



Bringing it all together

From agent to expert

The future of the
contact centre advisor



A white paper from BT Global Services

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From agent to expert – the future of the contact centre advisor

Executive Summary

The agent is becoming increasingly central to the delivery of customer experience within the contact centre. However, with customers becoming more demanding and less satisfied with the contact centre experience, the agent often gets caught in the management of contradictions as they try to balance the demands of the organisation (increase efficiency) with the needs of the customer (get service).

As we move into the future the call centre agent needs to become more than a transaction processor, adding little value, and move into the role of an advisor and, ultimately, an expert.

In the 'mass production' model of contact centre management, the agent often becomes the scapegoat as businesses are increasingly unable to handle the complexity of contact centre contacts. Self service technologies shift the simple, mundane transactions away from the contact centre. The growth of multimedia calls increase the complexity of the contact centre queues and the skill sets required to deal with them.

In the mass production contact centre industry, time is money and measures drive an emphasis on efficiency and economic value. Faster is better. Costs are to be driven out. Speed equals efficiency, time and cost savings. This creates the contradictions of quality verses quantity as customers are disappointed with the trade-off between cost of service and the service itself, and customer service advisors contend with managing increasing demand whilst maintaining quality standards.

Contact centre agents are often part of a system that causes them to mistreat customers. Rules and policies put pressure on agents and the costs include undue stress – resulting in turnover, morale and hostile treatment of customers.

The human factor in the call centre production line is expected to maintain maximal efficiency, regardless of the stresses and strains of emotional labour. However, strategies such as self service reduces the routine, mundane contacts and strategies such as customer relationship management (CRM) start to make the human qualities of the contact centre interaction more central. From a purely cost focused perspective, this makes 'transactions' less efficient. However, by allowing advisors to add their own intelligence and skills to the interaction, it can make them more effective.

The weaknesses in the mass production model are that it:

Is designed from organisation-out rather than customer-in

- It treats the contact centre as a cost rather than an investment.
- It measures cost per transaction.
- It ignores what customers value and true customer value.

Tends to treat agents as automata

- It ignores the human ability to add value to the contact through complex problem solving skills, empathy and expertise.
- It assumes that agents work efficiently and unemotionally throughout the day.
- It limits agent autonomy.

Oversimplifies the increasing complexity in transactions

- Works well for simple, high volume tasks.
- It tends to overemphasise statistical measures at the expense of experience.
- It assumes a conversation can be 'optimised'.

Causes management blame the person not the system

- Setting and monitoring work standards, productivity and procedures can hide the real reason for calls and cause high levels of cost of failure.
- Management is by inspection.

Tends to undermine agent motivation

- It uses a carrot and stick model of motivation.
- Much effort expended by both management and agents on playing the system rather than improving the customer experience.
- It is a monotonous job.
- An environment where there is high demand and low control tends to result in stress, high levels of churn and low levels of employee investment.

For contact centres to survive, the industry needs to fundamentally shift towards a model that can cope with variety, complexity and personalisation.

'Mass Customisation' allows the customisation and personalisation of the customer interaction for individual customers at a mass production price. This model is characterised by high levels of agent autonomy and empowerment – they become advisors. It focuses on creating stable but flexible processes delivering tailored and empathetic interactions between advisors and customers.

Mass customised contact centres aim to deliver effective, high quality, personalised customer experiences using flexible processes, customer knowledge from the various CRM and knowledge systems and a higher degree of employee autonomy, knowledge and empowerment. It doesn't ignore the need for efficiency, productivity, high quality, low costs, and high responsiveness but goes about it in a very different way than the mass production model. High levels of first time resolution and customer satisfaction are the norm as is reduced cost of failure demand (i.e. less firefighting). Employee motivation and satisfaction measures are higher than average, while attrition and absenteeism are typically low.

So if the mass customised model is more fit for purpose in this era of complexity, why are 84% of UK contact centres still operating under mass production principles? [16]

The following seem to be factors inhibiting the industry from embracing mass customisation:

The concepts are often outside management's comfort zone.

- Contact centre is often at the margins of an organisation rather than the hub.
- Customer service is often not represented on the board and is often ignored.
- Management find it easier to manage with productivity stats (even if they bear no resemblance to reality).
- There is often a silo mentality with no one person managing the end-to-end delivery costs.
- There is a fear of losing control of costs.
- It implies a need to understand end-to-end service delivery.

It requires a BIG mindset and culture change – in both agents and managers.

- The contact centre has been accustomed to having a victim mentality.
- Managers don't trust the front line.
- It requires different advisor and management skills in terms of commerciality and the ability to look beyond statistics.

It is perceived as being more expensive.

- However, overall organisational cost to serve is reduced with the focus on eliminating cost of failure and waste.
- Traditional transactional contact centre costs may go up.
- Costs of customer and employee churn will go down.

The ultimate long-term model for customer contact, however, is simply to put customers in contact with the best person to solve their problem wherever they are – this is the 'networked expert'.

This model also sounds the death knell potentially of the centralised contact centre. Experts could be anyone or anywhere. This requires the organisation to have a greater understanding of skills and expertise available to them. It also requires more intelligent skills based routing and different methods of managing workflow and end-to-end process accountability.

This also links with other trends such as 'homesourcing' – i.e. networking people into the virtual contact centre from home – and 'rightsourcing' – i.e. getting the right talent to deal with customers regardless of where they are located in the world.

This paper discusses the increasingly critical role of the human advisor in the future contact centre and urges the contact centre industry to change – or risk extinction.

Introduction

Contact centres have long been a convenient solution for businesses to centralise their customer's telephone contacts. Customers, however, are getting more demanding of service as companies come under increasing pressure to cut service costs. Contact centre employees are also becoming increasingly transient as they become less satisfied with their experience. All these things mean that the contact centre industry needs to take a step back and reconsider its position.

Contact centres are widely reviled by both consumers (being listed in a recent survey of consumer hates from the National Consumer Council [1]) and the employees working in them (with contact centre work being in the top 3 of the UK's most stressful professions according to the British Psychological Society [2]).

As we move into the future the agent needs to become more than a transaction processor, adding little value, and move into the role of advisor and, ultimately, expert.

The traditional contact centre model operates under two conflicting logics [3]. The first is the need to be cost efficient. 66% and 48% of contact centre managers respectively said that cost reduction was their primary driving force [4 & 5]. Customer experience or service delivery was ranked 3rd in both surveys, behind increasing sales/revenues. This implies the dominant organisation drivers are increasing the speed of throughput and reducing costs.

However, the second fundamentally contradictory position is the desire to be customer oriented which emphasises the need for a quality customer experience. The need to respond to market conditions and operational strategies means that contact centres are subject to a pendulum swing between the need to manage costs and need to be customer oriented [6].

The contact centre is caught in the centre of the 'Demand Delta' [7]; the gap between customers' increasing expectations and organisations' ability to deliver service. The level of demand and expectation for customer communications is growing faster than the capabilities of organisations to deliver these needs or their willingness to commit to a customer focused experience.

With both customers and employees becoming more dissatisfied with contact centres, this report looks at the next 5 years of the industry and beyond and considers what the future might hold for the contact centre and, specifically, what it might hold for the contact centre advisor.

Methodology

During May and June 2006, the authors conducted 19 structured interviews with a number of industry analysts, academics and contact centre operational managers. They also ran 6 focus groups with front line agents. Views were obtained from across industry segments (including telecoms, utilities, retail, finance and government). An extensive trawl through the available literature was also undertaken to spot general industry trends and commentaries.

Contact centre models

1. What do customers want from a contact centre?

“I think that the average consumers’ tolerance for poor service is going to reduce. So driving better levels of quality is going to be a matter of survival. What we see today as best practices are going to be hygiene factors in five years time” – Contact centre Director.

The biggest question in future contact centre evolution is not about how they can support the inevitable influx of different types of media, but how they can deliver the high levels of customer experience that customers are coming to demand and expect.

The telephony only contact centre of today is generally not delivering the experience that customers want or need. A recent survey by Bain and co [8] found that 80% of businesses believed that they were delivering superior levels of service but only 8% of their customers agreed with them!

Contact centres provide the human face of the organisation. They should give customers the ability to talk to knowledgeable and friendly people who have ample supplies of reassurance, problem solving skills, opportunities for relationship building and the ability to inform buying decisions. They present the “personality of the firm to the customer over the telephone” [9]. They are the hub of all interactions with the customer.

Customer experience of contact centres varies with only 50% of customers reporting a good or excellent experience [7].

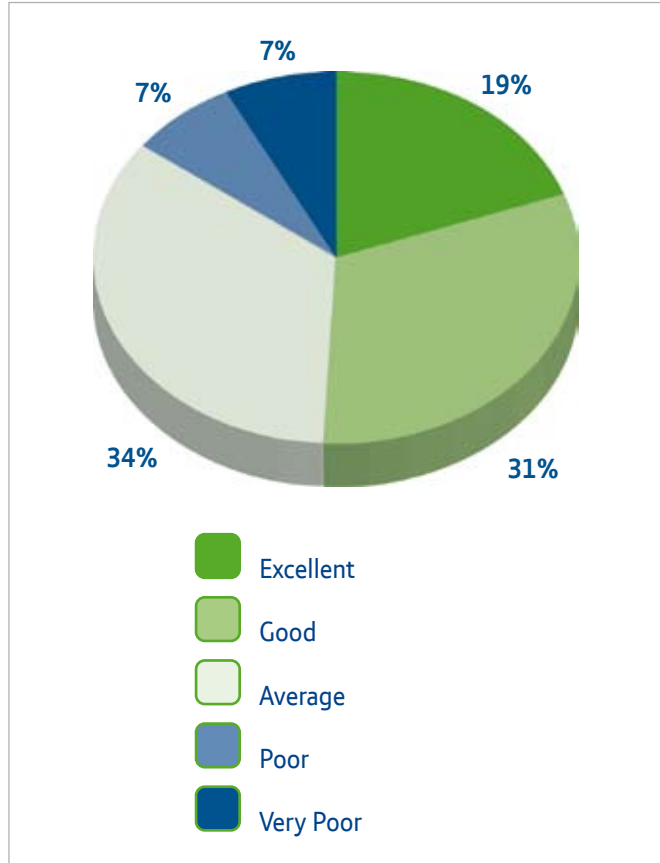


Figure 1: Customer experiences with contact centres [7].

