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Digitizing Operations for a Digital World

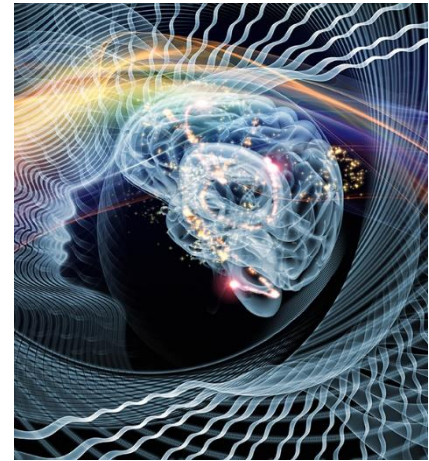
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Digital technologies have progressed to more advanced levels, and, as any gamer will tell you, the more advanced levels are where the real fun lives and the most points can be gained. The opportunities abound with customers' rising expectations waiting to be met and the technology to support data speed, connectivity, and readily available service provisioning.

Whether you need to catch up in your digital transformation game or want to move full speed ahead, the architecture, software, and infrastructure is available. You can achieve either objective efficiently with a focused strategy on digitizing operations and automating processes with a commitment to make it happen.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) capabilities that drive real-time, forecasted, and prescriptive visibility to the business, the network, and the customer are a reality now. They correlate data between systems to acknowledge anomalies, find issues faster, and present resolutions automatically. AI, ML, chatbots and live chat all play a role in an effective, blended strategy to expand and maintain your customer base. AI's predictive analysis power continues to spread, even into the challenging but vital area of measuring customer satisfaction well beyond qualitative survey scores. And ML drives faster and automates responses back to the customer and operations alike.

A unified service experience platform with a robust AI palette that enhances operational and business systems for all stakeholders—*enterprise customers, employees, sales agents, and digital ecosystem partners*—is no longer a luxury. It's now a necessity.



CSP customer needs are increasing

The explosion of commoditization—mobile devices, self-designed services in the health, entertainment, and remote-working fields (among others), the continuous expansion of IoT—leaves communication service providers (CSPs) to feverishly hustle to meet the demand. But the time and resources to bolster networks to strengthen the infrastructure to support the increasing demand has been difficult to find. The convergence of these factors—booming customer traffic, and CSPs stretched thin in their efforts to provide stable, high-quality services—creates a scenario that can seem challenging at best.

Indeed, Accenture reports in its [article](#) “Brain Gain,” that the heart of CSPs’ offerings, connectivity for consumers and business-to-business, has been mired in stagnation even as bandwidth demand and the market for digital services is peaking higher than ever before. Price-to-earning ratio has plummeted 28 percent worldwide over the last ten years, but the expenses involved to land new customers continues to increase. Amazon, Google, and Microsoft have also ramped up the competitive pressure, challenging CSPs to move beyond their traditional ‘connectivity’ role.

Addressing the pain points

The pain points that telcos face remain the same in recent years, with some variations. It is still a matter of delivering high-quality performance across a wide array of digital services. Fortunately, SD-WAN and NFV are more widely adopted than they were at the onset of the digital transformation revolution, and by allowing telcos to enable offerings to their customers more efficiently, they allow for the creation of more services, revenue streams, and profits.

The downside for some companies that are late to their digital journeys is that the competition is becoming more adept, nuanced, and creative in what services they can offer and the efficiency with which they deliver them. Delays are increasingly detrimental.

Digital platforms have become essential elements to building and maintaining the positive customer experience that we all seek to deliver. Customers have become progressively proficient at controlling their telecom accounts, from viewing billing information to checking on existing orders to contacting customer service support when needed. While this independence is expected by consumers, the good news is that there is still a very sizable market segment that needs access to a digital platform. Furthermore, for the telcos that have not fully embraced a digital journey, quick transitions are available. Again, the pressing issue is time—and finding an accelerated path to catch up if behind. Hesitation equates to an increasingly smaller existing customer pool.

