
Helping the Heartland

The coronavirus threatened Iowa's economy; Amazon Web Services (AWS) helped keep workforce services running smoothly.

Challenge: Unprecedented Volume and Workload

In the past year, state governments overcame disruptions from COVID-19 and continued to serve their residents. Among them is Iowa Workforce Development (IWD), which is responsible for administering state and federal unemployment insurance programs and handling unemployment claims at a time of widespread job loss.

In spring 2020, as the virus spread across the United States and into the heartland, people and the economy got sick. Congress passed an emergency \$2 trillion stimulus package, and unemployed workers seeking financial relief rushed to file claims with state offices. In Iowa, a record number of unemployment claims presented IWD with an unprecedented challenge. In the first two weeks of March 2020, the agency processed 6,871 claims; in the final two weeks of the month, total claims exceeded 152,000 – an increase of more than 2,100%.

IWD's legacy telephone system was not designed to handle the unprecedented volume. On the busiest days of March and April 2020, the agency received 264,000 attempted phone calls during business hours. On average, about 18,000 calls were accepted. The rest were dropped or routed to an automated message that encouraged callers to "please keep trying."

IWD quickly mounted an innovative response. Despite not having a remote-work policy, IWD made it possible within a week of the beginning of the pandemic in Iowa on March 15, 2020, for the entire staff to work from home. Workers received laptops and softphones integrated with virtual machines and supported by a newly acquired service model for devices. In a classic bucket-brigade scenario, the agency recruited temporary call center workers from inside the department and from other agencies. Call center staff often worked 60 hours a week, with people from across the agency pitching in to help.

Those actions were critical to the agency's continued success, but they didn't solve the underlying capacity limitations of the legacy system. As a result, the contact center required frequent use of resources outside the agency. Upgrading the call center's legacy technology during the pandemic wasn't an option; it would take too long and cost too much. It was clear the agency needed to think outside the box to find a workable solution in very short order.



Solution: A Cloud-Based Omnichannel Contact Center

Iowa's workforce agency turned to Amazon Connect, an omnichannel cloud contact center, to bolster the capacity of IWD's on-premises call-handling capability and later to fully replace the traditional call center. Amazon Connect's cloud-based service is inherently scalable and easily integrates chatbots and other smart features that improve the agency's ability to handle spikes in demand. Easy to implement, the new system was fully operational in a matter of months.

IWD opted for an incremental deployment. It started with the agency's help desk and smaller call centers, such as the appeals department. The transition concluded with porting over to Amazon Connect the call center for the agency's benefits division – its largest.

Enabled by Amazon Connect, IWD today can quickly scale up to handle 1,500 concurrent calls, a 600% increase from the 250-call capacity of the legacy system. Smart features, such as Amazon Lex, have enabled the system to answer about one-third of customer queries without the involvement of human workers.

The legacy system was costing IWD significantly more money than AWS, and it had less features, less analytics, and it was less efficient.

Contributing to the project's success was the AWS support team, which readily shared its expertise in automation and orchestration throughout the deployment.



Stats

2.8%

was Iowa's pre-COVID unemployment rate in January 2020

10.2%

was Iowa's unemployment rate in April 2020

6X

increase in Iowa's call capacity using Amazon Connect

30%

of calls shifted from human to automated answering

Takeaways



Improved performance, lower cost.

In the three-month period from Nov. 1, 2020, through Jan. 31, 2021, Amazon Lex, a conversational artificial intelligence interface, handled more than 129,000 queries that otherwise would have gone to human workers – at \$82,000 less than the cost of the legacy system during the same period a year earlier.



Better use of human resources.

In the same three-month period, the system saved the agency 10,797 staff hours.



Improved constituent experience and engagement.

When someone hangs up after they've asked Amazon Lex one or two questions because they got the information they needed, IWD is able to understand and capture all of that.

About IWD

Iowa Workforce Development is a state agency committed to providing employment services for individual job seekers through our IowaWORKS partnership. Employers and businesses can post jobs, hire veterans and apply for qualifying federal tax credits. IWD continually strives to improve processes and align the organization in such a way to provide effective, demand-driven products and services. IWD staff in Des Moines consists of administrative, labor services, workers' compensation, labor market information, and the unemployment insurance services staff.

About Amazon Web Services

Amazon Web Services (AWS) is the world's most comprehensive and broadly adopted cloud platform. Millions of customers, including government agencies, are using AWS to lower costs, become more agile, and innovate faster while powering infrastructure and providing reliable, mission critical services.

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