The moans listed by customers are well defined in the research literature:

- Having to wait longer than ever to have their call answered.
- Being kept waiting on premium rate numbers is frustrating.
- IVR systems are criticised as being too complex.
- When you do get through, advisors don’t know their stuff.

However, research has also concluded that there is a large gulf between what the customer expects from customer service and what the service provider thinks the customer expects. Keeping the customer satisfied is more than simply answering the call within three rings. Customers are willing to wait a little longer to be served if the person that answers the phone is well trained and able to solve their problems [10].

Customers’ expectations are based around the following:

1. Convenience/ accessibility – make it easy for me to get what I want.
2. Reliability/ trust – if a promise is made it is kept.
3. Assurance – I have confidence in the promises made.
4. Responsiveness – the process responds and adapts to my needs and doesn’t waste my time.
5. Personalisation – the service recognises me as an individual.

Customers not only want service to be efficient, they also want it to be effective. Effective services demand adaptation and adaptability, relevance and variability and a recognition of the customer as a human being with a particular identity and defining characteristics. These are precisely the things that a typical contact centre process model is designed to eliminate or ignore.

Customers’ purchasing decisions are not usually the result of pure logic. Other factors, which have more to do with the heart than the head, come into play [11]. Yet, when it comes to designing the customer experience, emotion is only usually a factor in advertising, it is rarely considered in the way that a company designs its contact centre strategy, processes or systems [12]. It is this emotional crevasse that often causes the gap between customer expectation (built up by marketing promises and other service expectations) and reality (a result of operational design for efficiency). Customers are often left disappointed with the trade-off between the cost of service and the service itself.

2. Models of the future contact centre

The Demand Delta trade off between cost, control and quality produces three general types of contact centre model and contact centre employee. All of these models have strengths and weaknesses in dealing with complexity, delivering value and customer satisfaction.

These models are:

- Mass Production – the Agent.
- Mass Customisation – the Advisor.
- Networked Expert – the Expert.

2.1. A mass production model: The Agent

“The contact centre mission statement: ‘We take lots and lots of calls really, really fast’ – Industry analyst.

Mass production is based on a business model adopted from the manufacturing industry. It is based on centralised control, rigorous process definition and employee compliance [13,14,15 & 16].

This model works well in a world without complexity and where calls can be easily categorised and processed – as one industry analyst commented: “as much as people complain about contact centres they are actually very effective in managing large volumes of fairly predictable types of customers and calls”. However, the model starts to fall down in a world where customers no longer behave according to their demographic and the simple calls are automated out by self-service systems. This has a tendency to shift the call patterns into the contact centre into the less routine, complex enquiries that the mass production model simply cannot handle well.

A mass production contact centres’ goal is to maximise throughput, deliver uniformity and minimise costs. This is rooted in a cost, not revenue, based model where little customer value is generated and transactions are generally simple and highly repetitive. One analyst cynically criticised this model as being a product of a system “designed by accountants and built by IT people”. This view was reinforced by a customer experience strategy director: “Behind every decision not in favour of the customer, there is a deranged chief financial officer!”

Despite these views, mass production is the dominant model in the contact centre industry representing 84% of UK contact centres [16].

Employees in this model behave as if they are automata – agents processing calls to stringent call handling times, unable to own the whole process, empathise with customers or have a long-term view. As one agent put it: “we’re chickens; battery hens aren’t we”. Personalisation and responsiveness depend upon the agent being able to vary and tailor the experience they deliver to the needs of individual customers, but mass production demands uniformity and inflexibility. They will either be unable or disinclined to take overall responsibility for the end-to-end process and, therefore, the total customer experience – as one agent stated: “I wouldn’t mind helping every customer out but if it is nothing to do with sales it just gets passed on”. Customers, as a result, are unlikely to have confidence in the ‘promises’ they’re given.

“It is the demand of contact centre management for control and uniformity on the one hand, and their desire for quality interactions based on variability and adaptability on the other that is the central paradox faced by today’s contact centres” – CM Insight [16].

The strongest characteristic of mass production isn’t its ability to deal with high volumes of transactions, but the means by which it does so; by reducing variation and encouraging uniformity using techniques taken from the manufacturing industry production line. These processes are data driven, rational and analytical. They focus on conformance to requirements, which are generally specified in functional terms. Uniformity is directly equated to quality, which is undermined by variation. The problem, when this model is translated to contact centres, is that human conversation is all about variation, appropriateness, empathy and adaptability. Reducing emotions and experiences to a statistic that is Critical to Quality (CTQ), measured and controlled is not a simple task. A completely unspontaneous, mechanistic and unvarying conversation is not generally one that we value – yet is often the ‘gold standard’ aspired to by many contact centres’ quality monitoring guidelines.

The mass production approach has historically displayed two intrinsic flaws:

1. It has largely ignored the critical role that the employee plays in the delivery of customer experience. In manufacturing there is no extensive contact between the employee and the customer and the result is a product rather than an experience. It assumes that employees work optimally, efficiently and unemotionally throughout the day – like automata – despite the rigours of talking to customers.
2. It underestimates the impact of the managerial environment on the employee. In this model, contact centre managers are essentially inspectors. It has assumed that, in order to ‘fix’ a problem, it is necessary to ‘fix’ the person, rather than the ‘system’ in which they operate. As a consequence, management becomes concerned with setting and monitoring of work standards, productivity and procedures.

People tend to support the belief that people are the primary cause of poor performance rather than the system in which they work: “Everybody always thinks that it’s the contact centre advisor’s fault. However, the contact centre didn’t send out 150,000 red reminders out 3 days too early and didn’t tell anyone! The industry hasn’t sorted out the difference between failure cost that is arriving at the contact centre because of the imperfections of the product or service, versus those that the contact centre doesn’t manage properly (which I call “pooping in their own nest”)", Customer experience strategy director.

There are many things that are out of the agent’s control that govern how effective they are in doing their job. These include:

- The nature of calls.
- The nature of the problem – no two customers are the same and no two calls are the same.
- The availability (or lack) of information/training.
- The behaviour of other parts of the organisation.
- Procedures that may or may not be helpful.
- Fire fighting as a result of ‘cost of failure’.

In terms of the mass production agent profile, they are generally young and transient workers, such as students, and agency workers on temporary contracts. Pay is low (as one agent says “you pay peanuts, you get monkeys”), with bonuses and commissions used to incentivise higher productivity. As a result, mass production contact centre jobs are designed to fragment and deskill tasks, increase standardisation of transactions through standards and scripting and eliminate the need for firm specific knowledge – since training is generally minimal.

Employees tend to experience a degradation in working conditions with increased pacing and volumes of work, routinisation of work practices and increased stress through the classic psychological precursors of high demand and low control.

In an attempt to bridge the chasm between the management of the operation and the goals of the business, productivity based KPIs (key performance indicators) are enforced. However, applied blindly, these often serve to drive behaviours that are detrimental to the customer experience (such as ‘call bouncing’, where advisors hang up on customers if their query is too difficult to deal with or they have exceeded their call handling time).

Mass production is a model that is good at processing short, simple transactions. However, the world of contact handling is one of increasing complexity and rising customer expectations.

In the light of this, why is mass production still the dominant model used in the contact centre industry? Thompson and Callaghan [18] sum it up: “Most of the contact centre industry has been developed as a way to increase productivity through economies of scale. The organisational mindset, facilitated by innovative technologies has, from the beginning, been used to simplify and routinise tasks and establish tight control and surveillance mechanisms. No matter what technological developments are introduced, unless there is a fundamental shift in the way work is organised, it is unlikely jobs done in customer contact centres of the future are going to require greater skills or be any more rewarding, than much of the contact centre work of the present”.

2.2. A mass customisation model: The Advisor

“Faced with the growing range of new products and services, we believe that many customers will increasingly seek the reassurance of human contacts” – Ovum, 2006 [19].

‘Mass Customisation’ is the customisation and personalisation of products and services for individual customers at a mass production price. A ‘Mass Customisation Model’ [13,14 & 16] is characterised by high levels of employee autonomy and empowerment. Agents become advisors.

This model is focused on creating stable but flexible processes delivering tailored and empathetic interactions between advisors and customers. Mass customised contact centres aim to deliver effective, high quality, personalised customer experiences using flexible processes, customer knowledge from the various CRM and knowledge systems and a higher degree of employee autonomy, knowledge and empowerment. It doesn’t ignore the need for efficiency, productivity, high quality, low costs, and high responsiveness but goes about it in a very different way than the mass production model. High levels of first time resolution and customer satisfaction are the norm. Employee motivation and satisfaction measures are higher than average, while attrition and absenteeism are typically low.

