Routine, standardized and boring tasks
- High stress
• Short, fast job cycles
• Poor job security
• Low pay, possibly piece rate

In many ways these are the most visible examples of contact centres that we are familiar with, the mass production, high volume, low value added examples particularly associated with telemarketing and surveying. Nonetheless, this is but one contact centre model and none of these criticisms are inherent to contact centres, although many organizations will experience some or all of the above while implementing a contact centre. Despite these criticisms, contact centres can help streamline and enrich customer service and provide staff and customers with a common knowledge base through technology complementing labour as opposed to driving labour. Further, contact centres can be designed in a manner that requires highly skilled work with associated job security and high pay (Batt, 2002). It is also possible to design enriched jobs by mixing administrative and other work to improve overall job and user satisfaction.

Contact centres could be a critical success factor for distance education providers and their students. Generally students want access to more information more quickly than ever before, but those in online learning environments are likely to have an even greater affinity for accessing information quickly or even instantly (Howell, et al., 2003). Given the desires of students in this learning environment, universities need to carefully consider how learner support services are managed. Adria and Woudstra (2001) have suggested that a significant organizational and technological innovation, that of a contact centre, will provide a coordinating mechanism to support student service requirements. They note that contact centres can be a strategic asset for organizations, as they can be used to strengthen customer relationships, and can enable the organization to learn more about customers so as to serve them better.

From the students’ perspective some of the positive outcomes of using a contact centre model to provide student support are to:
• Increase the availability of easy, accessible support
• Promote the flow of consistent information to students
• Increase student satisfaction with the learning experience
• Promote a community of support for students to access

Contact centres can provide a single point of contact to deal with student needs which can further improve the learning experience. Such an expansion can be even more critical in distance education as there may be a poorly established community of learners, or none at all, creating a situation wherein student peers cannot provide valuable insight into how to access campus information or solve various administrative and support related problems. Also, reducing learner isolation and providing an easily accessed safety net could substantially improve student satisfaction, success rates and retention.

Despite the potential advantages, implementing a contact centre in a university environment can be difficult, especially when it mediates the relationship between students and faculty. The major criticisms of implementing contact centre mediation are that it can further distance the learner from the academic, depersonalize the learning experience and be just another example of universities increasingly relying on business models. Given this, it is expected that the implementation of contact centre models in education, and in distance education in particular, would meet with great resistance. Nonetheless, overcoming resistance to implementing a customer service orientation in the form of a contact or contact centre may be successfully achieved through framing changes around the core values of the organization.

The Study

Interviews were used to gather information from faculty teaching and supporting students within a distance education organization. This study encompassed two different delivery models. At the university where the study was done, undergraduate education is undertaken through two distinct models. One model requires faculty to have office (phone) hours (approximately 4 hours) every week. This provides the only occasion for students to receive support for learning. As a general rule, students will deal with the same academic throughout their course and are likely to rely on faculty for administrative support. The second model moderates the relationship between student
and academic through a contact centre. Students requiring support contact a centralized or one stop student support centre. Administrative matters are normally resolved immediately while academic issues are posted for academics. Academics then contact students via e-mail or phone, depending on the nature of the inquiry and teaching style employed. Students may or may not deal with the same academic throughout their course as a team teaching approach may be employed. A total of six faculty members were interviewed. Three faculty were interviewed that dealt with students directly while two taught in the contact centre moderated model. One taught in both. The questions asked faculty to provide their experiences and perceptions with the support systems they were familiar with when working with undergraduate and graduate students. Student satisfaction surveys were also collected and reviewed for common content and themes about the student services provided and technologies used. This research was interested in looking at these perceptions as they pertained to information technology uses within student support and teaching. A secondary goal of the interviews was to gather information that might inform future uses of technology and adoption of new technology within student support models used within this organization.

