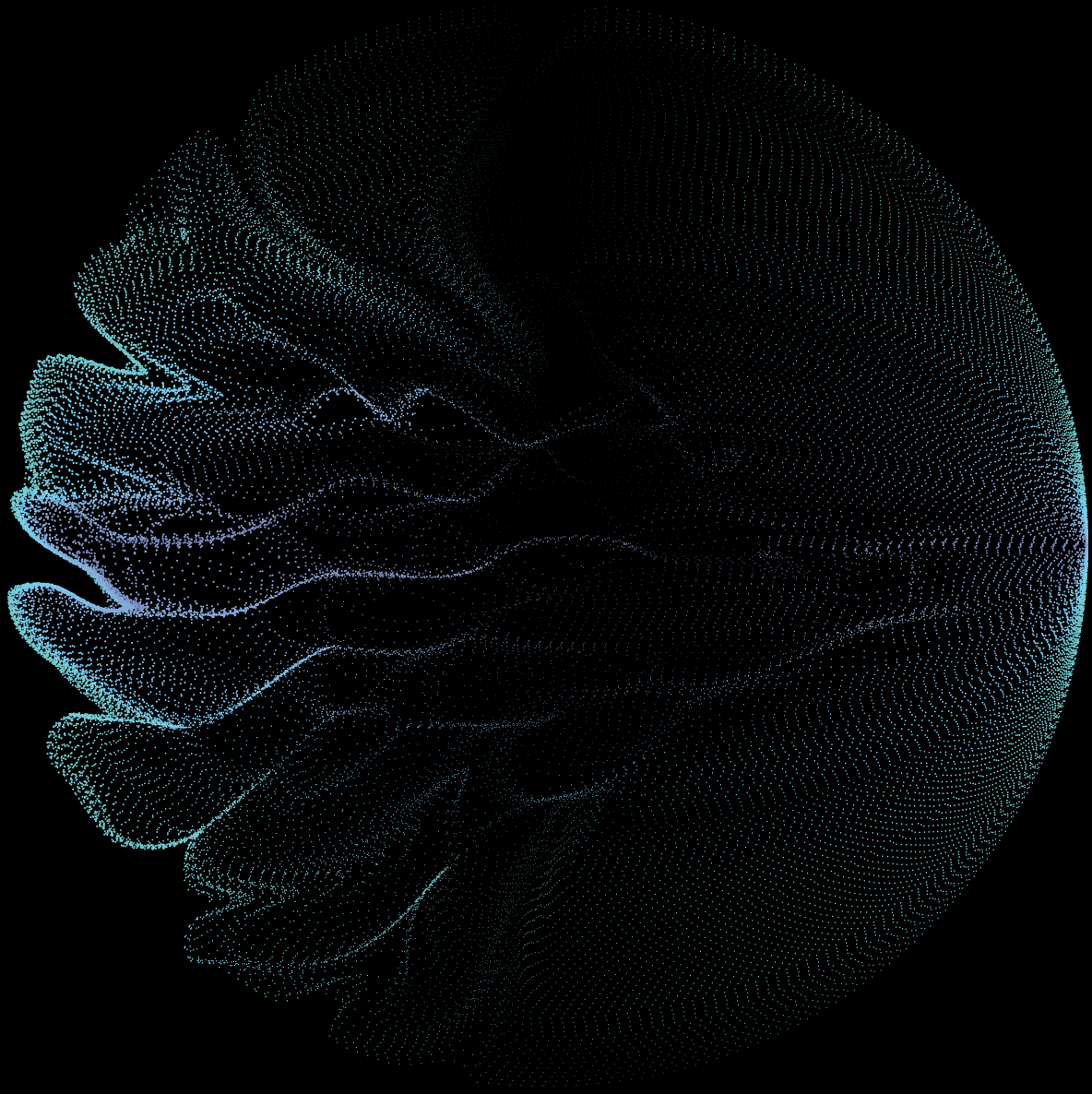


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The Contact Centre of 2030 can't wait, it's now....

Rethink the purpose of centralised contact centres
and the shift toward adaptable operations

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Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted all aspects of life, and contact centres – as the first point of contact for a wide range of issues - were among the earliest and hardest hit. Calls, chat messages, and emails came pouring in as people around the world scrambled for information and help with everything from medical advice and rearranging travel plans, to filing for unemployment benefits and obtaining emergency loans. Meanwhile, contact centres found themselves crippled by COVID-related challenges like employee illness, social distancing requirements, and global disruption of offshore operations. This triggered widespread contact centre service failures, including endless busy signals and days-long hold times.