Costs in this model are not managed through simply counting transactions and volumes of calls but by measuring and eliminating waste (and cost) through the identification of ‘cost of failure’ demand (characterised by measures such as first contact resolution). Ignorance of the nature of demand (i.e. WHY customers are calling) and ignorance of the causes of variation in the performance of contact centre advisors (e.g. stress, overload, systems problems) can all easily be ignored when all calls are treated simply as units of work under the mass production model.

Calls can be categorised as ‘value’ (productive calls for both the customer and the organisation) and ‘non value’ (due to ‘cost of failure’ which comes from people either calling because something unexpected has happened (e.g. a web page has crashed half way through a booking) or something expected has not happened (e.g. a package hasn’t arrived)). It has been estimated that up to 70% of calls into contact centres represent non-value/cost of failure demand [20]. This explains why mass production contact centres are often fire fighting rather than looking at delivering improved levels of customer experience.

Tracking cost of failure also starts to recognise that the service delivery process is a chain of interdependent parts which are all working to deliver the customers’ needs:

“It’s not just about contact centre optimisation any more, but the entire customer process. True quality must extend beyond the contact centre to every person, program and process that shapes and influences the customer experience. Companies today need to improve not only customer service, but also operational performance and quality objectives” – Contact centre operations director.

When the contact centre is treated as the hub of that delivery system, driving the business from the customers' perspective, the potential for improving performance becomes easier. Hand in hand with this is the need for companies to understand how and why back office processes effect service delivery and customer satisfaction.

This harnesses the ingenuity of the front line. They are the eyes and the ears of the organisation and can be used to contribute to, learn about and improve the customer experience, rather than spend all their time fighting against the system. Problems identified that are within the team's control can be actioned by the team. Those beyond the team's control should be actioned by the manager to another part of the service delivery chain.

Under the mass customisation model, management's focus changes from managing people – ensuring that people do as they 'should' – to managing people as one aspect of the total system – understanding and improving how well the work flows, end-to-end, to fulfil the customers' demands. This requires a broader commercial focus in the mindset of the contact centre manager than is largely evident today. Commenting on contact centre management, one analyst expressed concern about the appropriateness of skills in the average contact centre manager: "There is a complete lack of strategic and commercial competence in contact centre management. They say 'we'd like to manage customer experience' and then you look at the reality. The gap between the two is so large; the disconnect is just enormous. We don't equip our contact centre managers with either the skills or status or the mandate to do much about it. There is some blame to be placed on the managers themselves for not stepping up to the plate", Industry analyst.

Since performance is governed by the system and not the people. If a customer makes a demand on a system and the system recognises and does what matters to that customer, service improves and costs fall. This is an idea that traditional managers find counter-intuitive, as they have always equated service with cost.

These are the key differences between the approaches of mass production verses mass customisation:

Mass production thinking		Mass customisation thinking
Organisation-Out.	Perspective.	Customer-In.
Functional specialisation.	Design.	Demand, value and flow.
Contact centre at periphery of organisation. Command and control management.	Decision-making.	Contact centre as hub. Front line empowerment (within specified boundaries).
Related to budget, maximising throughput and cutting costs. Quality monitoring against set operational metrics.	Measures.	Related to customer and delivering (cost effective) experience. Quality measures done against key customer oriented metrics.
Contractual.	Attitude to customers.	Emphasis on long term loyalty and word of mouth.
Extrinsic (incentives). Greater overhead in terms of policing and monitoring targets.	Motivation of people / Rewards.	Intrinsic (pride). Lifestyle benefits (better work: life balance, career development etc).
Limited advisor empowerment. Limited areas of responsibility. High number of escalations. Greater employee turnover. Comparatively lower productivity, first contact resolution and quality of experience.	Resources.	Greater recognition of cost of failure demand. More effective use of advisor resource. Higher first time resolution, less need for escalation, lower turnover of staff and higher quality of experience.
Geared for high churn. Increased use of contract staff and outsourcing/ offshoring. Recruitment meets basic level of production competence. Little investment in training.	Recruitment.	Recruit attitude, train skill. Emphasis on coaching and development. Higher performance from advisor base.
Emphasis on standard delivery of service. Regular refresher training required. Staff churn means that knowledge is often lost.	Training.	Higher initial investment in training. Emphasis on soft skills. Boundaries of empowerment clearly defined. Training reinforced by availability of self-led or eLearning packages.
Ad hoc coaching process. Tends to be short term focused. Larger team sizes to reduce management overhead.	Management / Coaching.	Longer-term development plans in place. Team leaders highly competent coaches. Smaller teams.

If an organisation understands why a customer calls in ('demand') from the customer's point of view, it should also understand what matters to the customer ('value'). If the organisation then deals with that work ('flow') in the most efficient way, by just doing the value work, service improves, the relationship is built and costs fall

because failure work is minimised. As one analyst put it: "Contact centres need to recognise they are not a recognisable valuable entity as customers don't perceive themselves as calling a contact centre, they perceive themselves to be calling the organisation".

The role of the manager shifts from policing to coaching and mentoring – “I think the team leader is going to go even further down the coach and performance manager route”, states one operations director. Their role is to work continuously with their advisors to identify and anticipate failures in existing processes and systems and work closely with the rest of the business to fix them in order to improve the overall customer experience. They and the contact centre are seen as major drivers of service quality. The primary measures used to manage performance relate to the achievement of those business results, rather than introspective and cost focused productivity measures. According to one strategy manager, customer service should also have a greater voice on the board of companies – “I am dismayed at how many organisations do not have customer service represented on their board – but this is increasing”.

New technology should be used to complement, rather than substitute, for labour. This requires a shift in core contact centre technologies:

“I think right now all of the attention is on performance management and I think enabling technologies are the way forward – enabling you to do your job properly, enabling you to choose where you do your job from, enabling organisations to quickly get access to customer information cleverly by thinking about the enabling technology before putting it in. It is not just enabling the advisor, it is enabling data and information to be funnelled into lots of different envelopes. We have lost that in the contact centre and nobody knows what to do with all of the different information it has become more cumbersome. Contact centre workers today are knowledge workers – they just don’t have the right tools to support them. The tools are the bit that is missing” – Contact centre industry strategist.

Good knowledge management tools are critical to this model. There is always too much to learn and remember and there is a limit to the amount of training any one advisor can undertake. As one industry strategist commented: “I think that the challenge for the advisor is that as the information that they are going to have to absorb grows, the time they have to absorb it diminishes”. This starts to emphasise tools such as intelligent directories and increasingly sophisticated search technologies (such as semantic search engines – which search on meaning and context rather than simply keywords).

Studies have shown that the adoption of the mass customisation model has led to better contact centre performance [16,21,22 & 23]. CM Insight [16] discovered that organisations that encourage autonomy among frontline employees delivered customer interactions which were judged as being 6-10% better than those that were allowed little or no discretion.

This included:

- Positive call handler attitude (enthusiasm, interest, confidence, attentiveness).
- Socio-emotional behaviours (politeness, friendliness, helpfulness).
- Call handling skills (listening skills and questioning skills).
- Successful call outcomes (call objectives fulfilled, positive image presented).

They also found that, when management takes a systematic approach to quality and a facilitatory role with staff, the quality of customer interactions is between 6% and 13% higher than those where the old ‘control, compliance and standardisation’ management approach is used. It was also found that, the larger the team, the poorer the quality of the call outcome. Depending on the size of the team, call quality is between 9% and 21% lower than in small teams.

In centres that used high levels of automation (e.g. IVR), the quality of the customer interaction was found to be between 8% and 14% lower than in those that don’t [16]. This is not because the use of automation is bad per se, but that it is most frequently used to drive efficiency and productivity rather than support quality. IVR, when badly designed, can cause huge cost of failure demand, as the advisors noted:

“I think that when a customer is pressing options they should be a lot easier to understand. A customer is getting through by just pressing ‘1, 1, 1, 1’ they don’t want to listen to the options. Then they just get through to sales – that is how sales is getting a lot of rubbish and we just have to keep on transferring calls out”.

While each of the findings is significant in isolation, when combined their impact is massive. Frontline autonomy, supportive management and small teams can have over a 40% positive impact on the quality of the customer interaction.

Why aren’t more people doing mass customisation?

However, despite the promise of mass customisation, there is significant resistance in adopting it as an industry standard model.

The following seem to be factors inhibiting the industry from embracing mass customisation:

The concepts are often outside management’s comfort zone.

- Contact centre is often at the margins of an organisation rather than the hub.
- Customer service is often not represented on the board and is often ignored.
- Management find it easier to manage with productivity stats (even if they bear no resemblance to reality).
- There is often a silo mentality with no one person managing the end-to-end delivery costs.
- There is a fear of losing control of costs.
- It implies a need to understand end-to-end operations.

It requires a BIG mindset and culture change – in both agents and managers.

- The contact centre has been accustomed to having a victim mentality.
- Managers don’t trust the front line.
- It requires different advisor and management skills in terms of commerciality and the ability to look beyond statistics.

It is perceived as being more expensive.

- However, overall organisational cost to serve is reduced with the focus on eliminating cost of failure and waste.
- Traditional transactional contact centre costs may go up.
- Costs of customer and employee churn will go down.

These doubts were reflected in some cynicism from our interview panel about change. Comments included:

“The worst case scenario is that the industry remains as it is. I would be surprised if there are any contact centre agents in the future. If you find a better job you would take it. The better scenario is that if the industry would change, then the role of the advisor would become much more important because the advisor would become the repository of knowledge and they will become very close to what consultants are today. They would be doing an interesting job and they would be trying to make a career out of it. They would feedback to the company. They will be much more skilled, much more trained, with a minimum requirement for education. This is what they should be. I am not sure this is what they will become” – Academic.