A cross section of faculty from various faculties and disciplines were interviewed, as technology and processes used for student support varied from faculty to faculty. The interview questions were designed to capture the different values and experiences of each participant. The interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview questions. Using the grounded theory approach the problem was allowed to emerge from the data. Analysis of the data of the participant experiences provided an understanding of faculty thoughts on teaching and supporting students at a distance, including their thoughts about various types of IT used most successfully in their opinion.

In this study, open coding was used to categorize and sort the data collected from the interviews and historical student surveys. Data was analyzed using a constant comparative method by “taking an entire document, observation, or interview and ask: what seems to be going on here? What makes this document the same or different from the previous one coded” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990 p. 73). Five themes about IT and student support service emerged from the interviews and historical student satisfaction surveys: student expectations, division of labour, mode of study, communication methods and teacher presence.

Student expectations: It was clear from both the interviews conducted with faculty and the historical student satisfaction surveys that student expectations for service has changed over the years. Students tend to be demanding quicker, more directed service. Interviewed faculty noted that the demand for immediacy from students is accentuated by electronic or IT forms of communication. Faculty noted that even though our service to student has become faster and likely more efficient than in the past, we have also lost the teaching moments. The critical, reflective nature of a discussion that may occur from a student question is lost in the electronic world, as students send directed questions, and want specific answers to these questions. Students in distance education are interested in obtaining information on their own time.

Division of labour: Faculty noted that they spend far too much time dealing with administrative issues that could be better handled by other staff. All faculty interviewed indicated the value of somehow using technology to have students directed to an administrative service. Many of the faculty, especially those who also head up programs, felt they dealt more with general student queries about course information, transfer credit, programs of study, grade checking then they spent tutoring students. They felt that their time could be better spent teaching the students within the courses they were responsible for. They also felt that IT would work well in all matters that were administrative in nature.

Mode of study: It became very clear during the series of interviews that faculty were less concerned about the use of IT and even the centralization of administrative support services to students than they were with the use of IT in the delivery of courses. For the most part faculty felt that IT needs to only be used if it pedagogically enhances the course for students. What was more important to them was the quality of the instructional materials and that costs of materials should not be transferred to students.

Communication method: All of the faculty interviewed noted that students’ preferred and most often used communication method was e-mail. Those faculty members who have taught in this distance education organization for many years indicated that e-mail has almost completely replaced telephone communication, much to their dismay. Although e-mail is more convenient for faculty, they felt that it was more impersonal and the teaching opportunities they once had over the telephone is lost within the electronic medium. However, it is clear from both
the perceptions of faculty and from student responses on the satisfaction surveys that electronic communication is preferred. The flexible nature and appeal of distance education makes education more accessible to them.

Teacher presence: Another theme that emerged from both the faculty interviews and the student satisfaction surveys is the importance of teacher or teaching presence. Rourke, et al., (2001) define teaching presence as “the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.” (p. 5) Presence begins with the design of the course, the instruction provided and outcomes achieved. They suggested that increased use of teaching presence and teacher intervention may lead to more efficacious text-based learning. “Students’ satisfaction appears to be greater in the tutor – to – student model of student support. Students indicated that they like direct contact with as specific tutor. They also indicate that although tutors are not available as often as they would like, they clearly liked this model better, than when they must make contact with a tutor through a centralized contact centre. It appeared from the interviews with faculty that all of them felt that better design and organization of courses was needed, direct instruction was desired and ways to manage or create a climate for learning within the online environment and with new information technology was desired. They felt that students somewhat needed to build relationships with academic staff and while technology may streamline processes, and make things more efficient, a few were worried it could also drive a larger gap between teacher and student.

All faculty interviewed recognized the importance of electronic, online communication and delivery of both support and course content. They also understood that students were demanding more online, one-stop service. Students who are interested in distance education are generally interested in immediate retrieval of information. (Howell, et.al., 2003). These needs can be accommodated in most cases by IT. Direct student to tutor contact was also highly valued, even by those faculty members who worked with the contact centre model. All wondered if technology could help in guiding students to the correct level of support – administrative or academic. They all felt that information technology and customer management tools were useful, however, they were cautious about the implementation as they did not want to see larger gaps between teacher and student.

