How DC Drives Deeper Civic Engagement

Challenge: Overcoming the Inertia of Legacy Systems

A few years ago, the District of Columbia (D.C.) recognized that it needed to modernize the constituent experience across multiple agencies. District officials were eager to improve the quality of services and deliver easier access for residents. They realized they had to standardize their technology, reduce costs and enhance the existing enterprise solution.

One of the district's main channels of engagement is through its contact centers. Demand for those services was growing, yet upgrading and expanding the capacity of legacy systems would have been costly, prohibitive even. Under the prevailing a-la-carte pricing model, simply standing up a 10- or 15-seat contact center would cost more than $30,000 — plus another $40,000 to add call recording, callback functionality, dashboards and rich analytics. At larger agencies, "the expense of an upgrade would have been well over a million dollars," said Cynthia Romero, Unified Communications Engineer for DC-Net/Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO)/D.C. Government.

In addition, upgrading legacy systems couldn't be done quickly or easily. Adding webchat, SMS and basic self-service options to the existing on-premises contact center solution would require significant time and money.

Eager to find a resolution, D.C.'s OCTO recommended Amazon Connect, the easy to use omnichannel cloud contact center provided by Amazon Web Services (AWS). Shortly thereafter, in 2018, the city's Office of Risk Management (ORM) became the first agency in the district to stand up a new contact center using Amazon Connect. A handful of other small agencies joined OCTO and migrated their contact centers to the cloud.

It wasn't a stampede, not at first. That would happen later.

D.C.'s biggest agencies, behemoths such as the Department of Health and Department of Human Services, were hesitant at first. They had legacy on-premises contact centers and were content to pay maintenance costs (i.e., the cost of maintaining the status quo) and forgo major service improvements. There were tradeoffs.
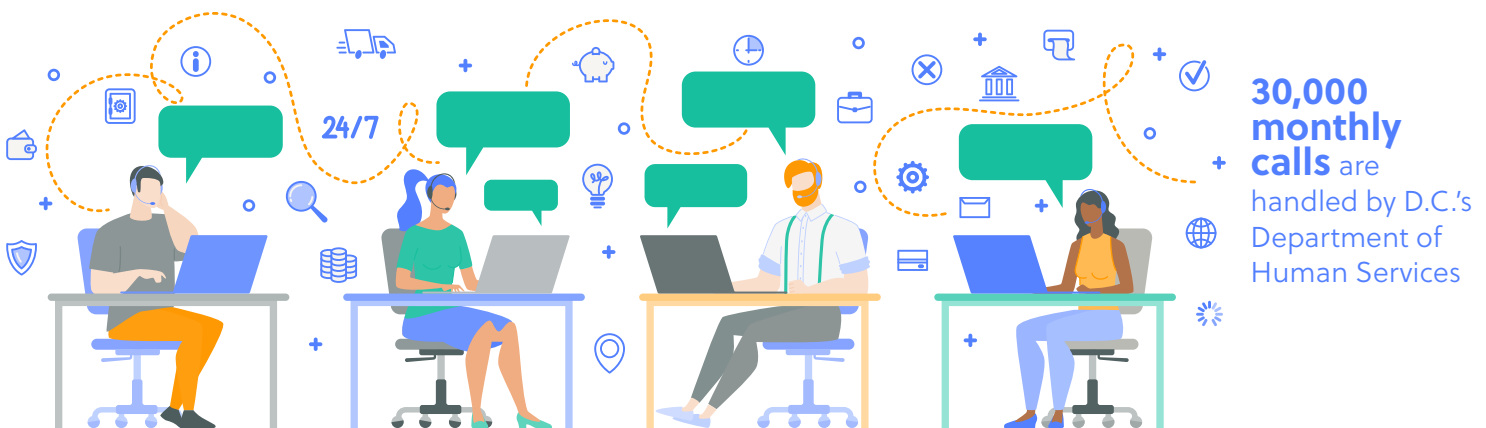
"You can pay the maintenance cost on a legacy system, and that's fine, but you're never going to introduce multimodal contact centers, you're not going to get data-rich analytics that you could pull from data that's available with Amazon [Connect] and you're not going to enhance the user experience of your callers," Romero said. With Connect, callers can more easily use multiple customer service channels at the same time: searching a web site and live chatting with an agent (live or automated) while awaiting a return call from someone in a different department.