“You’re asking me what I will see in the future, well I reckon it will be pretty much the same; perhaps a few new carpets!” – Advisor.

The problem, once again, is to do with the balance between cost and customer service. As one customer experience strategist espoused:

“The issue that we’ve got as an industry is to create a compelling story in financial terms to back up what we know to be true. If engaged employees create happy customers and happy customers stay with you and spend more, why don’t we start to invest in all of the above?”

One of the problems is persuading managers that they will not lose control of costs with this model. One strategy director summed up the industry’s concerns:

“There is a much higher degree of trust involved in this model. People believe that they will lose control of cost – and the reason that they believe that is from experience...because it happens. Why does it happen? It’s because you have people that aren’t fundamentally trained or supported to manage costs on the ground. Having the idea is one matter but you have to structure the model in a way that allows this to happen. There’s a lot more work to be done on this before it will be accepted”.

There is agreement on this from the analyst community who reported that 66% [4] and 48% [5] of customer service managers identified cost reduction as their primary driving force. Improving customer experience was ranked 3rd behind increasing sales/revenues.

However, the mass production model is actually causing high levels of dissatisfaction in both the customer and the employee population. This is creating costs due to failure of end-to-end service delivery and customer and employee churn. In order to differentiate on customer experience or risk becoming a commodity player, the industry needs to change and mass customisation seems to be the most effective way to balance out the Demand Delta – maintaining efficiency whilst improving the service experience.

2.3. The networked expert model: The Expert

“The role of the Advisor won’t change much in five years, with the exception of some leading edge organisations, the top 10% perhaps. There won’t be a radical shift. What we will see though is the top 10% who say it is essential to be the best. They understand that without customers they have no business. They will hire the best to execute that plan, give those people the best salaries, training, management. They will have hired a knowledge worker, an expert” – Industry analyst.

A ‘Networked Expert’ model is, in some senses, an old fashioned one. In this model, the customer is put in touch with the person in the best position to solve their problem – the front line moves from being an advisor to being an expert. This was often the model used pre-contact centre and is often used to manage interactions for high value customers (usually corporates) – where a specific, dedicated team of experts are used to maintain the customer relationship long term.

However, the 21st century spin on this problem – which gives it a more cost effective angle – is the increasing sophistication of both skills based routing technologies and organisational knowledge management systems and directories. After customers have come through self service technologies, their (often extremely complex) problem is diagnosed either automatically or via a human triage function (acting as trouble shooters and as an intelligent switchboard or directory service) and directed to an expert to advise them. This will have a major impact on the role of the contact centre advisor:

“Customers are calling us about an issue because of the complexity of the world we are living in. We have termed this a ‘contact centre job’ – with people being paid the same wage as ten years ago. That is unsustainable – you will not get expert problem solvers who are shifting organisations in six monthly cycles – they are call handlers – we need expert problem solvers” – Contact centre strategist.

These experts are truly knowledge workers. Whereas advisors also tend to deal more with routine and familiar knowledge, experts deal with more obscure and often tacit knowledge. Unlike the mass production and customisation models, where work is monitored (to different extents) and knowledge is presented to them at the appropriate moment in the workflow, experts themselves are responsible for maintaining and updating their working practices and knowledge. This model also sounds the death knell potentially of the centralised contact centre. Experts could be anyone in the organisation with a particular expertise in a customer, discipline, locale, interaction skill, product or service. These experts do not necessarily reside in a traditional centralised contact centre – but could comprise a mixture of office based, mobile and home based workers. They may work anywhere (and for anyone) but they will have customer queries routed to them intelligently, based on their expertise, appropriateness and availability. They can act as a conduit to other networked experts, depending on the customer requirement. These experts will manage their own work and queues through enterprise wide workflow technologies.

This model requires a fundamental shift in:

- Network structures,
- Cross enterprise relationships,
- Cross institutional processes,
- Patterns of ownership,
- Control,
- Authority,
- Rights,
- Obligations,
- Systems and technologies that can deliver support at a price most people can afford.

“People will create a virtual local service using the technology to make sure that the person who speaks to the customer knows where they are, has a bit of information about their geography and if possible will be matching people to regions again” – Contact centre operations manager.

With the emphasis in this model shifting to an expert interface, the experts involved need to be both highly knowledgeable and empowered, as well as being good communicators. Experts are sources of knowledge so are, in themselves, a knowledge resource for other people dealing with customers who may have complementary expertise. Much of this knowledge is in their head and has been developed through years of operational experience.

These experts will share, publish and validate knowledge to each other and to customers directly. Their reward and recognition packages are based around effective problem solving (e.g. preventing repeat calls coming through to them on the same topic) and contribution of knowledge to the organisation.

With significant value being added by this customer interfaces, it may be incorporated into the service charges levied by an organisation or may be a chargeable service designed to help consumers save both time and energy: “The arrival of new products and services, particularly those linked to the digital home, will increasingly create opportunities for operators to monetise human intervention through subscriptions to premium customer support services encompassing installation, training, technical support and warranties.” [19].

3. From agent to expert: Motivation

“The typical contact centre agent is young, female and works in a large, open plan office or fabricated building. Although probably full time, she is increasingly likely to be a part-time permanent employee, working complex shift patterns which correspond to the peaks of customer demand. Promotion prospects and career advancement are limited so the attraction of better pay and conditions of another contact centre may prove irresistible. In all probability, work consists of an uninterrupted and endless sequence of similar conversations with customers she never meets. She has to concentrate hard on what is being said, jump from page to page on a screen, make sure that the details entered are accurate and that she has said the right things in a pleasant manner. The conversation ends and as she tidies up the loose ends there is another voice in her headset. The pressure is intense because she knows her work is being measured, her speech monitored and it often leaves her mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted” – Taylor and Bain [24].

Since approximately 60% of contact centre costs are personnel [25], conventional finance modelling dictates that these costs need to be minimised by ensuring that all employees are utilised to their maximum. This is the root of the mass production model described in 2.1. All the performance measures are designed to optimise productivity and minimise costs. This provokes the “management of contradictions” [26] with the inevitable trade off between quality and cost. Everything that can be measured is measured through the contact centre switch and management information systems.

These measures are ingrained in contact centre culture. Figures such as PCA 15 (Percentage of calls answered in fifteen seconds) are benchmarked and even legislated against as a service standard. With the exception of customer satisfaction, typical service measures are all tangible internal measures of efficiency. They assume that service work can be treated as a production line, with statistics dictating that customers are all the same and their needs can be treated as units to be measured and bonused on. This is an overly simplistic model that is used to drive and motivate customer service people through targets, bonuses and incentives [20].

This model also assumes that customer service agents perform efficiently throughout their shift and are measured as if they were robots, processing work in an emotionless manner. Measures do not take into account that customer service is emotional labour [27]. It is hard to deal with customers on a daily basis. They are endlessly demanding, often difficult and frequently angry. These measures do not account for emotional strain, stress or fluctuations of energy levels during an average shift (as the unpredictable production line in the cartoon in the figure below shows – boxes may look the same but their contents, when opened, may need to be handled differently).

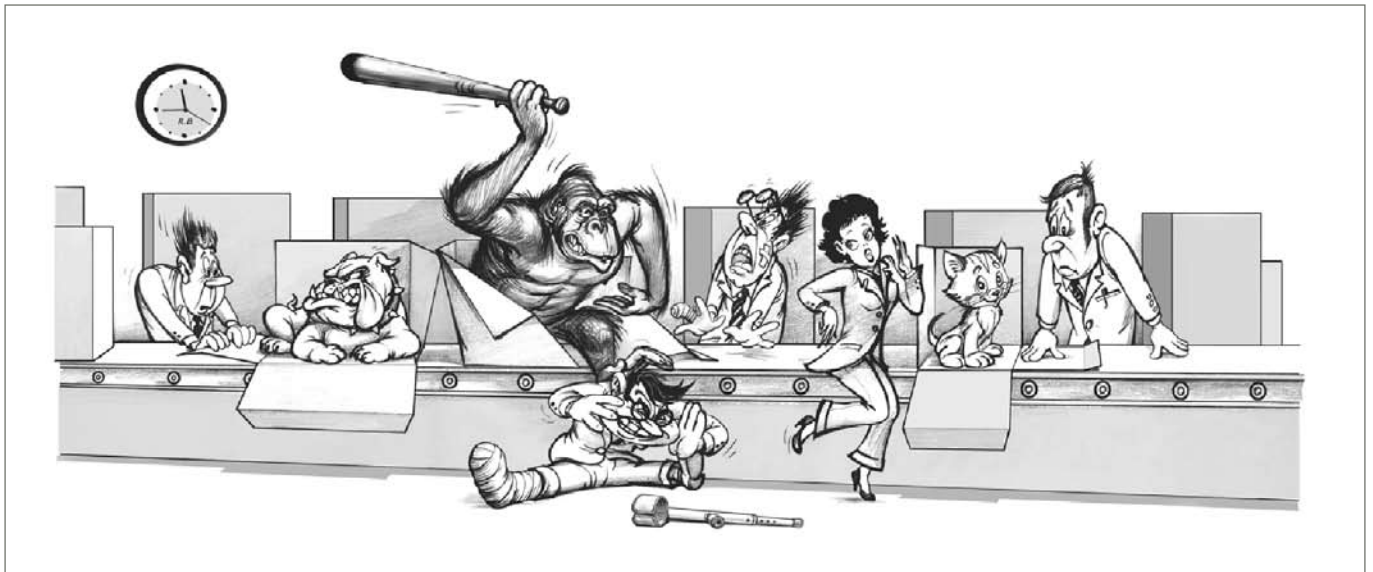


Figure 2: “The Cat in the Box” (Courtesy: Rinat Baibekov).

