

Re-launch, Re-invigorate, and Re-charge

A better approach to improving automation and workforce operations

“Last night somebody broke into my apartment and replaced everything with exact duplicates...”
Stephen Wright

In spending time with telecom operators I've seen an interesting phenomenon related to continual changes in the industry, along with the constant need to reduce cost and be more efficient. That is, that whatever we have now isn't good enough, so we must buy something new to replace it. Yes, there may be certain legacy issues that keep a software from being as fast as a new version, or even valid functionality gaps, but the alarming observation I have is that operators don't fully utilize the systems they have invested in to achieve the benefit they were looking for when they bought them.

There are many complex applications in today's modern enterprise, all intended to drive efficiency and profitability through automation in the company's key functions including construction, marketing, sales, field installation and repair, network management, and customer care. The cost of replacing even one of these systems can be staggering. And then too often we are back in the same boat, looking for something new to solve the problem.

Near and dear to my heart, for example is the automated workforce management (WFM) application. A typical scenario that regularly plays out among operators is to look at newer solutions for complex workforce management systems because the installed one isn't doing what it promised. In many cases, there's a reason (or reasons) that the company may not have taken into consideration.

Five years ago, maybe 10, when the WFM application was installed, it was thought of as a panacea for all service related issues, on par with solving world peace or traveling to Mars. There were great expectations and for the most part many of the benefits were realized. This is related to the focus and attention given by the leadership team who bought it. They were on the hook for operational improvements and made certain that every user was trained properly to get the most benefit for the company.

Over time, priorities shift or leadership changes occur (leaders move on to new roles, new companies, maybe even out of the industry), and the focus may be lost. Sometimes the application is acquired when companies merge and its not understood. The next generation of leaders and users move in, but may not have the same interest as the original team. Training

may move from formal to casual, in that the next generation of users are trained by sitting next to an experienced user and learning by observing. In this case, they learn only the elements that the “trainer” shows them and may miss other areas that can help them to do their job in a more efficient and automated manner.

As time goes on, the powerful capabilities of automation are eroded. I’ve observed companies using spreadsheets and tick marks to track things that are all automated, if only those features were used properly. The end result of all this is that the application that was once the solution is now the problem! The next logical step therefore is to replace it with a new one. A new one that does exactly what the existing one does. It will have a different user interface, but it does the same thing as the one that exists.

Has any business decision maker ever encountered a vendor who had a solution that “increases OPEX?” I’ve never met one. When the new product is presented, somewhere in the presentation there is always a promise to reduce OPEX. The new application that is replacing the existing one will promise to do so. But can it really reduce operational costs more than the existing product if it does exactly what the current application does? Is the cost of disruption, customer impact, and re-training on new tools accurately estimated? Are the expectations of the new system realistic? How quickly will the new solution become the old solution in need of replacement? In my experience helping operators work through these issues, costs are often underestimated and the expected benefits are inflated.

Re-Investment for success

I have a different thought. In many cases it can make more sense to re-invest in the employees who use it. Pay for experts to train and re-train the users to be absolute in-house experts. A few weeks of business process analytics from the vendor will uncover all the areas where simple re-energization will once again allow the operator to realize the results that were intended. The choice for the operator may be to spend \$100,000 for a well managed re-start, vs. \$1,000,000 to replace the tool and achieve exactly what was already possible. That is money better spent.

In order to make such tools culturally significant, they must be used as they were designed. For example, with WFM tools techs, dispatchers and managers must be thoroughly trained and intimately familiar with proper use. The best way to ensure that is through compliance management. Measure usage by each individual to verify that they are taking advantage of all it has to offer. Measure tasks, feature usage, and reductions of unnecessary activities (like a tech calling to provision a device that can be done using the tool).

Finally, all these things are intended to save time. They don’t. We cannot save time, only spend it. Looking at how the workforce is spending its time may be an indicator that a tune-up is needed.

About opXL

opXL is a team of cable experts that provides operators with a wide variety of strategic, operational, and analytical services, access to a large network of technical and functional specialists in most common cable applications, and works with many vendors to support the reinvigoration of systems that are no longer meeting expectations.

Whether its strategy development, business process analytics to improve, launch support for a new application, performance analytics, opXL is ready to support cable operators to reach peak performance objectives.