The results of this study found that the culture of the academic group was quite open to information technology innovation and customer relationship management (CRM) especially within the non-academic support services. They felt there were definite benefits of sharing knowledge about students, and tracking their contacts with the university. Rogers (1995) suggests that “the characteristics of innovations as perceived by individuals help to explain their different rate of adoption.” (p. 15). In this case adopting a new innovative model to provide non-academic services would be, as Rogers (1995) argues, an innovation that is perceived as having "greater relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability, and less complexity will be adopted more rapidly than other innovation” (p.16). Although most of the faculty interviewed had not experienced the contact centre model of support they all perceived it to be more administratively effective, and would be willing to have the overwhelming number of non-academic queries they currently handled taken over by others who may be more knowledgeable about those issues. They felt that the technologies used to assist with this would increase effectiveness and quality of service. However the “relative advantage” of technologies and innovative tutorial models was less apparent and perhaps less acceptable to faculty for academic services. It was clear the academic perceptions are still very much in favor of the students: to – tutor model, and they were hesitant to accept that online enhancements would improve academic teaching at a distance.

Implementing Contact Centres

All universities adopt some business practices in order to operate (Muller et al., 1997) and distance education providers are no different. Despite the growing trepidation associated with universities adopting business practices, there is no reason that some business practices, rather than detracting from the learning experience, can be adopted to improve the learning environment. Can the academic sector find common ground with business practices in order to meet the challenges of innovation and change within the organization in order to serve students, staff and the organization? Rogers (1995: 36) suggests that “the characteristics of an innovation, as perceived by the members of the social system, determine its rate of adoption” and implementing a major change requires that the change be framed properly (Garvin & Roberto, 2005; Reger et al., 1994). The implementation of a contact centre must attempt to meet the existing values, experiences and needs of the students, faculty and administrative staff in order for it to be successfully implemented. Senior management needs to demonstrate to the best of their ability how the implementation of a contact centre is (a) consistent with the values and culture of the organization, (b) consistent
with academics’ professional values, and (c) in the best interest of the organization and students. The more senior management can frame the implementation in these terms the more likely the change will be successful.

Organizational Culture

It is important to take a close look at culture within distance education. Organizational culture can be defined as “a shared pattern of ideas which develops between members, which includes assumptions and values, about how those members should think and act in that organization.” (Trice & Beyer, 2003: 8). The nature of organizational culture is very complex. Cultures evolve and staff learn and understand the unspoken values and beliefs of the organization. Organizations also contain unobservable ideologies. These are the assumptions, beliefs and values that we learn through our socialization experiences and are very hard to change. As a result, organizational change can be very difficult especially when contrary to organizational culture and this is why it is important to attempt to frame any change, as much as possible, as consistent with an organization’s culture and values.

With regard to distance education, it is designed to be student centred and “should be built on two foundations: the needs of the intended students, and the learning outcomes of the course or program” (italics original, Davis, 2004: 98). Students partaking in distance education are interested in obtaining information on their own time. That is the flexible nature and appeal of distance education that draws many students. As a result, if an academic is the primary contact for a student, the academic may not be able to (or more probably is unlikely to) meet the time needs of students. When distance education is coupled with a contact centre, an electronic bulletin board for the escalation of inquiries to academics and a team teaching environment, there are significant benefits to students in terms of their ability to obtain routine information and IT support in a timely manner and receive required student-academic interaction at a time convenient and beneficial to the student. In one post-secondary setting where a contact centre has been implemented, less than twenty percent of student contacts needed to be referred to an academic (Adria & Woudstra, 2001). The vast majority of the inquiries were of a routine nature. Examples may include, how do I submit assignments? What was my mark on an assignment? How do I write my final exam? How do I obtain a transcript? These are very routine inquiries with most of them being handled through highly structured policies and procedures. It appears that students are most likely to require routine support in distance education and coupled with their desire to obtain information quickly it appears to be in the best interest of the student to have a contact centre in order to facilitate a student’s learning needs.