Taken as a whole or in parts, a robust digital platform will address service order and management and multi-domain service orchestration; provide a big data intelligence engine; offer a product catalog and telecom configure-price-quote capability; and allow for an API marketplace and IoT management.

The edge is front and center

Edge technologies continue to mushroom in the telecom industry, just as SD-WAN has for years. Additional technologies that reside at the edge of the network can be hugely beneficial as well—namely, virtual customer premises equipment, virtualized network functions (VNFs) and interconnects—and gateway technologies at the edge and at the consumer.

There is an incredible amount of emerging communications technology being consistently improved that allows telecoms to reshape their network environments, establish new revenue streams, and expand their loyal customer base. Options abound to make the digital transformation. Embracing some or all these innovations opens a more promising future for telecoms, and it will ultimately benefit their end customers.

Meeting customer expectations in any industry is a constant challenge: the bar rises ever higher, and the goalposts constantly move. The telecommunication industry has and continues to experience this truth, and even more acutely with the emergence of commoditization that has impacted every facet of the business.

The demands for more speed, reliability, and user-friendliness are a reality that telcos cannot avert. Minor fluctuations in service quality can impact even longstanding customer relationships. The telecom customer experience is paramount, and telcos must continue to enhance it at every level from the direct consumer level to SMB to enterprise clientele. The pressure to do so is genuine and can realistically only be met by providing a robust platform of services and products.

Get smart about network resources

Amid the pressures, there is positive news that can be the seed for telcos' future growth. Accenture also reports the encouraging statistic that eight in ten consumers surveyed reported being satisfied with both their home broadband and mobile service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, 60 percent reported having trust in their CSP, almost three times the percentage that trust their social media provider.

How might this translate to success for CSPs? It means that the time is ripe for telcos to branch off from their essential service of connectivity and seek to capitalize on the trust as we move forward into a post-pandemic landscape. This is where the aforementioned services such as personal healthcare and remote working capabilities may come into play, and all things related to creative digital services.

The way to be a supplier in this market is through using a digital platform (building blocks) that is tied in with a strong ecosystem. Software-defined networking provides the path for telcos to rapidly respond to customer requests and meet service quality expectations. SDN and SD-WAN allow CSPs to meet these demands even when they exceed the service provider's normal capabilities. This can be achieved case-by-case through a manual operator or automatically based upon priority lists.

A few years ago, SDN and SD-WAN were perceived as the new disruptor in the technology arena. Now it is the bulwark that CSPs can use against the disruptor of continuous commoditization. Telcos must embrace a strategy centered on a robust platform and vigorous digital ecosystem to continue to meet customer expectations and protect the relationships they've invested in over the years.

Creating loyalty through customer experience

Preserving existing customer relationships is another task layered with complexity in today's environment. Customers want results, but at the same time they desire more control and insight into their accounts. They crave and expect an expanded palette of self-service tools. Both Gartner and Deloitte have touted surveys and research for a number of years now that indicate that the vast majority of business relationships, while vitally important, will be conducted with little to no direct interaction between customers and a human enterprise representative. People have become so adept at communicating with companies online rather than by phone that the latter is an increasingly diminutive piece of the customer support toolbox. Customers are not in this situation because they are without options. To the contrary, research definitively shows that they prefer online communication.

The only viable solution is creating and maintaining a vibrant self-service portal essential to meeting telecom customer expectations and giving clients increased awareness into the details of their account. Cloud-based platforms enable customers to access and make changes to their account from anywhere and at any time.

A robust self-service portal should allow users to address any number of issues from a single location. These may include billing and invoice management, help desk requests and service provisioning to scale up network capabilities on an as-needed basis.

Live chat is an additional key feature that should be included in any customer-facing telecom portal. When something goes wrong, a significant number of people still want more options for outreach, beyond interacting with their service provider via phone or email. All efforts and approaches that make communication with your company easier and enable customers to engage on their own terms are key elements in enhancing the overall experience.

As much as any factor, the key to customer experience success is usability. Any self-service platform needs to be user-friendly, easy to navigate, and provide the correct data at the right time. Employing a cloud-based digital platform with this philosophy in mind will put you on the right track to meet and exceed customer expectations.