With 68% of customers citing indifference from a staff member as a key motivation for removing their business [28], there is a clear mirror between the customer experience and the employee experience. By focusing on targets and measures, the front line often feel pressured to rush. This can lead to errors and, at worse, can encourage advisors to abandon difficult customers to keep their statistics healthy. As Seddon [29] states, “the fact is that targets don’t help us get to where we want to be. Worse, they actually obviate the possibility by making people focus on the wrong things”.

In our focus groups with contact centre employees, measures and processes were cited as one of the principal frustrations of the job. They summed general sentiments up:

“The thing I don’t like about the job are the management processes that they put you under, which they feel don’t restrict your job but we feel that they do – because you can’t do it properly!”

“They either want good customer service or short call times, management should make their mind up”.

“Dealing with the customers – some of whom are very rude – I can handle no problem. The biggest cause of low morale and poor efficiency is the management and the blinkered view they have of the situation”.

Measures are often used as a blunt instrument to motivate agents to enhance their productivity. However, in reality, they are often a source of demotivation and stress since they act against agents’ desires to do a good job.

This management of behaviour is based on the belief that people are motivated only by external rewards or by the fear of external punishment. However, extrinsic rewards (e.g. bonuses) are not the primary reinforcer of basic human needs [30] or the reason why people are engaged in their jobs. Employers frequently set targets in an attempt to encourage their employees to produce more in shorter amounts of time. Targets are generally set based upon averages and aspirations rather than on an individual and realistic basis.

Performance standards often make quality employees feel negatively about their job and cause them to be demotivated to strive to achieve greater things. When employees who are not meeting standards (often due to factors not under their control – e.g. unusual customer demand or systems problems) receive negative feedback, they are likely to find their jobs less fulfilling and more stressful. Additionally, if people start to fail or miss their performance targets, they ‘cheat’ and do what they need to do to keep the boss happy [20,29]. This can act against the customer experience: “I think that stats create a barrier – they are there for a reason, but if they are inefficient and fabricated what is the point of having them”.

The danger is that targets and measures simply reinforce the status quo – rather than improving the customer experience – because exceptions don’t get noticed. It also directs the innovation and energy of the people on the front line away from the customer and towards playing the system. Success becomes the ability to meet the targets rather than meeting customers needs.

“The people who check all of this don’t know what we do so it doesn’t matter what I have done. I could talk to every customer and not do anything, as long as I said sorry, asked if there was anything else I can help with and if they were happy with the way I handled the call, I will come back with 100%. My manager and my centre manager will be happy, as long as my stats are fine it doesn’t matter whether I am helping anybody or not. All they are bothered about is if you can keep things down to 300 seconds, keep your wrap time down and say three things on a call.”

The five C's of Motivation

So, if targets are fabricated and are a source of frustration rather than a motivator, what does motivate contact centre advisors to do their jobs? Prior research by Millard [31] was reinforced by the focus groups conducted as part of this research.

These were:

- **Culture** – an overriding factor for motivation that is driven by things such as management style, processes and procedures.
- **Content** – summed up by Herzberg [32] who stated that “if you want people to do a good job, give them a good job to do”. Content is about giving timely feedback, assurance that individuals are performing a valuable task well, acknowledgement and recognition.
- **Control** – in jobs where there is high demand and low control, the classic result is stress [17]. Control is increasing employees' perception of control and choice.
- **Collaboration** – Teamwork and a feeling of belonging can increase motivation, decrease turnover, increase job satisfaction, and influence productivity (negatively as well as positively). There is evidence that the socially isolating nature of the contact centre often causes the formation of serendipitous ‘communities of coping’ [15] where advisors provide each other with both emotional and informational support.
- **Curiosity** – Humans function best in state that is somewhere between boredom and anxiety. By minimising unpredictability and challenge, jobs can become boring. Introduction of unpredictability, challenge, fun and even pleasure in the design of jobs can make them inherently more motivating.

Culture

Culture is literally the “way that things are done around here”. This is generally created by the contact centre management style from top-level management to local team leadership. Best practice research has found that the most effective customer service organisations have a flatter management hierarchy and have a management style that is dynamic, risk taking, passionate and people centric rather than command and control and measures driven.

“I think that the model of command and control management is so out of date. Shared support and self managed teams are the answer – rather than relying on centralised control” – Customer experience strategy director.

The command and control management style, found typically in the mass production contact centre, uses centralised decision-making, policy deployment and process. This tends to reinforce the image of the contact centre advisor as a second-class citizen.

Management can also be very influential in terms of role modelling behaviours and establishing organisational attitudes to work. A supportive manager has been found to have a significant positive effect on employee well being in contact centres [33].

Management reward and recognition was a point of debate. Agents said that they would like more local reward and recognition schemes rather than formalised or grand gestures (“just saying ‘thank you’ is sometimes enough!”). They also wanted more open and constructive feedback rather than just negative feedback. Agents wanted to be treated like adults rather than children (“I’m 46, I don’t appreciate being treated like a child!”) and trusted to do their job, rather than be punished for the few that did not pull their weight. They also wanted recognition for personal development because “not everyone can be a high flyer”. Targets needed to be appropriate to the job, rather than simply talk times and sales leads. These needed to be set individually then agreed with their manager.

The stress of the job had to be recognised and occasional stress relief and relaxation needed to be allowed by management. People did not want to feel as if they were being constantly watched, but wanted to be able to get management support when they needed it.

Content

“If you want people to do a good job, give them a good job to do”, stated motivation psychologist Frederick Herzberg [32]. It seems obvious that people who regard their job as important are profoundly committed to what they do. Motivation is typically highest when a job offers an opportunity to learn new skills, to experience some variation in tasks and to acquire and demonstrate competence.

One of the main pleasures reported by advisors was the sense of satisfaction in helping people. They liked to be able to feel that they had achieved something at the end of the day and had made a difference. Advisors thrived on being able to talk to customers. 90% said that this was why they got out of bed in the morning. They also enjoyed solving customers' problems. Comments included:

- “I like getting recognition from the customer”.
- “I like talking to people”.
- “I like solving problems”.
- “It’s really good when you can help people out”.
- “I’ve dealt with such nice people who are so desperate for help that I’ve stayed and done it in my own time”.

They enjoyed getting closure and having end-to-end responsibilities rather than having to continuously hand off to other people and other departments. They wanted accountability for what they did. They also wanted access to complete customer histories and to have the ability to use information on the internet and intranet more effectively. Knowledge management support tools needed to provide up-to-date product, service and process information. They also wanted to have instant feedback on quality monitoring. If feedback is not instant, problems are likely to continue for a while since the longer the delay between action and feedback, the weaker the shift in behaviours.

The major source of dissatisfaction was the highly routine and non-challenging nature of some of the work:

- “It can be monotonous – I could do with more stimulation”.
- “Taking calls all the time can be boring”.
- “Repetition is the worse part of the job”.
- “It can be boring but it pays the mortgage”.
- “It would be great to get away from the monotonous work, because at the end of the day your head is cabbaged”.

The elimination of variation in the mass production process has, paradoxically, undermined job variety and interest. Since agents never see their impact on the end-to-end delivery process and have no ownership or empowerment, they are disengaged and demotivated. This is one reason why employee churn is high in this model – agents get bored! With the higher levels of challenge and complexity in the mass customisation and networked expert models, the job can become more interesting, with increased variety and the ability to challenge and extend problem solving skills.

However, this level of empowerment means that learning and knowledge become more and more critical to customer experience delivery. There is always too much to know. Time is a key factor in terms of the day-to-day demands of the job. One advisor commented: “I get 15mins break a day in my 5 hour shift, when in the hell do I get time to read the briefings?” They need time to read and digest news, product and market information that help them talk to customers. The mass production model does not register this as valuable time – which is why many mass production centres no longer give advisors pre-shift briefings.

Multimedia is also a way of introducing variety into the role. Advisors wanted the ability to work on contacts other than telephone when their voice was not quite up to talking all day (“I’ve come in with laryngitis because I don’t want to go down the sick route, it would be nice to have a few hours on email resting my voice”).

Collaboration

Over 95% of the agents surveyed stated “the people I work with” was the biggest reason they came to work. Even in large contact centres and there was a sense of team spirit and a friendly team atmosphere.

In terms of the pains of contact centre work, the high levels of customer empathy felt by advisors makes it all the more difficult to handle customer abuse:

- “One nasty call can ruin your day”.
- “Irate callers can really affect you – people can be very rude over the phone”.
- “We can become ‘phone fodder’ for customers – taking abuse for other people’s mistakes”.
- “Abusive calls are very hard to take personally”.

The reaction to the stresses of these elements of the job is to utilise team working. There was a strong consensus amongst advisors that the people they worked with were good and they used peer support to provide “communities of coping”, despite the isolating nature of the work. Team building was enhanced by team games and events both inside and outside working hours (“fun shouldn’t be banned!”). 88% of those questioned reported that they felt that they were part of a work team:

- “We have great camaraderie – we need it to combat the stress”.
- “Everyone is in the same boat so we can understand and support each other”.
- “You can talk about anything – it helps to get things off your chest”.
- “The thing that gets me out of bed in the morning are the wages and the social aspect of work – not being in the house all day”.
- “I like my job because I like the people I work with”.

