



“Now, no distressed caller will ever hear the engaged tone if a volunteer is waiting to help.”

Catherine Johnstone, Samaritans CEO

power to you



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Steve Wrigglesworth, Project Manager, Samaritans Connect

When curate Chad Varah officiated at the funeral of a distressed 14 year-old girl who had taken her own life, he was determined to offer help to people who had nowhere to turn when their lives became unbearable. His vision marked the start of the Samaritans, the world's first 24 hour telephone helpline which took its first call in 1952.

Now Samaritans has 201 branches across the UK with 18,500 volunteers who give their time weekly and often overnight to deal with over five million contacts a year.

Available 24x7, 365 days a year, Samaritans remains the world's only emotional support helpline and its work has become increasingly necessary and effective. With the current economic climate resulting in 2.46 million unemployed, the number of people calling Samaritans with financial worries has increased from 1:10 to 1:8. Someone contacts Samaritans every six seconds; of those, 1 in 5 are suicidal and 75 per cent of suicidal contacts felt that the organisation helped them to decide not to end their lives.

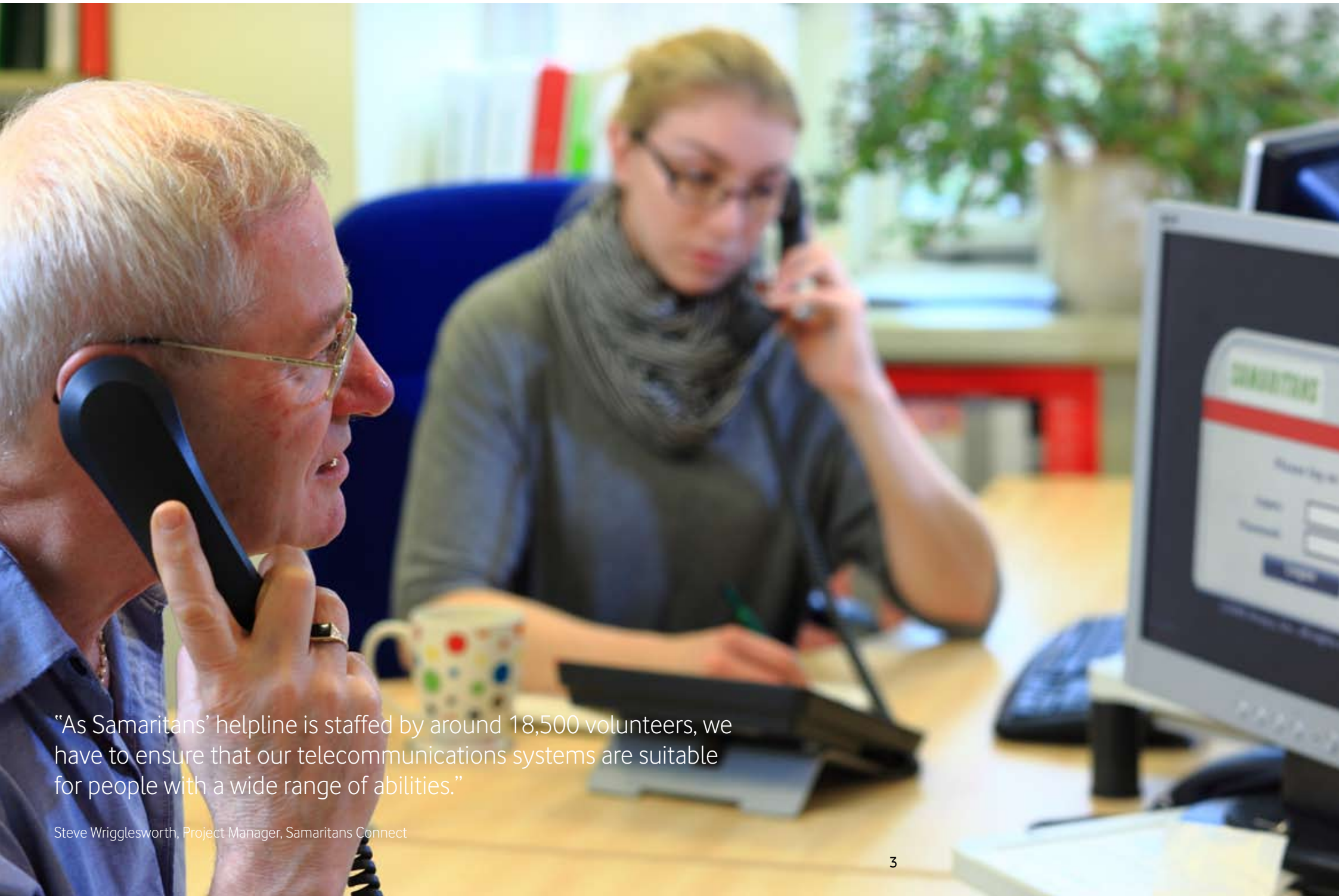
Nowadays, contact is made in many ways such as SMS messaging, email, letter or even face-to-face. In line with the traditional image of Samaritans, the telephone is still its main lifeline but the effectiveness of the service was being compromised by outmoded technology.

