

Leading Strategically Through the Recovery

Erin Stewart
Interactions
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Amy Perkins

Welcome, everybody. Thanks for joining the latest in our Leading Strategically Through the Recovery series. I'm so excited to be chatting today with Erin Stewart, one of my favorite people. For those of you who don't know Erin, she's Senior Director of Sales at Interactions and she has years of experience delivering innovative, forward-thinking solutions to organizations.

What I'll say, in addition to her resume and expertise, you all can expect to benefit from Erin's thought leadership, her academic interest in innovation and strategy and her easy-to-talk-to demeanor. Those are certainly some of the things about Erin that I value.

Before we jump in, I want to take a moment to thank our sponsors and cover a little bit of housekeeping. First, let me thank LiveVox for their generous sponsorship of the webinar series, as well as RevSpring support on a number of these webinars, as well.

LiveVox is a leading provider of enterprise, cloud contact center solutions, managing 12-plus billion interactions annually. With 15-plus years of pure cloud expertise, they empower effective channels of choice engagement strategies.

RevSpring leads the market in financial communications and payment solutions that inspire consumers to pay, many leading accounts receivable management companies trust RevSpring to maximize their financial results through dynamic and personalized print, online, phone, email and text communications and payment options, a lot of things we'll touch on today.

Three pieces of housekeeping before we jump in. All of your mikes have been muted, however, if you want to submit a question—and I highly encourage you to do so—please do so through the chat box window available to you. You can do that any time throughout the broadcast. We will have a Q&A period at the end of today's presentation.

The webinar will be up on insideARM's website later for rewatching, so if you miss parts of this, have to leave early or if you have colleagues who you think would enjoy the webinar, please feel free to share it.

Finally, I have some legalese that I need to read and put on the record, so please bear with me. This information shared in this webinar is not intended to be legal advice and can't be used as legal advice. We can't reinforce that enough.

With all of that out of the way—very, very important messages—I'm glad to get to the next important thing which is you, Erin. Thanks again for being here. You ready to jump in?

Erin Stewart

Yeah. Thanks so much for having me, Amy. I'm excited to talk with you today. It's been an ever-changing environment over the past few weeks, months, and looking forward to digging in a little bit into that today.

Amy Perkins

Perfect. I am, too. Erin and I talked a little bit, naturally, before this webinar. We were talking about with COVID-19, certainly there are a lot of varying stories, but one of the things that I think we can both say we're excited about as champions of innovation is that times like this really are a catalyst for people to think differently about how to solve some old problems and a lot of new problems that we're going to be facing.

I'm sure that you're seeing a lot of that as you talk to your clients and others in the industry. Can you share some of the stories with the audience about how your customers, or others within the industry, plan to weather COVID-19, utilizing AI or other technology that maybe they were slow to adopt initially?

Erin Stewart

Yes. I would love to talk a little bit about that. I think it's been a really great opportunity, not only for organizations to see some of the things float to the top that they maybe had hoped to spend time on and hoped there was a right time and now, is the time. So, it's really brought some of those to the forefront and with that, has given the opportunity for consumers to actually engage with these solutions and become more comfortable with them and become the normal going forward.

We've had the opportunity to work with some of the world's largest financial institutions in situations where they've had the need to divert 100% of their call volume for hours at a time while they move to work from home. The virtual agent can step in and allow for consumers to have a good experience and still accomplish what they look to when they engaged originally while these organizations go through these transition periods.

We've also seen times where maybe these cyber security firms that we work with have the need to escalate digital channels. There's a chat process that was on the table and they came forward and said, "We need this now more than ever. Can you help us?" I'd say almost all of our clients, as well as others in the industry who are talking with innovative solutions around these AI, machine-learning buzz-word solutions and it's brought us to a point where we can talk about the reality of consumers needing this and the opportunity for these firms to engage in a way that consumers want it.

Amy Perkins

That's great. I've heard some other stories like that. I'm just finding it so inspiring that there's all of these great tools that are out there for us to be able to jump in and leverage. If you think even through the last crisis or a last major event we've had like this, you go looking for it and it might not be there, that solution might not be there and it's having to be built for later use. I'm so excited that solutions like this are there and are available to folks to consider to build into and integrate with their existing strategies.

Along those lines, you recently published a really insightful article which I got a lot from about the pitfalls that companies fall into when they are trying to pursue AI integration. I'd love to talk a little bit more about that, if you want. Let's jump right in.

You highlighted three key areas of focus for those considering AI and how to think about things as they're looking to bring any new, really, technology solution onboard. As I was reading through it, I felt like it was very applicable to any change you might be wanting to adopt within your organization, but

especially at a time like now, when everyone is more stretched and everyone has an urgency to really get things moving.