Contact centre work can be very isolating – just the advisor talking to a succession of faceless customers – but tacit networks of support have naturally evolved that help people get through the day.

Again the mass production model ignores the value of this social networking approach – it goes against productivity to have agents talking to each other rather than to customers. However, knowledge sharing is critical to building expertise. This factor is acknowledged strongly in the networked expert model.

Choice/Control

One of the biggest motivators cited by advisors was the ability to work flexible shift patterns and hours (with 86% of those questioned saying that it was a key motivator). Control is a basic human tendency [34]. People are most likely to become enthusiastic about what they are doing when they are free to make decisions about the way that they do it.

Contact centres vary in the amount of control and discretion that they give advisors, depending on which model they predominantly use. Individuals in mass production centres often suffer high level of demand and a low level of perceived control over key aspects of their job including pace of work, target setting [35,36 & 37] and emotional behaviour [27]. Low job control, low variety and excessive job demands can cause job related stress and turnover [38,39,40] and internal emotional conflict [27,41]. Advisor control over how they talk to customers and how they do their work task is more important than control over when they take calls.

Advisors wanted to have the choice to take multimedia calls; not just telephony but email and video advisor calls (where an advisor can be video conferenced in to high street branches to give specialist advice). Since “taking calls all the time can be boring”, advisors wanted the ability to choose voice, email or video contacts according to personal preference, training, aptitude and how they are feeling.

They wanted to retain the ability to be themselves whilst talking to the customer, rather than having to be heavily scripted (as one advisor pointed out: “We’re not robots, well not all of us”). On occasions, where scripting was required (usually for regulatory reasons), scripts needed to be flexible enough not to constrain the advisor or bore the customer, but still ensure regulatory compliance.

The ability to provide proactive feedback to improve both systems and processes – evident in both mass customisation and networked expert models – would improve advisors’ perception of control and increase their involvement.

Curiosity

Humans possess a natural curiosity about themselves and their environment [42]. We search for and overcome challenges, attempt to acquire and master skills and gain competences in complex tasks to promote a positive view of ourselves [43]. This is tied in with the human need for advancement and growth [44] and learning [45]. However, there is also evidence that if people are also enjoying their job they are more likely to deliver a good customer experience [46,47] – as one advisor commented: “It’s basic common sense, if you’re not happy at work you will not deliver good customer service”. Employees who have fun at work are less likely to be late or absent and job attrition, motivation and productivity improve [48]. Talking to customers can be extremely challenging (“We’ve got the hardest job, the people online have the hardest job of anyone in the company. We deal with the public and a lot of them are not nice, some are but a lot aren’t”). However, advisors generally thought that contact centre jobs were not regarded as “proper jobs” or given any level of recognition as a profession.

The act of minimising variation, as practised by the mass production model, can make something boring and tends to act against the ability to learn new things and progress. By partitioning functions, contact centres unwittingly create demotivation (“I feel like a receptionist. I keep having to transfer calls out. It’s brain numbing; it’s awful. I can’t deal with anything. We don’t know to do anything except to transfer”).

Contact centre trends

4. The reinvention of the contact centre: Other factors in contact centre development

4.1. From telephony to multi-channel contact

“Just measuring people on average handle time doesn’t work anymore” – Contact centre director.

Increasingly, the widely used term ‘multi-channel’ is becoming reality for organisations. The two key technology trends are the proliferation of mobile devices and customers’ growing expectations of a multimedia experience.

However, the multi-channel contact centre is less than business as usual, according to a 2005 survey by Contact Babel, with non-telephony contact accounting for less than 10% of transactions into UK contact centres (see diagram below). Experience has shown that:

1. Costs are currently prohibitive, especially since volumes are currently relatively low – multimedia can be expensive to support if a dedicated team does so (around £70 per contact, compared to £5 for telephony and £12 for email).
2. The priorities for a universal queue means that email management tends to suffer and there are potential knock on service level effects for all media.
3. In order to prevent high volumes, companies tend to bury interactive services such as co-browsing deep into their page hierarchy and generally on high value, high complexity items only.

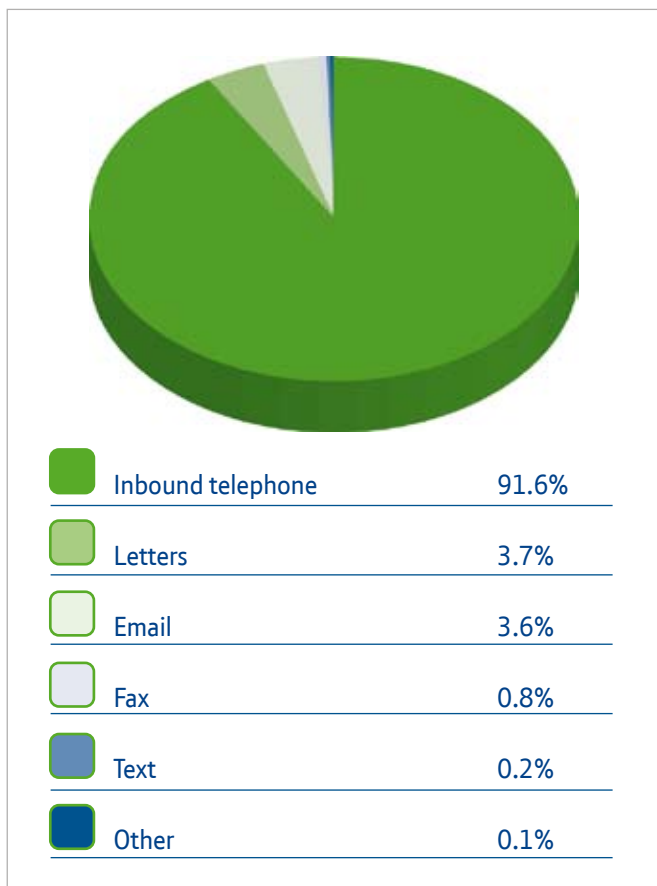


Figure 3: Percentage of calls into UK contact centres by media type [7].

However, according to Forrester research [49] there is recognition by companies that different modes of contact will increase and there is an intention to better cater for these multi channel contact needs:

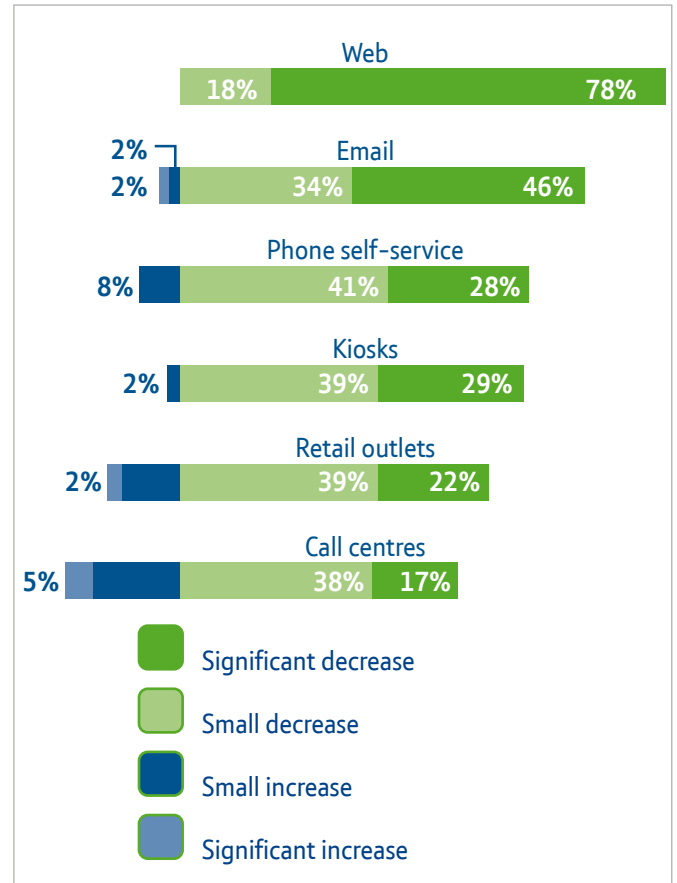


Figure 4: “Thinking about how your company typically interacts with customers, what change (if any) do you expect to see in the volume of interactions over the next two years?”, based on a Forrester Survey [49] of US companies with annual turnover of \$500 million plus.

Even if the contact centre cannot handle more than just telephony, the type of enquiries coming through via the contact centre are being influenced by other channels such as the internet. Technology does not replace the need for human touch. Telephone and face-to-face contacts are often preferable, particularly for important or complex/ unfamiliar transactions and, in some cases, as a supplement to online activity. The Henley centre [7] report that, between 1997 and 2003, the proportion of ‘complex’ calls made to business increased from 22% to 27%, while the proportion of ‘simple’ calls fell from 67% to 61%. It is crucial that these complex enquiries are dealt with carefully, as a poor experience for customers can potentially result in lost sales or business.

To cater for the multimedia customer, the multimedia contact centre needs to be able to [50]:

- 1. Solve problems.** With a customer population increasingly having access to 3G and camera phones, the contact centre of the future needs to consider the technology implications of streaming videos, photo capture, universal queuing (and prioritisation), skills-based routing, storage and bandwidth in order to effectively support true multi channel contact.
- 2. Communicate.** Customers are increasingly looking for a personalised service experience where they have control over their interactions in their communications format of choice (e.g. mobile phone, Internet, PDA). They are also starting to expect to be able to communicate with organisations anywhere, at any time, using any device they choose.
- 3. Provide Content.** Customers want to be able to solve their own problems, which implies the ability to retrieve information or content in a mobile world.