Today - months into the pandemic - contact volumes and wait times remain high in many sectors. But conditions are in some cases stabilising, and contact centre leaders are starting to think about the future – reviewing their operations to try and avoid similar disruptions when the next crisis hits.

We believe this is a prime opportunity for organisations to take their contact centre capabilities to a much higher level. The COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated that typical continuity plans for contact centres are fundamentally flawed, and that standard contact centre operating models aren't flexible enough to cope with highly unpredictable events. Organisations that simply tweak what they were doing before COVID may be missing out on the chance to shift to more adaptable and resilient ways of working.

By capitalising on recent technology and process innovations, contact centres can help ensure they never get caught flat-footed again, while also improving their ability to serve customers more efficiently and effectively during normal times – whatever 'normal' means in the future.

Plans for gradual innovation towards the somewhat overused (and dreamy) goal of creating 'Contact Centres of the Future' no longer apply.

Instead, contact centres have an immediate need and opportunity to accelerate their progress toward the desired future state and dramatically improve how they interact with customers – achieving much of their 2030 vision for call centres by the end of 2020.

Here's how the new accelerated future of contact centres is likely to unfold.

Plans for gradual innovation towards the somewhat **overused (and dreamy)** goal of creating 'Contact Centres of the Future' no longer apply.

Learning from critical failures at a critical time

Contact centres are on the front line when a crisis hits, and unfortunately the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak caused many to buckle under pressure precisely when they were most needed.

Contact centre continuity plans typically revolve around shifting operations to a different facility that's less affected by the crisis, but the pandemic created a global need for social distancing, meaning no contact centre anywhere in the world was safe from disruption. Nor were many of these contact centres prepared to support the work-from-home operating model that social distancing requires.

A technology platform that could support agents working remotely was a particular, critical need. Many existing platforms couldn't deliver this seemingly simple capability, with the issue compounded by a shortage of the laptops and VPN capacity needed to support large numbers of remote workers. To make matters worse, the global nature of the pandemic meant that in many cases offshore resources weren't available to take up the slack. (In fact, the exact opposite often occurred, with offshore workforce disruptions leaving many contact centre organisations completely agentless).

And while the world is becoming increasingly digital, many people still turn to the humble telephone in times of crisis.

Contact volumes in both the public and private sector spiked as people sought guidance from healthcare providers and insurance companies; called to understand new government policies, or manage financial assets; the list goes on.

This challenging combination of rising contact volumes and impaired contact centre capacity made it difficult or impossible for people to get access to the services and information they needed. For example, one organisations' contact centre's automated voice menu system informed callers that the estimated wait time was 42 hours. In other cases, people trying to file unemployment claims or apply for small business loans called hundreds of times without ever reaching an agent – and all too often the 'lucky' few that did get through were told they needed to call a different number or go to a website to obtain the services they needed.

...while the world is becoming increasingly digital, many people still turn to the humble telephone in times of crisis....



Moving past the crisis

So what's next? The ongoing COVID-19 crisis is prompting organisations to make decisions in the near term that could have significant long-term implications. Yours might be one of them.

So as you think things through, it's important to bear in mind that hasty decisions today could greatly limit how quickly you can improve customer interaction capabilities tomorrow.

To mindfully accelerate your efforts, it's helpful to think about the challenges in three phases: *Respond*, *Recover*, and *Thrive*. Here are more details on each.

...hasty decisions today could greatly limit how quickly you can improve customer interaction capabilities tomorrow...

Stage 1: Respond

Contact centre organisations overwhelmed by COVID-19 naturally responded with urgent tactical actions to address their most obvious and immediate needs. In addition to buying more laptops and increasing VPN capacity, some organisations expanded their pool of agents through crowdsourcing and/or rapidly hiring furloughed employees. Many organisations had no choice but to pull some of their contact centre operations back onshore.