Another factor in distance education where communication needs to be facilitated by phone, finding common times for students and academics to connect can be difficult. This is particularly true where the student body spans numerous time zones, as is common in distance education, but this problem can be ameliorated through the use of team teaching. Where there is a pool of academic experts attached to a particular course and student needs are posted to an electronic bulletin board using a ticket system, a course administrator (or through other team approaches) can assign or reassign tickets to those available at the required time. In addition, student inquiries can be handled from one expert to another expert for any other reason. In a continuous enrollment environment (non-semester system), this is particularly helpful for a myriad of administrative reasons. When an academic takes a leave or a holiday or becomes ill, an electronic bulletin board system allows for the seamless handing over of student inquiries (tickets) to other academics allowing students to continue to study uninterrupted.

One of the key elements of a university contact centre is that it should be designed on the high value added model. Creating meaningful and fulfilling jobs should be a key goal of any post-secondary institution. Failure to do so would increase organizational resistance to contact centre implementation. Contact centre workers and managers should be empowered to ensure maximum job quality to enhance the student learning experience. This would overcome many of the previously mentioned common criticisms of contact centres, criticisms that would be looked upon with particular disfavour in a university setting. High value-added contact centres would also be consistent with the team teaching concept that often occurs in distance education, provide a focal point for a shared knowledge system and build and improve on the relationship between students and the university. A team environment where student service representatives continually design and redesign their jobs in response to continuous feedback from students that also provides a central hub for input from all other areas of the university such as registry and IT functions, would create a high value-added contact centre that provides continuously updated real time information, something that is extremely difficult to do in a distributed work environment.
Professional Values

As mentioned previously, some consider that interaction between faculty and students is an essential part of the post-secondary learning experience. This interaction is often perceived as a personal one (Noble, 2000, 2001) and some believe the key to success of distance education is the development of the relationship between student and teacher (Simonsen, et al., 2000). This is also what motivates many to become academics, the learning experience and interaction with students. One of the criticisms of distance education is that it lacks this personal interaction as there is a separation of teacher and learner in time and place. There is a fear that a contact centre would further mediate or distance this relationship between the student and the academic. These are legitimate concerns but there are ways of overcoming these potential barriers.

Clearly given the current state of telecommunications in terms of price, access and ease of use, there is no reason that some elements of a distance education course cannot be built around one-on-one interaction between academics and students. This is done in many distance settings and is often seen as a key element of the learning experience. How does the further mediation of a contact centre interfere with the meaningful interaction between students and academics? The key word is “meaningful”. Does providing routine information to students really constitute meaningful interaction between academics and students? In actuality, the implementation of a contact centre could provide for the opportunity for increased meaningful interaction. If significant savings can be gleaned from the introduction of a contact centre in distance education as has been shown (Adria & Woudstra, 2001), it would allow courses to be designed with greater value added student-academic interaction. Contact centre savings could allow for the re-design of courses to have increased interaction that actually adds to the value of the course and help negate one of the criticisms of distance education, that it is an “industrial” model of education with little or no student-academic interaction. This would improve the quality of the learning experience and the professional experience of the academic. It would ensure a personal interaction that is often unavailable in large classroom settings, possibly enhancing the experience in a fashion that would meet or even exceed the classroom experience. Savings could also be invested in collaborative software so that students could have available, or create for themselves, a student community in order to simulate some of the other aspects of the classroom and campus setting.