In the private sector, businesses justify the cost of investing in IT as a way to grow profits. In government, making the business case for IT investments is more challenging, but important to ensuring that constituents have access to the critical services and information that they need.

"If you're a company like Capital One or American Express, every minute a caller is on hold is revenue that's potentially lost," Romero said. "That's not necessarily the case with government. You've got a captive audience."

The looming question was how to overcome budgeting realities to improve contact centers and develop a scalable enterprise solution that would better serve Washingtonians.

$1 million cost avoidance to upgrade on-premises contact center

24/7

30,000 monthly calls are handled by D.C.'s Department of Human Services

Solution: The Coronavirus Catalyzed Contact Center Upgrades

It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention. If true, the coronavirus was an imposing mother. Overnight, agencies' leaders told the agents who were staffing D.C.'s on-premises contact centers to work remotely at a time when contact center traffic was surging — a contingency that agencies using legacy on-premises systems were not equipped to support.

The city had two options: upgrade and expand legacy systems or leverage Amazon Connect for a few small government agencies. "When you have 30,000 employees and 40-plus contact centers suddenly go remote, it's going to be a challenge," Romero said.

Option one appeared untenable. Had agencies that weren't already using Connect chosen to continue with their legacy systems during a pandemic, "D.C. government would be spending a fortune in contact center solutions and telephony charges," Romero said. "And there's no way we'd be able to support thousands of simultaneous calls, which we did today for pandemic support initiatives. Not a chance. Our telecom infrastructure just couldn't support it."

D.C. agencies, including those that had been reluctant to embrace new contact center technology a couple of years earlier, readily endorsed conversion to Amazon Connect. Today, 12 months later, more than 40 agencies are on board with Amazon Connect. "Once you've built the standardized processes, it's very easy to turn that around and reproduce it for other government organizations or sub-organizations within your agency," Romero said.

40+
D.C. agencies have adopted Amazon Connect since 2018

For example, the Child Support Services Division's self-service application, deployed in 2010 on a different platform, cost the city more than $1 million to implement over 10 months, and costs more than $75,000 annually to maintain. Replicating the same solution this year using Amazon Connect took approximately six months to complete, with no upfront costs required.

Amazon Connect empowers agency contact center agents to serve constituents faster and better. Contact centers using Amazon Connect capture data from multiple sources – agent streams, contact trace records, etc. – and collect it in a data lake where it's accessible to anyone and any application. "We're centralizing all of our data for all of our contact centers so it can be disbursed, sliced and diced however they see fit," Romero said.

With Amazon Connect, D.C. has dramatically reduced the time to innovation and big bills associated with legacy system upgrades and refresh cycles. Amazon Connect includes many built-in features that legacy systems offer only as add-ons. Using these advanced features has enabled the agency contact centers to enhance interactions and respond more quickly to constituents needs. It also has improved insights and decision-making capabilities for agency management.

"There's no additional cost for call recording. There's no additional cost for a callback. The same features that we provided with our on-prem system at a much smaller scale took extensive time and money to deploy and maintain. These features are no longer a consideration. All of it is built in," Romero said. "We're using [Amazon] Connect for things that would cost a small fortune and a great deal of time if we had stayed in the legacy ecosystem."

The district's contact centers emerged from the past year better off than they might have expected. Agencies previously established and running on Amazon Connect could support the surging call volumes due to the pandemic. For those that were not, cloud adoption increased quickly and significantly.