But as the situation has begun to stabilise, a number of immediate questions are emerging that could have a lasting impact on the future of contact centre operations. Do any of these ring true to you?:

1. We've upgraded our IT infrastructure so agents can work from home, but call volumes and wait times still aren't going down. How do we solve this problem now, and avoid it later?
2. How do we ensure our agents can work from anywhere in the future? (This is no longer a binary choice between home vs. office. It's working from home; from the office; from a branch or store; or from repurposed facilities borrowed from less critical parts of the business – just to name a few examples. Given all these new options, are 'hot desks' a thing of the past?)
3. How can we avoid reactively buying thousands of laptops the next time a similar crisis strikes, or needlessly buying them in advance of a crisis that may be years or decades away?
4. How do we avoid the need to hire thousands of additional agents (locally or offshore) to handle a massive spike in contact volume, or to re-open failed communication channels?

5. How can we reduce concentration risk associated with large onshore or offshore contact centres? (i.e., how can we avoid the risk of putting too many eggs in one basket?)

6. How can we rapidly pivot staff to other parts of the business? (In times of crisis, formal roles don't really matter. However, while you might have staff who are well qualified to pitch in, barriers related to technology and workforce agility can impede your efforts to redeploy them).

These questions provide a useful reference point as contact centre organisations move through the Respond stage.

Organisations need to know that whatever the world throws at them, their ability to serve customers will never be disrupted again.

Given this need, the opportunity to reframe customer contact has never been more pressing or compelling. And that reframe starts with a strategic recovery plan.

...whatever the world throws at them, their ability to serve customers will never be disrupted again.

Stage 2: Recover

Although contact volumes and wait times remain high in many sectors, contact centre leaders have started turning their attention from response to recovery – trying to understand what went wrong and how to avoid similar problems in the future. However, when developing a strategy and roadmap, it's important not to fixate on the specific tactical responses that were needed to address problems that arose during the COVID-19 crisis, but instead to think strategically about the capabilities and flexibility that will be needed to thrive in the new normal – while at the same time positioning your operations to cope with the next crisis, which could be very different.

In other words: If you simply tweak what you were doing pre-COVID, you might miss a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shift to more adaptable and resilient ways of working.

The COVID-19 crisis helped illuminate and eliminate a variety of existing issues, including excessive bureaucracy, antiquated security requirements, and sub-optimal offshore processes. Meanwhile, technology innovations are enabling better outcomes at lower cost than the traditional approach of using offshore labor.

At this stage, the majority of contact centre organisations are now looking at scalable, data-driven contact centre technology platforms that can enable them to recover quickly and future-proof their operations. This can help address the first three questions from the Respond stage, which largely revolve around supporting agents with technology that enables them to work efficiently and effectively from anywhere.

Contact volume increases should not lead to increased wait times. Customer contact capabilities that are adaptive and responsive can help avoid the crush by anticipating customer needs and addressing them proactively.

The key to success is abstracting how contact services are delivered, so the desired customer outcomes can be achieved in a variety of ways without necessarily relying on a human agent located at a specific physical facility. Customers should be able to get most of their service needs met without having to interact with a human agent; agents should be able to work from anywhere that's appropriate; and organisations need to stop creating single-purpose facilities (for example: people located at the head office or a branch should be able to serve as contact centre agents). Knowledge should be readily available, so reskilling is easy – enabling contact centre organisations to quickly add staff from outside sources or other parts of the enterprise.

...you might miss a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shift to more adaptable and resilient ways of working...

Stage 2: Recover (continued)

Get the recovery phase of customer contact wrong, and your organisation may never thrive.

Here are some key focus areas to help you start thinking about getting it right:

- Redesign the work (and workforce) to match the recovery environment. Question the wisdom of moving all functions back offshore. Now might also be the right time to eradicate bad processes and/or invest in increased automation, digitisation, and self-service.
- Accelerate virtual and cloud enablement using tools that completely abstract the customer outcome from the human agent (and the agent from the physical environment).
- Open all channels – e.g., voice, chat, WhatsApp, WeChat, Apple Business Chat – to make it easier for customers to contact you through however, whenever and wherever they prefer.
- Integrate channels, providing real-time, channel-agnostic customer interactions whereby customers can start in one channel and be passed to a different channel accompanied by the full context of the current interaction so they don't have to repeatedly provide the same information.
- Automate or deflect call types and transactions based on what the customer wants to do – using authentication and intelligent routing to reduce the volume of calls that require handling by agents (thus freeing agents to focus on the customer and on providing great service). High volume, low-value calls (e.g., password reset, lost card, order status, FAQs) are not satisfying for the customer nor the agent and should be resolvable through natural language interaction or other digital channels.

