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# Automatic Call Distribution for 9-1-1?

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**A**UTOMATIC CALL DISTRIBUTION (ACD) has been used in inbound call centers for some time. A basic ACD system makes it possible to handle large numbers of incoming calls by automatically distributing calls to predesignated groups of call takers. When incoming calls exceed capacity, ACD places calls in a queue until they can be directed to the next available call taker. The automatic distribution of calls helps ensure that the call taking load is equally distributed among operators. This and other advanced features offered by business ACD systems make them well suited for order departments, customer service, technical support and retail call centers.

## Business ACD Versus 9-1-1 ACD

Many manufacturers of public safety equipment incorporate a business ACD solution as part of their 9-1-1 telephony system. However, potential buyers need to be aware that a 9-1-1 PSAP represents a

very different environment from a business call center. What's more, ACD features that work well for a customer calling to return the sweater Aunt Judy bought him for Christmas may not be appropriate for the life or death calls that are the daily routine of a 9-1-1 dispatch. Therefore, when choosing a system, 9-1-1 managers should recognize that there are now available ACD solutions designed specifically to operate in the 9-1-1 environment.

## What 9-1-1 ACD Can Do for You

ACD brings many valuable features to the 9-1-1 environment, although these will vary among manufacturers. Following are some key advantages of 9-1-1 ACD features over business call center solutions.

### Hold Versus Park

During a large-scale incident, 9-1-1 centers usually are swamped with calls. This often leads to the need to triage calls. In 9-1-1 telephony systems that do not have

ACD, it is normal practice to place non-emergency calls on hold to be handled after all emergency calls have been cleared. However, most ACDs designed for business do not allow more than one call to be placed on hold. Plus, while on hold, a call taker typically cannot answer additional calls. This problem is somewhat alleviated by using a *Park* feature, but this usually requires additional keystrokes, plus returning to a *Parked* call is not always easy. By contrast, ACD systems designed for 9-1-1 allow call takers to quickly place an unlimited number of calls on hold while continuing to handle additional calls.

### Seeing the Big Picture

In PSAPs that don't have ACD systems, call takers usually can see which lines are ringing, on hold or in use. However, 9-1-1 PSAPs that have transitioned from non-ACD key systems (a button for each phone line) to a business ACD system often complain that their dispatchers lose the big pic-

ture—that is, *who* exactly is handling *what* call.

With more modern non-ACD equipment, the longest ringing line is uniquely identified. On the other hand, ACDs

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designed for business use typically do not display system status to the individual call takers. At most, call takers may see the number of calls in the queue, but have no visibility of calls on hold, in park or already answered. Whereas, an ACD designed for 9-1-1 allows all call takers to pick up any call on hold or barge into calls in progress—they may even answer a call that is ringing at an unattended console position. All these options are facilitated by having the aforementioned big picture.

### Other Considerations

In addition to the important capabilities outlined earlier, some 9-1-1 ACD solutions provide PSAPs with a range of advanced features:

#### Auto Answer

The PSAP should be able to choose between having control over answering and having the call answered automatically with a zip tone in the headset as notification of a new call.

#### Ring-No-Answer

If call takers have control over answering, there should be an option to have calls that have rung too long at position to

be assigned to the next available position.

#### Requeue

This lets PSAPs triage calls by moving them between priority-based queues.

#### Hold-Timeout

With the ability to place several calls on hold, PSAPs need an option that permits long holds to be reinserted into the queue so they are not forgotten.

#### Auto-Ready

Because call takers need to be allowed to temporarily take themselves out of call distribution, a *Ready* feature is needed. PSAPs should be able to choose between automatically making the position ready upon release of a call and letting the call taker decide when they are ready.

#### Message Board

A message board option should allow all PSAP personnel to view the status of the system—such as how many calls in queue, how many call takers currently available, call rate, etc.

#### Mission-Critical a Must

Most importantly, 9-1-1 call taking is *mission-critical* communications and therefore intolerant of failures. It always must be remembered that business class PBXs are not designed to mission-critical standards. An ACD designed for public safety must have architecture that allows *no single point of failure*.

When lightning hits an E9-1-1 dispatch, this last feature often makes the difference between whether the phones keep ringing, or whether there is a sudden and deafening silence. **ENO**

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