To serve these challenges, the future multimedia contact centre needs to deliver voice, data and entertainment-based applications to users 24/7, over any device the user chooses.

Few contact centres are able to deliver across all media currently. The current media supported include:

- **E-mail management.** E-mail currently represents the largest proportion of customer contacts after telephony. As an email arrives in the system, email management software does several things, including filtering to match email addresses with customer records, eliminating “shotgun” inquiries from multiple “submit” button clicks, assigning a tracking number to the email to establish an audit trail with a particular customer or inquiry and prevent duplicate responses and generating automated responses informing customers that their email has been received.

Once in the system, many email response systems analyse incoming mails through scoring modules that range in complexity, applying tools like natural language processing, neural networks, and data mining to determine the contents of an incoming mail. These modules look for keywords in mails to help prioritise customer responses. They also generate response templates that are used either to assist advisors in quickly handling inquiries or to generate a “smart” automated reply.

E-mail advisors need to be literate and articulate as well as being able to type quickly and accurately. These skills are not necessarily found in conventional telephone advisors; this often poses a problem to contact centre managers. E-mail is a relatively expensive mode of customer contact – with advisors being less productive than via other contact mechanisms – and customers often require more than one email to solve their problems. Email responses are often handled in a dedicated email contact centre since the process of dealing with email is very different to that of telephony contact (particularly the time to answer expectation). Other contact centres often switch their advisors to the email queues in periods where telephone call volumes are low.

- **Online Chat/IM.** Experience suggests that online chat or instant messaging works best for sites selling products that are moderately priced and not overly complex. Chat is particularly suited to short, sharp exchanges rather than long, complex dialogues. Online chat in a multimedia contact centre is normally integrated with CRM-fed information (customer context, customer history, corporate knowledge base, standard scripts/templates) similar to that of traditional contact centres or an email manager. In addition, chat software often includes advisor response templates.

Chat allows for multitasking of chat sessions by individual advisors, who routinely handle several sessions simultaneously. A survey [51] showed that 62.2% of multichannel contact centres had advisors handling more than one chat session (multiple customers) at a time. Most (63%) of these advisors handle a maximum of two to three sessions simultaneously, although handling as many as 10 sessions at a time is not unheard of. This makes chat seem more efficient than telephony. However, the business efficiencies have been questioned by research from Jupiter in 2005 [52], which showed that agents could only effectively serve two customers at a time. They suggest that the true cost of chat is closer than the cost of the telephone than it is to that of email. However, chat also has the side benefit of reducing the language barrier since typed messages are easier to interpret than strong accents.

Chat also implies having advisors available to respond quickly to contacts and capable of handling the more casual form of contact that the medium offers, whilst being able to quickly interpret meanings and give the correct answers in real time. Fast and accurate typing skills are also essential (although spelling mistakes are tolerated more than via email contact due to the rapid interactivity of the chat medium) as well as a good knowledge of digital applications. Current use tends to be with slightly more technical audiences or a younger population who use chat routinely.

- **‘Call me’ button/co-browsing.** With email, the call me button is one of the most common types of multimedia service offered to customers via the Web. After the customer hits the call me button, the information enters the queue as if it were a call and triggers a call back when the next advisor becomes available. This can also facilitate web page sharing and ‘co-browsing’ with customers. Call-me buttons are also becoming increasingly common on ‘click-to-call’ applications on mobile devices and PDAs.

The other powerful function related to co-browsing is the ability for advisors to remotely take over a PC using VNC (Virtual Network Computing) capabilities. This is most frequently used in the field of technical support, where advisors can remotely diagnose and repair faults. Most of the technology for such remote PC takeover has been available for some time and one of the main obstacles is the issue of the advisor causing harm to the user’s PC and issues of trust, security and data protection.

- **Voice over IP (VoIP).** Functionally speaking, a VoIP contact is handled just the same as a normal telephone call. VoIP is very attractive to current contact centre managers, who can implement this multimedia functionality with minimal disruption to contact centre service patterns. One important difference, though, is in customer identification, since VoIP access can be restricted to customers who have either registered or otherwise identified themselves to the company (via a Web form, for example). This can help if VoIP is integrated with the contact centre CRM systems.
- **Video.** Video tends to be used for specialist functions only – with some high street banks using video contact centres to beam in qualified mortgage and financial advisors to bank branches that would otherwise be unable to deal with these queries and local authorities using it to give remote areas access to specialist council services. Operationally, video contact centres tend to be run separately from the rest of the contact centre due to the environmental demands of adding a visual component to the interaction – i.e. a quieter, tidier environment with uniformed advisors. Customer pull for video based contact is limited since the visual medium seems to add little to the interaction. Although trials have been done of video based contact via media such as kiosks, there has been limited demand from a largely videophobic customer base. It is also unpopular with advisors, who often complain that they feel isolated from the buzz of the contact centre floor.
- **SMS.** To date SMS has been largely used to inform customers of updates and changes in service status, e.g. weekly bank balance updates (currently offered by many banks), field engineering appointments, marketing messages (often practised by mobile operators), travel details (e.g. journey details from the UK National Rail website; flight tracking by British Airways), health test results (e.g. Boots screening services), NHS appointments (cutting missed appointments by almost 70%), congestion charge payments (Transport for London) and SIM card activations (Orange). It is also often used as a medium for deaf people to access contact centre services (e.g. Sussex Police).

SMS has also been employed to deflect calls by providing automated replies to frequently asked questions. Incoming questions can be analysed by Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology and matched with an appropriate reply, which is then sent back to the customer's mobile phone.

Actual real time deployment of SMS within contact centres with a live advisor is currently extremely limited, despite it being technically possible. The charity, ChildLine has been using text services alongside its conventional telephony lines. They have found that one advisor can be handling around fifteen text interactions simultaneously [53], which has proven extremely cost effective. They have also found that there are no lost calls because all the texts are stored. This also means that the advisors can get a complete history of the customer interactions.

- **MMS.** Multimedia messaging is widely predicted to take off during the next few years with more consumers acquiring multimedia phones. Current multimedia messaging use in contact centres is limited. One company is using MMS to send location maps to customers. However, applications for Government and Police are being investigated and MMS could potentially be of interest to technical fault reporting, applications requiring sign language mediation or any task with a visual component.

Experience has shown that the transition from telephony to multimedia requires a fundamental shift in the way that the contact centre is run in terms of people, process and technology.

- The primary technological challenge for the multimedia contact centre is not just the ability to deal with all these channels in isolation, but to deal with them through a **single queue**. Given customers may mix their media during a particular enquiry or purchase, it is important that emails, calls and other channels are all integrated and dealt with consistently. Even if different advisors deal with each channel, they must all have full information relating to the query available, to save time and avoid unnecessary repetition of details by the customer.

To meet the multimedia demands of the customer and to provide high-speed connectivity to the legacy infrastructure and applications, the contact centre needs a technical architecture that is very modular. Large enterprises and service providers are currently rallying around the single, unifying standard that is Internet Protocol (IP). This has enabled the development of a unified messaging approach to queue management.

- **Workforce management and forecasting** is also a challenge for the multimedia contact centre. According to a survey by ICMI [51], the majority of multimedia contact centres (66.6%) found forecasting workload, managing multimedia queues and scheduling advisors accordingly in the multichannel environment more challenging than with traditional one.

Customer service load balancing is critical to this model. For example, a customer's expectation for an email response will be different to that of an IM chat or a telephone call. Contact centre queues need to be managed on the basis of these customer expectations and the volumes hitting the contact centre. Only 28.3% of respondents to the ICMI survey [51] had a multiple contact management (MCM) system – a unified system that routes, tracks, and reports on all contact types that the facility handles.

In practice, multimedia contact centres tend to use two alternative methods for workforce management:

- Call blending – the same advisor receives a mixture of phone calls, e-mails, and text-chat requests.
- Task switching – an advisor remains dedicated to a particular mode of communication for a given period of time.

- **Training of advisors** is an issue for contact centres moving into new channels, whether existing or new advisors are deployed. Many contact centres making the transition to multimedia contact centre find that few of the traditional telephony oriented advisors possess the needed skills – or the desire – required to handle email or other non-voice media. Companies such as internet service provider, Quip, have established a new multimedia contact centre minus the voice. In this case, handling internet contact is not an issue for the contact centre because no other channel is supported. The centre is run by staff trained purely for the online medium and IT systems have been set up specifically to support this form of contact. This type of green field arrangement, however, is a rare luxury.

However, in a blended multimedia contact centre, certain media lend themselves to skills bundling. For example, web chats and email requests require good writing skills; phone calls and VoIP requests need advisors with excellent verbal skills.

However, despite the practical challenges of implementing multimedia contact, the premise of the multimedia contact centre can deliver advantages for all parties involved.

4.2. ‘Rightsourcing’ – An alternative model for outsourcing and offshoring

“By some organisations offshoring is a fairly desperate attempt to make their problems cheaper. Moving broken processes to lower cost locations will not fix those problems. While cost savings are being achieved, the reduction in performance against such metrics as customer satisfaction, first time resolution and sales conversion rates are dramatically affecting the overall business case. People issues around attrition, absenteeism and wage inflation are impacting service levels, levels of expertise, training and development and future cost projections” – Industry analyst.

“Rightsourcing” is emerging as a prominent trend in contact centres moving into the future. This is locating the best experts to solve the customer problem regardless of where they are in the world. Providing language skills, specific technical skills or geographical knowledge is the role of the rightsourced expert.