Along those lines, in the article you talked about how important it is to build the right integration scheme. Can you share some examples of where and how you've seen this done really well?

Erin Stewart

This is a really interesting observation that I made. A lot of people talk about putting together diverse teams, but I think it's important now more than ever. When you think about putting together a project team to work on building a strategy and finding the right solutions to help achieve that goal, finding a diverse team not only means maybe tenure with the company, skill sets, responsibilities, different viewpoints and when you put all of those people around a table and you empower them to come up with new solutions to new problems, rather than trying to maybe reuse what we're doing and make it a better thing, do it in a better way.

This is really a time where if you can have an executive sponsor on a project who assigns a project coordinator to really work with assigning certain people to take certain tasks on and then, report back to the larger group, putting together that team that's very diversified, leveraging individual strengths and then, putting everyone around a table with the empowerment of an executive who says, "Let's find new solutions to problems using what we have today," and not try to recreate solutions that are already there.

Amy Perkins

Absolutely. I think those are such great points. Some of those lessons I've learned the hard way, so I think it's great advice.

One of the things I've noticed, too, along those lines, once you build a team, one of the things that can hold a team up is really being slow to make decisions and not being clear on who exactly is the decision-maker or is it decision by committee.

I guess I'd ask you, what are your observations when you've seen teams try to work together to push through to try to quickly adopt innovation that's needed to solve a problem?

Erin Stewart

Once you do have a team around a table, there's a lot of cooks in the kitchen, a lot of people who not only want to have a say on what's happening, but a lot of skin in the game. People want to latch on and help organizations through this time. I think it's important for that executive sponsor to understand what are the approvals required in order to make this change. Is there a technical approval, a financial approval, an operational approval, a security approval? Understand clearly what all of those are when you're going into looking for solutions to get you to your strategic initiative.

If you're aligned with that, then your project team can understand that it's their responsibility to get you the supporting documents you need in order to help those approvals happen, so really understanding the landscape of what's required in order to make these changes ahead of time is a really important step and making sure that that approval happens in an efficient, timely manner.

Amy Perkins

I've also found in this area, once you do recognize who the decision-makers are, communication really is everything because if you get to the table with that decision-maker and that's the first time that you're asking for what it is you want or need, I find that that typically adds time on the end of getting that decision back.

I would always try to do the prework before I got into the point of the decision, or the ultimate recommendation, so I could get early adoption, or pushback, and to be able to solve for that to be able to move through a little quicker. I think beyond knowing who to call, really building those relationships and being strategic about how to influence your decision-maker is really, really important.

Erin Stewart

Right. You should know not only the decision-makers, but the roadblocks you're going to encounter. If you know that every time you bring in a vendor, there's something on the security questionnaire that's a hard checkbox to check, start there every time and just understand what those are so that you're not doing more work required than what needs to be done.

Amy Perkins

Not only that, proactively communicating what those anticipated roadblocks are, again, back to that communication piece you were saying is it's so important because we had one project and it still bothers me to this day because it was a tough lesson-learned. We got pretty far down the path before we recognized something that would be a roadblock.

It created a significant delay in the overall project, not for any technical reason, but for our own important and necessary bureaucratic reasons internally. It slowed us down and so, for us, it was like lesson-learned. How do we keep getting out of our own way so that we can stand these things up more quickly? It can be a complex process to implement something new and different, but I love the tips you give here because I think they really do make a meaningful difference.

Now, this next question is one of my favorite subjects, so you talk about the need for a solid, strategic fit. Can you explain to the audience what you mean by strategic fit and elaborate?

Erin Stewart

I'm sure that I mentioned this in my blog post, but right now in our emails, while we're on this webinar, we're probably getting an email with the subject line that says AI, machine-learning, RPA, automation, something that's a buzz word out there. There's a tendency to look at those to say, "This looks like a really great solution. What problem could it solve?" When you start that way, that's much harder to assign metrics and understand how the success of that will be attained.

It's much more efficient to look at what the strategic goals and initiatives are that you're trying to accomplish and then, seek out solutions and vendor partners who can help you achieve that strategic goal. Doing it that way really allows you to use these buzz words, these solutions—these creative, innovative solutions—as tools in your tool kit that help you get to that end goal. But if you start with just one of them and think that that's going to solve the problem, you're really going to set yourself up for failure.