"Because we had Amazon Connect available to us, it took a great deal of pressure off our team and allowed us to meet agency demands and timelines. That simply would not have happened otherwise," Romero said. "The AWS community was a significant contributor to our success. The community has grown, and picking up from lessons learned and examples from the community has been key."
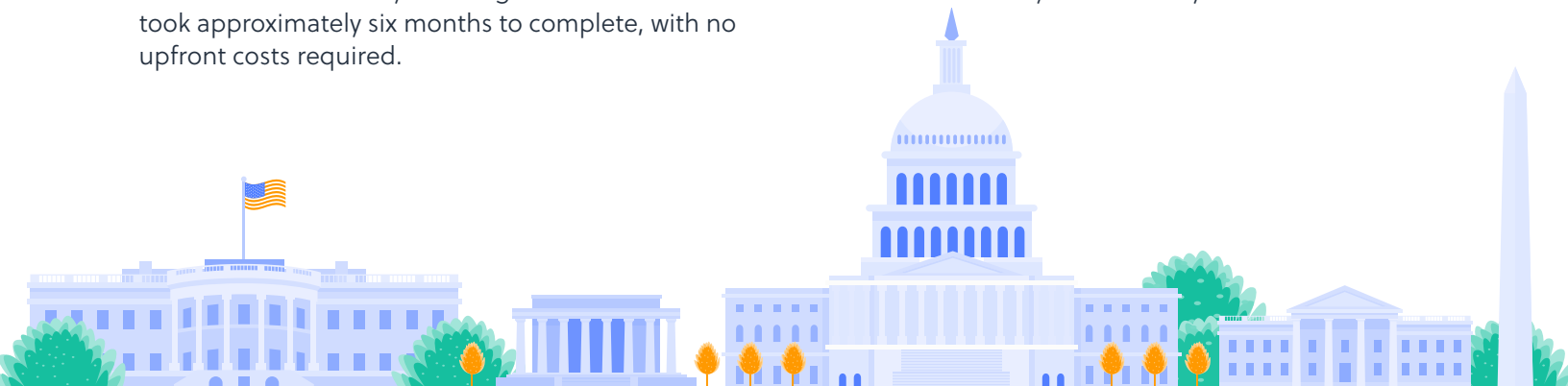
Multiple D.C. Agencies Benefit from Amazon Connect

Department of Health

D.C. contact tracing and vaccination registration use Amazon Connect integrated with Salesforce. Speed of deployment was a primary consideration in choosing Amazon Connect to support those services. The contact center was able to incorporate SMS texting, call-backs, and other features to reduce wait times and more quickly disseminate information to callers.

Department of Human Services

The agency handles 30,000 calls a month, displaying performance metrics across multiple visualization platforms. Access to data in standardized formats using Amazon Connect supports development of dashboards and data-sharing. These analytic reports ensure citizens are receiving all of the services and programs they need, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Metro Police

In the past, telephony denial of service attacks against the Metro Police Department required law enforcement to use expensive prevention applications. Now, D.C. Police use a phone captcha solution that integrates with Amazon Connect. The phone captcha gives callers a randomly generated number to enter before continuing the call.

Child Support Services

The largest and most complex application deployed using Amazon Connect, to date, was completed at no cost – except the time required to complete the task. By comparison, an earlier deployment of the same application on an on-premises platform had cost $1 million.

Amazon Connect Enables:

- Elasticity
- Scalability
- Dashboards
- Chatbots
- Ease of integration
- Omnichannel functionality
- AI/ML capabilities

About AWS

Amazon Web Services worldwide public sector helps government, education and nonprofit customers deploy cloud services to reduce costs, drive efficiencies and increase innovation across the globe. With AWS, you only pay for what you use, with no up-front physical infrastructure expenses or long-term commitments. Public sector organizations of all sizes use AWS to build applications, host websites, harness big data, store information, conduct research, improve online access for citizens and more. AWS has dedicated teams focused on helping our customers pave the way for innovation and, ultimately, make the world a better place through technology.

Contact us to learn how AWS can help you with your biggest IT challenges.

aws   DC.gov   govloop