Offshoring of contact centres has attracted an enormous amount of media attention in the past few years. Despite public perception to the contrary, the reality is that under 10% of global contact centre business has been offshored. Analysts such as Datamonitor [54] predict that only 5% of all advisor positions globally will be offshored in the next two years. The trend for offshoring is, however, part of a much broader global macroeconomic trend about product sourcing: “Product businesses and manufacturing have been doing what they call global sourcing (what we would call offshoring) for years and it works!”

However, offshoring of contact centres is often driven with a cost reduction agenda rather than a customer experience one. Companies are often seduced with the promise of up to 70% reduction in costs with little or no sacrifice in terms of business efficiencies [55].

Consumer polls about offshoring create mixed messages. One MORI poll in 2004 [56] suggested that 66% of customers don’t care where in the world their call is answered as long as it is handled quickly and efficiently. However, research by NetReflector [57] found incomprehensible accents were cited by 27% of English speaking customers as their principal complaint. A survey [58] suggested that 68% of consumers would reconsider their purchasing decision if they encountered an offshore contact centre.

With a fundamental cultural and language mismatch, the result can be a degraded customer experience. During one focus group an advisor wryly noted that: “If someone rings up with a complaint because they can’t understand the Indian contact centre, they get through to complaints in India”.

A customer experience strategy director, who had gone through an experience with outsourcing, commented:

“The experiment that has been offshoring has pretty much failed in a voice context. A firm that says that “my customers are important to me” and “the relationship is important” but then says, “I’m going to send that work 8000 miles away to a country with a completely different culture” is an example of the money not following your strategy. I think that the Indian and Chinese markets will play a major role in business process outsourcing in the future but I think that will be predominantly in non voice traffic”.

The backlash about Indian outsourcing is, at the time of writing (July, 2006), a hot topic with large companies conducting high profile u-turns with their offshoring policies because of consumer backlash (termed ‘reverse shoring’ or ‘backsourcing’): “When a company goes for off-shore contact centre outsourcing to cut operational costs, it should ideally start measuring the impact of this decision on its customer satisfaction ratings right away to validate such a strategic move” – Academic.

However, other markets, such as China, are starting to flex their economic muscles in the offshoring market: “If you think India is a threat, wait for China, as many Chinese speak beautiful English. It makes sense for it to be China and India as they have the most people in the world”, industry analyst. There was also a general consensus that non-voice contacts could be more effectively deployed offshore than voice because of the preciseness of written language verses the difficulty of accents and dialects (on both advisor and customer side) in telephone contacts.

The fundamental issue is that many of these offshore centres are also run under the same mass production mindset. In fact, the majority of work that is often offshored is precisely the low skilled, repetitive tasks that could often just as easily be automated out. Therefore they inevitably tend to suffer the same high levels of dissatisfaction from both customers and from employees as onshore mass production contact centres. An industry analyst with extensive experience in offshoring comments that, once again, the problem lies in the management: “If you ask people what are their biggest challenges with off-shoring, they will say consistency of processes, communication issues, cultural effect. All of these are management problems! Yet management don’t rank management competence as an issue in off shoring”. Some Indian contact centres are currently reporting over 100% staff churn per annum and they are struggling to recruit and retain high quality employees. This results in spiralling costs that start to undermine the economics of offshoring.

Rightsourced advisors or experts could be part of an expert network run by an outsourcer. The difference in this networked expert outsourcing model is that the expert is recruited for specialist skills and knowledge and may be employed by multiple organisations (a consultancy model). Their role is no different to that of the company network experts – in that they are knowledge workers who are seeking to solve and spot problems and feed the solutions and knowledge back into the organisation that employs them. These outsourcers act more as strategic consultants rather than being under contract to deliver specific service levels and targets, as practiced under the mass production outsourcing model.

4.3. “Homesourcing” and “homeshoring”: A contact centre in your front room

“Because we have technology now that enables us to distribute calls without losing efficiency to almost anywhere, I think we will see more clusters and more “homesourcing” – Customer experience strategy director.

The concept of homeworking is not a new one. However, despite being successfully trialled back in the early 1990s, it is still rarely practiced in a contact centre context. Once again, this tends to be largely as a result of mass production thinking. One manager interviewed stated that he “liked to be able to see if his guys were working or not” and he wouldn’t be comfortable with his agents working from home.

There are some other pragmatic reasons for company’s reticence in using more home workers in that customer data is no longer in a secure and controlled environment. People in the finance sector voiced most of these concerns.

The concept also received mixed reactions from advisors in the focus groups, with a 50:50 split for and against homeworking. Most welcomed the notion of increased flexibility (“just working at your own pace, you haven’t got people watching over you so it is all about self control – the way you would do things at home anyway”). Others wanted to have the sociability and camaraderie of the workplace: “I can see it would be cheaper to run, but I think the control of the people would be harder. There would be too many distractions, if I am at work I come to work, if I am at home then the draw to do something else would be much harder. I don’t know if I could work at home on my own because I need the interaction with other people”.

Past studies of contact centre homeworkers have found that:

- Not everyone is psychologically suited for homeworking.
- Most people need to see others in their team face-to-face at least once a month.
- People who have never worked in an office environment tend to embrace homeworking more easily.
- Managers of homeworkers need to adopt slightly different management styles to ensure that remote workers feel included and appreciated on the basis of being an individual contributor.

However, a number of factors point towards the growth of homesourcing as a contact centre solution into the future:

- Call volumes becoming increasingly unpredictable with the resulting problems of staffing peaks and troughs.
- Recruiting skilled experts in particular geographical locations close to centralised contact centres will become more challenging.
- The increasing demands of the ‘always on’, 24/7 society.
- The importance of local knowledge in certain industries (e.g. local government).
- The lowering costs of delivering high capacity, fast Broadband services to the home.

The problems of recruitment and retention of contact centre advisors in the bigger “warehouse” style contact centres is legendary: “The bigger the contact centre is, the harder it is to manage, no matter how good your culture and everything else. There is no real reason to have very big contact centres stuck in city centres other than people are thinking in an industrial model” – Contact centre Strategist.

Under the mass production model, burnout of employees pushes attrition rates to above 100% per annum – with the associated costs of recruiting and training new agents (reported as being anywhere between £5,000 and £10,000 per agent). However, the opportunity with homesourcing is the ability to recruit people into the contact centre who would not previously have considered it as a viable employment option. This opportunity encompasses:

- The disabled.
- Returning mothers.
- Carers.
- Over 50s.

There is a willingness on behalf of the industry to explore these opportunities: “I’m keen to tap into that whole area of talent that is under utilised. I’m also keen to look at ways that we can employ really talented women who want to stay at home with their children but who can come online for a few hours and do some work. There are also retired people and baby boomers, which are a huge glut in the population – profile wise we are seeing a societal change there and that needs to be reflected in the contact centre population” – Operations director.

5. Evolution or stagnation: change or die

“Along came Broadband networks, multimedia and mobile devices and with them came fun, persuasion, outrage, delight, faith, campaigns, satire, lifelong learning, identity, communities and passion. Now, increasingly, we interact to be, not just to do” – Cockton and Korhonen [59].

With contact centres apparently failing both customers and employees currently – due to rising customer expectations and an organisational thirst for cost cutting – why do organisations blindly stick to the status quo? If contact centres fail to change, will they exist at all in the future?

To survive in a competitive market, companies become, by nature, internally focused and their interactions with customers (and also often with employees) are generally adversarial. This promotes the mass production mindset model, where (usually short term) internal transactions drive behaviour and manage costs. In response to the need to increase revenue and profit this model can only look to reducing operating costs or increasing sales or prices. This requires a strict inward focus on production and distribution and a management team enforce efficiency through strict command and control management. As managerial hierarchies grow, they also became intensely political which makes the inward focus even worse. That inward focus, which began for rational reasons of efficiency, always removes managers from their consumers and their employees. For the past fifty years, managers have kept re-discovering consumers and then forgetting them again because of the fundamental nature of the system [14].

In the mass production contact centre industry, time is money and measures drive an emphasis on efficiency and economic value. Faster is better. Costs are to be driven out. Speed equals efficiency, time savings and cost savings. This creates the contradictions of quality verses quantity as customers are disappointed with the trade-off between cost of service and the service itself, and customer service people contend with managing increasing demand whilst maintaining quality standards.

Advisors are trained to keep calls short and sell high margin items that customers don't necessarily need or want, whilst being told that customer satisfaction is the single most important aspect of their job. This is why Korczynski [15] suggests that the advisor's job is more about management of customer disillusionment, than the promotion of the “enchanted myth of customer sovereignty” which has informed customer expectations. Contact centre advisors are often put in systems that cause them to mistreat customers. Rules and policies put pressure on advisors and the costs of that undue stress come in turnover, morale and hostile treatment of customers.

The human factor in the call centre production line is expected to maintain maximal efficiency regardless of the stresses and strains of emotional labour. However, strategies such as self service reduces the routine, mundane contacts and strategies such as customer relationship management (CRM) start to make the human qualities of the contact centre interaction more central. From a purely cost focused perspective, this makes ‘transactions’ less efficient. However, by allowing advisors to add their own intelligence and skills to the interaction, it can make them more effective.

However, whilst industry is driven by the metrics of economic rather than human value, the alternative models of the contact centre may struggle to gain acceptance by anyone but the most passionate customer centred organisations and customers will continue to feel aggrieved at the levels of service that they receive.

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