Amy Perkins

It all needs to align, right, with where you ultimately want to go down the road. I think that's something that concerns me a little bit and I caution a lot of people. I'm all about urgency and speed and making things happen, but you have to do it the right way, like we just talked about, but beyond that, you need to be thinking about, "Let me pause. Let me think about this, the long-term, where we're going to be a year from now, two years from now, three years from now."

Sketch that out. It doesn't have to be crazy detailed, but have a vision for where that is so as you're making these solutions now—right, Erin—they're so urgent and we have to get moving. You know that they're going to play a complementary part in your strategy, long-term, because the downside to that is a year from now, you're having to unwind or when you go to integrate the next thing, it doesn't match. All of that is loss of time and there are a lot of opportunity costs associated with those delays.

I'm really passionate about even now as things are urgent, being strategic, capital S Strategic, in thinking long-term, that's the only way you can know if this is a strategic fit or not.

Erin Stewart

Absolutely. Having a strategic initiative and small projects along the way to help you get there allows you and your team to celebrate those small wins along the way because that [interval 14:47] can be a long-term project and if you don't have things to celebrate along the way to keep your team excited and engaged, that can cause some efficiency and productivity issues, too.

Amy Perkins

Absolutely. That's a great point. Analysis paralysis is really common when evaluating making decisions about whether to invest in technology, which ones to invest in, how to size the benefits, all that. You talked about that in your blog post, as well. What best practices have you observed in that area as people are hurriedly looking to deploy some new things?

Erin Stewart

You mentioned prework earlier in our conversation. One of the things that I say a lot is earning the right to ask for approval, earning the right to have a seat at the table, earning the right to have a virtual conversation.

If you're doing the prework and you're understanding what your strategic initiative is, you're putting your teams together, you know what the approvals are needed, you're going through the process, by the time you get to decision-making, you know what direction you're going. It's right there in front of you and you don't end up in a situation where you run into those roadblocks you didn't expect or you have two different sides of the table with two different expectations.

All of those things can be avoided and paralysis analysis can be more like clearly reviewing something and understanding that we're all looking at each other and saying, "We knew how this was going to go before we sat down." That's the situation you want to put yourself in, is communicating and providing enough supporting information to make that an easy decision.

Amy Perkins

Absolutely. I think groups seem to get hung up a little bit sometimes on the details of the assumptions they've put in when trying to figure out either the degree of expense benefit or revenue increase, either

from commissions if it's an agency, or a rejection and loss, which helps revenue if you're a lender or a creditor.

We try to get so very specific about what we forecast those benefits to be. While I think we need to be precise and as accurate as we can be, let's face it. We could rework those cost benefit analysis a million times and probably only be a degree of difference.

One of the things I would talk to my team about is, "You just introduced a new possible assumption, like T-shirt size that for me. Are we talking about large difference? Small difference?" Because sometimes you have to stop and say all contributions to an assumption on sizing something are not equal. You have to pick and choose and get to the place you think gets you in the right ballpark.

I know that slowed us down a lot because analysts are often perfectionists, too and want to get all the numbers right and all the details right. It's not about being right or wrong. It's just accepting that you're within that range. I think all of that, if folks consider both sides of that, your points and mine, I think they'll get along the way a lot quicker for sure, which I think right now, time is going to be of the essence.

I'm going to pause for just a second to see if we—I believe we have a few questions in the queue. I want to make sure we have time to get to those. Let me jump over to you, Mike. Do you want to read us a question that the group has for Erin?

Mike Bevel

They weren't so much questions as—well, I asked questions of the audience, the webinar audience. One of the first questions I asked is how streamlined are your company's decision-making processes? Do you have a bottleneck? Do you have a decision by committee? How does that work?

Someone was great to answer with, "Yes. We meet each morning to discuss needs, solutions, implementations, documentations, all decision-makers contributing." I found that part interesting, all decision-maker contributing, because it sounds like in this case, decision-makers are clearly defined. As a lower-level employee, the sense that I get from that answer is, "I know who I need to go to so I'm not wasting time taking my question to nine different people."

But there is an actual question, but I'm going to need some help from the question-asker. Somebody said, "How hard is it to implement?" and I'm not sure what the "it" in that sentence means.

How hard it is to implement the interactions of technology and do I need someone who has AI experience on my team to work with these?

Erin Stewart

I'd say how hard is it to implement interactions is a fun question because it really depends on how much you've already thought about virtual engagements, but the good news is that Interactions is a managed service solution who provides you the ability to partner with someone who's worked with 70 of the world's most trusted brands to take on the AI, machine-learning, natural language processing dialogue management and research and development behind that. That's what we do best.