The other significant benefit to academics is that they would not have to be seen as a portal for routine inquiries. Effective division of labour is a key element of any distance education organization and the implementation of a contact centre can be seen as an extension of this concept. Of course one key element for the successful implementation of a contact centre would be a clear understanding of what sort of issues should be posted to an electronic bulletin board for an academic’s attention and what issues could be handled by contact centre attendants. Failure to develop a clear understanding could create significant tension between contact centre personnel and academics, be threatening to academics and the integrity of their work and also endanger the quality of the learning experience. Academics are hired for their personal experience and are viewed, and view themselves, as professionals. Dispensing routine advice is unlikely to be fulfilling to them and may even be frustrating. A contact centre model can be seen as liberating for academics. They can focus on their core activities and dispense with tangential functions, which is beneficial to the academics, students and the organization. Also, to provide meaningful and accurate advice to students on relatively routine matters would take extensive training on an academic’s part and ongoing training in order to keep current. In a dynamic and fast paced environment this could be a challenging task. Students are becoming increasingly litigious and therefore the provision of poor advice or inaccurate information has increasing risks. It would seem clear that a much more meaningful use of an academic’s time would be to interact with students about the content of a course and required skills rather than on administrative routine. This could also reduce the risk to the institution of a lawsuit. Not having to dispense routine advice, and attend training sessions to be able to do so, should be much more personally and professionally fulfilling and could enhance learning by shifting the savings from a contact centre to providing more time for academics to interact with students.

Another significant advantage for academics is the tracking made possible by CRM software. The data can provide information on the nature of all inquiries about a course, whether they are related to academic content or administrative matters. The data can be mined by faculty or instructional designers to identify weaknesses or problems with a course and identify difficult subject matter that could require supplemental material or remedial exercises to improve student success. This can be particularly important in large enrollment courses. In distance education, it is typical that one person designs a course while many deliver it. Attempting to collect all the relevant feedback from a large group of individuals who deliver a course can be facilitated through CRM software that can
track inquiries by course. It is far more systematic, does not suffer from recall error or the recency effect and can be utilized in a highly distributed work environment.

Overall, there are a number of appeals that can be made to an academic's sense of professionalism that could help smooth the implementation of a centre. Some of these spill over into clear advantages for the organization and students.

**Best Interests of the Organization and Students**

The impact of information technology on learning systems is significant to the centralization/decentralization debate on structure and control and a central theme in the literature is the trend towards the centralization of academic and administrative decision making in universities, much to the dismay of many academics. From an administrative perspective an organization would prefer centralized systems to avoid duplication, ensure security and maximize support service. Academics prefer the decentralized approach with freedom to facilitate, develop the learning experience between teachers and students and experiment with alternative delivery systems and models. "In the real world of online learning, conflicting priorities and approaches quickly arise, and clear statements of roles and responsibilities, processes, and policies must be established to help balance the relative need for control/centralization and freedom/decentralization." (Davis, 2004: 103). When a contact centre is coupled with CRM software and an electronic bulletin board, student inquiries are continuously tracked and the knowledge required for responses is constantly being created, revised and refined. This reduces the range and variation of services provided and reduces student frustration by providing a single contact point to deal with all inquiries. Within distance education, contact centres can reconfigure the path by which students obtain information and be more effective for the delivery of information in a more timely manner (Adria & Woudstra, 2001). This has clear implications for student satisfaction with the learning experience and also can reduce the feeling of isolation that can be associated with distance learning. This can be beneficial to the organization as it improves the student’s perception of the learning experience and reduces their frustration. Contact centres can also be used to help develop a relationship with the student (Woudstra et al., 2004). This can help reduce the feelings of isolation, improve student success and increase retention as student success is dependent on more than just course content and academic course support (Whyte, 2001). Clearly there can be a benefit to students and the organization from the implementation of a contact centre by improving student satisfaction and course quality. More generally it can be thought of as a coordinating mechanism in a distributed work environment, which is a very important and difficult task.