Outdated technology

Unlike an everyday commercial contact centre, Samaritans could not queue calls with its old system and people receiving the engaged tone could not get through to speak to someone and would have to ring back. Some 370,000 calls were going to the engaged tone and Samaritans believed that this level was unacceptable. It is a very brave step for someone to pick up the phone to Samaritans and with so many callers being suicidal, calls needed answering first time. With the outdated system, even if volunteers were available, vital calls could not be directed to them and Samaritans believed that unwillingness to ring back a second time was leading to 48,000 lost calls a year.

The organisation needed to collect and record more management information so that for the first time, it would have statistical proof of its success. It wanted to combine telephone, text and email contacts, freeing volunteers to handle other duties such as work in schools and prisons; and it also needed a system that would be cost-effective to run. Samaritans were also facing an anticipated 25 per cent increase in calls and realised that their old system would struggle with such a large increase.

It was decided that new technology was needed and a Project Board was formed to consider the solutions of 17 potential suppliers. This was then reduced to a shortlist of five who could provide the required technical infrastructure and the final decision was to go with Vodafone.



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Innovation is the key

Vodafone's challenge was to design a new Caller Contact Solution that would ensure that calls are answered with minimum delay and would standardise the means by which email and SMS messages are handled through the branches, matching communication methods with the most appropriate volunteers. It aimed to share contacts between volunteers, avoiding overloading some branches when others are underutilised and to create a comprehensive management information solution that would work both historically and in real time and support staffing capacity management.

As well as answering these immediate functional requirements, Samaritans also wanted a partner who had empathy with the cultural and financial characteristics of the organisation. While sophisticated and highly functional, the central platform had to be presented to volunteers in a friendly and familiar way and the change had to be gradual and well managed. The partner also had to recognise that the 200 individual branches rely on donations and are responsible for their own individual solvency.

"As Samaritans' helpline is staffed by around 18,500 volunteers, we have to ensure that our telecommunications systems are suitable for people with a wide range of abilities," says Steve Wrigglesworth, Project Manager, Samaritans Connect. "Another concern for us was that the use of advanced technology could make our long-established service of listening to more than 2.5 millions calls a year from distressed and vulnerable people start to seem more like an automated and impersonal call centre-type service. Vodafone understood our unique needs and proposed a solution which offered a bespoke system tailored to the ethos of our helpline service."

Vodafone's solution is centred on Avaya Communication Manager, an open, scalable, highly reliable and secure telephony application which provides user and system management functionality, intelligent call routing, application integration and extensibility and enterprise communications networking. This is run as a fully managed service and is hosted in a Vodafone Tier One co-location centre.

Sitting in front of the Avaya management tool is the Inbound advanced network-based routing system from Gamma Telecom which not only handles calls for normal delivery to the Avaya system but also provides a resilient routing solution in the event of catastrophic system failure.

Resilient Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) trunking carries call traffic from the public telephone network to the Gamma platform and on to the Avaya system and a Wide Area Network (WAN) connects these systems with the Samaritans General Office.

Optional deployment methods

Samaritans believe that the new Vodafone telephony solution will revolutionise the service and it has been hailed as the most significant project the Samaritans has undertaken since its inception in the 1950s.

Using its sophisticated routing technology, the Avaya system employs a set of pre-defined rules to deliver calls to the most appropriate volunteers. Vodafone has also developed a bespoke interface to handle emails and SMS messages ensuring that target answer times are met.

Two different deployment methods have been created to give branches the freedom to choose a solution that best matches their needs and financial capabilities. Branches can choose to use Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) lines with their existing handsets, avoiding the expense of new network connections and handsets to match their donation income to the investment. Alternatively they can take the blending of contacts to the next level with a private network connection connected to new Internet Protocol (IP) phones and PCs.

"Vodafone has designed a custom-built, robust and reliable system for Samaritans as we update our helpline service to better respond to the millions of calls we receive each year," adds Wrigglesworth. "The infrastructure has been implemented in a virtual centre away from our 201 branches. User-friendly, the system is easy to navigate, but behind this is an incredibly powerful contact centre system used by major banks and other high-volume, confidential service providers. The capabilities of this new platform are vast and this is a huge step forward for Samaritans."

Significant benefits

- An estimated 370,000 distressed callers will no longer hear the engaged tone if a volunteer is available to talk to them
- Providing more readily available help increases the success of the Samaritans' service
- With the new system, Samaritans will easily be able to cope with the anticipated 25 per cent increase in calls that would have crippled the old system
- The organisation will be able to gather more call statistics so, for the first time, it can analyse the efficiency of its service
- Combining separate telephone, text and email shifts will reduce administration and releases volunteers for other duties such as work in schools and prisons
- Running the service will be much more cost effective.
- Contacts can be shared equally between volunteers, making their work more efficient and enabling them to deal with 100,000 extra calls a year.



To find out how your business can gain from better communications, visit: www.vodafone.com and go to our business section or contact your Vodafone account manager today.