We rely on you to tell us what your agents do best today and how we can help you best achieve your strategic goals. Together, we work together as a team to achieve the end goals. I guess the answer is you

don't really require anyone that has any AI expertise. We're really looking to work with your business team to understand what happens in your organization today.

It's our job to deliver a solution that provides not only a great customer experience, but the reduced capacity needs on your agents' side or increased productivity, depending on what you're looking for strategically.

Feel free to reach out directly and we can dig in a little bit deeper. It also, really, from how easy is it to implement depends on your vendors that you have today. We have a lot of vendors that we're working with in this space to help us make that process a lot easier. We can go through that in other conversations.

Amy Perkins

Are there any other questions coming in, Mike?

Mike Bevel

No, but I will read one more comment out, which is, "We are a small company, so we include those lower-level employees because they are the boots on the ground, are experienced first-hand and offer valuable input. This also gives them a buy-in and dedication."

In this case, it's a small company, about 20-30 people. I imagine, as you try to scale that up, that becomes more challenging to involve that many people. In some cases, being a smaller organization offers you nimbleness that bigger companies don't necessarily have the luxury of. That's it for me for right now.

Erin Stewart

I would add to that, I think that speaking to the diversification of the team working on these, among the most innovative and creative solutions that I've seen have come from, I wouldn't say a lower level, but the people who have the boots on the ground. People who are answering the phones, people interacting with the consumers, listening to the calls, those are the people that we really engage with on our side, to understand the best way to engage with your consumers.

That's a really important piece to these pictures and whether it's an executive sponsor is an important piece, but having input and diversification from people who actually are speaking to consumers and doing what they do best is just as important.

Amy Perkins

I agree with all of that. I want to go back to the, I guess I would just say on that front is as I think about the question before about getting buy-in and getting support, I don't even think it's about being small or big. It's about think about who's impacted most by the change and sometimes, we say, "Oh, we don't want to bring those impacted in early because that could be viewed negatively or it might create fear."

I actually believe quite the opposite. I think in this case in the context of what Erin and I are talking about today, this change is really about filling in for people who aren't in the seats that we need in the seats again, in this scenario.

I think if I were out there deploying a new virtual agent or other options that Erin had, I would definitely be bringing in agents and others to weigh in on how that should work and how [consumers]

[unintelligible 24:07] be a part of the project team because I actually think that alleviates a lot of fear because you're transparent and people know and they know how it will and will not impact them, so when it does come out—to the point of buy-in—people are like, “Okay, yeah. We've been here. It's not just someone coming out of nowhere saying, “Hey, by the way. We're changing everything.” That doesn't seem to work so well, or not as quickly as you want. That's the only thing I would add.

Erin Stewart

A lot of our clients, and other organizations who are using solutions that help automate things and empower their agents to focus on things that are more complex, they see actually better agent retention, better agent happiness. You really see the agents like their job more and they want to be where they are. These innovative types of solutions should be empowering your agents.

I don't think we have engaged with many organizations who are looking at doing this sort of thing to reduce major agent pools or change the way that we do business today in that manner. This is more about empowering your agents to really do what they do best and getting them excited about that.

Amy Perkins

It's really aligning the right work with the right solution, right, and it needs to be a mix of all those things. I think in prior webinars, we've talked about introducing text and self-service web [unintelligible 25:31]. Now we're talking about AI and all these different things. They really are intended to be complementary to one another and not in lieu or in place of the other.

All right. If there aren't any questions, I guess, Mike, I'll just ask. I don't see any more questions, but I want to check on your end, too.

Mike Bevel

I do want to share one more comment that I found really interesting that sort of elevates what—not elevates—but adds to what the two of you were talking about. If you can tell the employee what is in it for them—AI—it will give them more assistance and the ability for an employee to continue to grow. That's how you sell the staff. It is positive to make us all better.

Now I have a real question in the question box. I will ask that. Are those in third-party collection—oh, and what I would like to suggest to the audience is if you have any thoughts, this question is for Amy and Erin, absolutely, they're going to answer it. It's their job, but if you have thoughts about the question that you want to share, please send them through because I'd love to share them with Amy and Erin.

The question is, “For those in third-party collections using Interactions, can you define the scope of what these agencies are doing with the technology? Is the bot taking payments, payment arrangements? Engaging with special handling? What percentage of these interactions are 100% the bot and what percent require your human assist?”

Erin Stewart

There's a few different questions in there, so I'm going to try to catch those all. If I don't catch them all, feel free to follow up with me afterwards and I can fill in the blanks. But in the third-party world, we do have agents on the virtual agent side, taking inbound calls, doing ID authentication. They are also taking one-time payments and special handling.