Electronic monitoring in the workplace, although increasingly common, is highly controversial and should be implemented judiciously. The use of CRM and a bulletin board system is a double edged sword—records of student-academic interactions can both help an academic and create suspicion. Where allegations that academics are unresponsive to students’ needs, an electronic bulletin board service coupled with a CRM system allows administrators and academics to assess in a meaningful manner whether or not student needs have been met (and if service standards exist, whether or not they have been met). This can both protect faculty and be a source for scrutiny. Every contact with a student risks the organization’s reputation (Woudstra et al., 2004) and an effective CRM system can reduce reputational risk. CRM software also provides for the flagging of tickets that have not been handled in a timely manner. This could occur for a number of reasons including structural problems, administrative problems, negligence, illness or IT failure. Again, academic administrators can reassign these tickets in a seamless manner if students’ needs are not being met, regardless of the cause (e.g. illness).

Contact centres are often developed in combination with an organizational intranet. This network can be leveraged to make knowledge and information easily accessible within the organization, and improve employee communication. Contact centre technological advancements can provide the means for efficient access to enormous amounts of knowledge and information. Knowledge and the management of knowledge have received a lot of attention from academics and practitioners and it is suggested that many organizations treat knowledge as a valuable asset. In order to remain competitive “organizations must efficiently and effectively create, locate, capture, and share their organization’s knowledge and expertise.” (Zack, 199: 1). The mission of an integrated contact centre therefore can be expanded to help the business enterprise understand and react to rapid changes in the environment through the collection, assessment and dissemination of knowledge (Woudstra et al., 2004), turning the contact centre into a key strategic asset.
Conclusion

There have been many recent changes in the internal and external environments of post-secondary organizations and universities are coping with a new economic environment in which resources are scarcer and competition for students is fiercer. Student demands have increased, and particularly within distance education, new technological developments have moved education into the world of online, one-stop service. Bates (2000) suggests that universities with traditional hierarchical, bureaucratic, and relatively inflexible organizational structures will encounter major change in the organization of work with the onset of new technology. He further suggests that an organizational structure that mixes centralized and decentralized strategies is recommended to support teaching with technology. Jennings (1995: 30) states that “while technological and pedagogical issues will continue to be important, the principal issues are now becoming those of the organization and management of these virtual learning environments so that effective learning and course delivery can take place.” Implementing change and restructuring within an organization such as distance education, can be disrupting and difficult for all involved; students, faculty and administrative staff and the implementation of a contact centre continues to push to issue of the delicate balance between centralization and decentralization, or in other words, between bureaucratic control and individual academic freedom.

Students expect a quality, reputable education and at the same time want quick, efficient accurate service, while faculty value the “education of students and the development of knowledge” (Muller, et al., 1997: 164). The business values within the university are about cost effectiveness, growth and efficiency. Within distance education, if an integrated contact centre is to be implemented it needs to meet the wider cultural needs of the academic side of the organization as well as the needs of students and the organization. As a result, distance education organizations must carefully develop a set of strategies for change.

The biggest challenge may be to ensure that the academic and administrative cultures have each of their distinct goals, expectations, and values met, or seen to be met. Regardless, a business and an academic case can be made for the implementation of a contact centre based on service to students, learning outcomes and student success and retention rates. The difficulties in the implementation of such a system may be overcome by framing the changes in such a way as to appeal to key elements of the organizational culture and the professional desires of academics. In addition, the implementation can be supported by the clear benefit to the organization and the notion that the contact centre is intended to be a high value added operation that is part of a team delivery system for the benefit of students. To meet the challenges of dramatic growth, limited resources, and new economic environments it is essential for distance education organizations to embrace new innovations in order to continue providing quality service and learning opportunities to its students. It is important to determine the expectations and perceptions that students, faculty and staff have regarding support provided for the student learning experience and frame changes in these terms. Conditions required by faculty and administrative staff in order to adopt a contact centre model within a distance education organization must be identified and the issues must be framed with these conditions in mind.

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