- Accept the fact that the telephone won't be going away anytime soon. How can you nudge customers towards digital and other channels, whilst maintaining the customer connection?

Contact centres today have an immediate and valuable opportunity to implement a new baseline model for work, workers, and the workplace - underpinned by recent and emerging technology innovations. Implementing these innovative platforms now can generate significant benefits today while also paving the way for an accelerated tomorrow – all with minimal disruption to existing operations. In other words: **these steps can set you up to thrive.**

Get the recovery phase of customer contact wrong, and your organisation may never thrive.

Stage 3: Thrive

This stage focuses on taking customer contact to the next level. Below we have outlined nine key focus areas that every organisation should be considering if they are to thrive. These all centre around abstracting the customer outcome from the agent, the agent from the facility, scalability and responsiveness to change, and providing an enhanced level of connectedness through hyper personalisation and data driven proactive customer interactions – addressing the six key questions organisations are asking in the wake of a crisis (see Respond stage).

Key focus areas:



Develop a revised perspective on what's possible in customer interactions. You might be pleasantly surprised to learn what advanced capabilities already exist to support the next normal.



Scale up new ways of working, along with new digital and physical channels. Re-evaluate your views about work, workers, and the workplace. What is the work to be done, how will your people do it, and from where can they do it?



Preserve the human element. People need help, and need to talk to real people sometimes – especially in a crisis. There will always be a need for human agents, not just bots and AI.



Data will be at the centre of future customer interactions, so your organisation needs to use data to create amazing customer experiences while simultaneously being very conscious of privacy and regulatory requirements. Whether pre-populating customer information and presenting real-time advice to agents or exposing your core systems to AI, data is the oil that creates a smooth customer experience.



Enable accelerated innovation. New cloud-based contact centre technology platforms are architected around open programming languages like JavaScript and Python, improving agility and opening the door to innovation from hundreds of millions of developers. On the other hand, traditional and legacy contact centre technologies rely on outdated or proprietary languages that restrict the talent pool and make innovation difficult. Move to technologies that embrace the cloud.



Make everything in the organisation flexible and scalable. You shouldn't have to build your infrastructure around a minimum or maximum number of agents, calls, or desks and chairs. In fact, capacity shouldn't be a factor in your decision-making at all – it should just be there when you need it. This is only possible and financially feasible with cloud-based technologies and a new vision of how work is done.



Accelerate the development and deployment of innovative business, digital, and technology capabilities. The COVID-19 crisis is going to kickstart a new wave of digitisation; however, you need to ensure the resulting changes are part of a broader transformation that respects how people want to interact with your organisation. Not everyone has or wants access to digital channels.



Let customers communicate with your organisation through whatever channel(s) they prefer. This might involve multiple channels in the course of a single interaction.



Serve customers when and where they want to be served, not when and where you want to serve them. Also, be proactive and anticipate the needs of your customers. Go to them; they shouldn't have to come to you.

Future-proofing customer contact

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a wake-up call for contact centres around the world, a sharp reminder that even in today's increasingly digital world, human interaction can be a necessity rather than a luxury.

As organisations begin to develop roadmaps for their future contact centre capabilities, they need to balance a careful consideration of the lessons learned from the crisis with developing future-proof customer contact capabilities that are flexible and scalable enough to tackle whatever the future might hold and open the door to new market opportunities.

Decisions made today can greatly limit or enhance a contact centre operation's future capabilities and strategic options, so it's important to choose wisely. In

particular, decision-makers should avoid the pitfall of following the swing of the pendulum from pre-COVID extremes (heavy emphasis on fixed contact centres, offshore resources, etc.) to current extremes (sending everyone home, pulling processes back onshore, etc.) – only to have it swing back again.

To thrive in the new normal (and to be positioned for the next crisis) contact centres will likely need to embrace an adaptable approach, including: agents working from wherever makes sense; reduced concentration risk; flexible organisations, facilities, and roles; and a next-generation cloud-based and data-driven technology platform that can provide the required flexibility while capitalising on innovations that enable deeper, more pro-active interactions with customers.

In fact, it's likely the next contact centre won't be a centre at all, but instead a distributed network of agents and technologies that can deliver service from anywhere in the world while at the same time serving customers through whatever channels they prefer – whenever and wherever they want to be served.

And that's a future everyone can look forward to.

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[Click here](#) to find out how we can help you deliver unparalleled customer experience.



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