Settlements, arrangements and negotiations are out there, as well. Those should be launching soon. I'm not sure exactly on the dates on those. They keep those pretty close to the coat as they're pretty competitive at this point in the third-party world.

But we do have a lot of success in the payments and the special handling. What we've seen in those applications is we do a lot of work on our side from the managed-services side to see how consumers are engaging and what's falling out to agents today and not staying in automation that are opportunities for us to engage.

One of those that came out of that was some additional special handling opportunities that we put into production very quickly in order to add that additional value. Consumers are engaging with us on a wrong party, third-party, as well as the right party in payment solution.

As far as what percentage of our interactions are handled with the speech recognition system versus an intent analyst through our human adoptive understanding, from our perspective, our pricing model is success-based, so we're only charging you when we're automating things and providing value to you.

It's our job to make sure that we're doing that in the best way. You just have to understand from day one that we're giving the best understanding solution, whether that be a human ear or a speech recognition system, the price to you is the same. It's our job to use the intent analyst to tune and train our system in order to improve our accuracy of our speech recognition system because that's obviously in our benefit from a pricing model and our costs.

It's really just about, from where you sit, it doesn't matter what percent is handled where. You just know that we're using the best resource every time to ensure that your customer never has to repeat themselves, or cause a frustrating situation.

Mike Bevel

Erin, this is a question that came to me during your answer. I've been thinking a lot recently about human behavioral change, especially after a situation like this, where everyone is doing everything by phone and Zoom. They might be talked out.

Do you think that sort of automatic bot systems might actually even be better for consumers going forward who may have fatigue just viewing the humans because we have to do all this interaction now to keep in touch and make sure that Grandma is okay and all that; that they would prefer instead to deal with this personality piece of technology rather than having to talk to someone on the phone. What are your thoughts about that?

Erin Stewart

It's a great point. Consumers, because they were presented with more self-service options during this crisis, has given them the opportunity to try out what's out there. They've been able to find the systems that they believe in and are confident with and they will continue to use those.

Those self-service systems that they engaged with that did not provide them value and caused frustration, it will take that brand time to earn trust back for them to want to engage again and be able to become a self-service user.

There's a real differentiator that's happened over the past two months with brands. Either they've seen a very high increase in the engagement of consumers with their self-service, or they haven't. That's quite telling when it comes to maybe some improvements that you need to make in those areas.

But Interactions actually did a survey a few weeks ago to gauge consumer interest in engaging with self-service post-COVID. We did see quite an increase. Those results can be found on our website. I'm sure Amy can share them out, as well, if that's helpful to the group.

But we also have a survey from 2018 that shows that even pre-COVID, consumers, as long as they dealt with something that was efficient and handled their problem the first time, they had actually preferred to engage with a non-human intervention around a financial situation.

Before this all happened, they were more comfortable after it. They've tried it. Either it worked or it didn't. Now we're going to be in a situation to either make it better or put a strategic initiative into place on engaging with your consumers, when, how and where they want.

Mike Bevel

Back to that thing that I was saying about human behavior, I think consumers who have accounts in collections are already feeling some level of shame and then, to have to talk about that shame out loud with a human they don't know, yeah, how you talked about artificial intelligence like being able to do that without talking to someone makes a lot of sense.

I wanted to add another comment that came in when the chat box—and for those of you who might be frustrated when I'm reading this, I'm reading this so that the transcriptionist can also get it to you. A third-party person writes, "Are AI being educated to perform tasks which take the human agent away from consumer resolution such as automated skip tracing, issuing letters, data that needs scrubbing, mundane duties taking away from the collector? Be able to keep the human interaction on the phones and continue to grow our humans—it sounds like they're in little pots and that's adorable—and continue to grow our humans, but our bot will do the work behind the scenes 24 hours, providing our staff even more efficient accounts and opportunities to reach the consumer?"

Erin Stewart

Yeah. Back-office automation is so helpful. Taking care of those processes initiated off of things that are happening on the floor or behind the scenes, super helpful.

Amy Perkins

Absolutely. I think we are out of time for today. I will say if there's anyone who has a question that you think of later or we didn't get to, you can email them to me, amy@insideARM.com, as well as any ideas for future webinar topics. I'll take anything you want in my inbox. Just send it to me.

I want to thank you again, Erin, for being here. Insightful, as always.

Erin Stewart

Thank you for having me. Look forward to the next.

Amy Perkins

Absolutely. Speaking of the next, we'll be together July 21 through 23 at the Strategy & Tech conference, digital conference, our first one. I'm excited to go deeper on all things AI when we meet up again then.