

The Evolution of the Contact Centre: Elevating the Front Line



Supporting Partner



Of the many ways in which contact centres have changed in the past year and a half, none is more significant or will have such a permanent positive impact as the elevation of the customer service function, and the growing emphasis on supporting colleagues on the frontline.

Customer experience has long been a focus of attention. The relationship between employee experience and customer experience is well understood. However, advisor experience in contact centres is a relatively new concept. There has always been a keen focus on productivity in the contact centre, but recently a more holistic set of practices have taken root which encompass well-being, career development, and investing in coaching, processes and tools which empower the front line to be successful.

In this paper we outline how and why the contact centre

has become elevated and we present the case for why advisor experience should be a top priority in every organisation that has a contact centre. The insights and quotations in this paper are extracted from The Evolution of the Contact Centre, a CCMA Research Initiative supported by Puzzle.

The Evolution of the Contact Centre is an ongoing programme, the first three waves of which ran from August 2020 through March 2021. The next iteration is scheduled for launch September 2021.

As challenging as the past 18 months have been for all of us, we will look back on this extraordinary period as a time when organisations gained a new appreciation of the customer service function and of the people who work in it.

The work of our advisors became more invaluable than ever during the pandemic as anxious customers turned to contact centres for certainty and reassurance. Acceleration in mass deployment of self-serve channels during lockdown has certainly not rendered humans obsolete: on the contrary, as transactional demand migrates to automated channels, there is a greater appreciation than ever of the need for human advisors to take care of the

more complicated and emotive queries.

As the role of frontline teams is re-framed in new and exciting ways, our understanding grows of the value in supporting them correctly: with systems that empower them to do their job, with good remuneration, with career opportunities that reflect the historically overlooked skills that advisors learn on the job. Welcome to the era of advisor experience: a thrilling new chapter that the CCMA is delighted to usher in.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Advisor experience and customer experience go hand in hand. Creating a seamless, frictionless and satisfying customer journey should be your touchstone when looking for ways to improve your contact centre and customer service. This comes down to equipping your people with access to expert knowledge, integrating cross-channel data, providing powerful AI (artificial intelligence) tools, and giving agents an easy-to-use interface.

With this in mind, Puzzel has partnered with the CCMA to investigate how and why the contact centre has become elevated and why advisor experience should be a top priority in every organisation that has a contact centre.



Jonathan Allan,
Chief Marketing Officer, Puzzel

This rise of hybrid working has placed a spotlight on advisor experience

Among many profound changes that happened during a pandemic, perhaps the most significant legacy is the permanent shift to hybrid working. Having proven during lockdown that it is possible for frontline staff to operate effectively from home and with expectations of on-premises working forever changed by Covid-19, many contact centres have chosen to embrace the hybrid model.

The various lockdowns of 2020-21 were a crash course in how to effectively migrate contact centre operations to remote working. As restrictions eased and offices re-opened, it was apparent for many contact centres there would be no return to the fully office-based model of pre-pandemic days.

In contact centres as in other industries, many colleagues now expect to have the option of working remotely at least from time to time. For contact centre leaders, meeting colleagues' expectation of flexibility and fairness at the same time as meeting the needs of the organisation is a balancing act.

“Treating people fairly doesn’t mean treating everyone the same. Giving lots and lots of options, but little clarity around what people can and can’t do within them can be more disengaging than having more restrictive, less flexible options that are absolutely clear.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

Some contact centres have fully embraced remote working and have downsized their office space to suit, re-purposing their smaller spaces for meetings and breakout areas rather than individual cubicles.

A geographically agnostic approach enables contact centres to recruit from a wider pool of people as opposed to from within a specific locale only.

Remote working helps fill shifts that typically are harder to fill with staff on premises (for example during late-night hours). Split shifts become more viable as the lack of commute makes working 3-4 hours at a time feasible.

“We’re very open to adjusting shifts, working patterns, compressed hours, to fit around people’s family life. There is a great opportunity to do that when we’re working remotely.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

Other contact centres have opted to mandate a certain amount of time spent in the office, citing the benefits of boosting collaboration and camaraderie.

“We made a very clear decision that recruitment and training and onboarding will be done the old-fashioned way in the building, face to face. The first six months will be very much building based. After that it’s about flexibility and giving people the opportunity to work from home, if it works for them.”

Ceri Henfry, Head of Operations, Money Penny

“I wouldn’t want to move to a model of totally operating online and recruiting people that never ever come to the office. It’s a place where we want to collaborate and drive forward the business together.”

Helen Wilson, COO, Atom Bank

“Unlike some organisations who hire people to work from home exclusively, our people didn’t sign up to that. And as much as they’ve kind of got through it, a lot of our people are driven through human connection.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

There are no right or wrong solutions when it comes to hybrid working. Each organisation must decide for itself based on its own unique circumstances and culture. What does consistently apply is the expectation from frontline colleagues to be able to have some input into decisions. As such, it is critically important that leaders are seen to be listening to staff and to be communicating with transparency.

Boosting skill sets and career opportunities

During the uncertainty brought about by a pandemic, nervous customers turned to contact centres for reassurance. Many organisations experienced a sudden rise in demand and an increase in average handling times during the first lockdown of spring 2020 which has not subsided since.

Some organisations have been successful in migrating some demand to self-serve channels. Thanks to increased adoption of self-serve, the queries reaching the phone channel now tend to be more complex ones that require live human assistance.

As automation increasingly takes care of the more straightforward questions, more value is placed on advisors to help solve the problems that only humans can. This is paving the way for skill sets, career paths and pay scales to be upgraded.

“Senior exec roles tended to come from marketeers, from finance, from business schools. Now they’re coming from service. We’ll see more and more of this because of the value we bring into the organisation of hearing and seeing it from the customer perspective. That is the key differentiator.”

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

“We need to make customer service a viable career choice. We have still yet to make this a recognised, skill-based service for people to be in. Covid has proven this across every single sector. No-one could have survived without ringing someone from customer service and asking for help. This is our moment.”

Louise Locke, Senior Director, Travelport

During lockdown the contact centre became organisations’ primary interface with the outside world. Internally, frontline staff became more visible to other teams and vice-versa. Colleagues in other departments gained a new appreciation of the value of frontline work. While the stereotypical perception of the advisor role is one of a low-skilled temporary job, more and more people are beginning to realise that the contact centre can be an excellent training ground and a career springboard: a place to build hard and soft skills, customer empathy, a problem-solving mindset, product and organisational knowledge. Not surprisingly, it is becoming commonplace for frontline advisors to move to roles in other departments, where the skills they have nurtured in the contact centre serve them well.

The next technology frontier: systems that empower frontline colleagues

As organisations roll out new contact channels there is a need not only to ensure a seamless customer journey but

also to provide the advisor with a single customer view. The two concepts go hand in hand, of course: the single customer view in the contact centre is essential to make the experience seamless for the customer. In other words, the quality of the advisor experience directly affects the quality of the customer experience.

Beyond the single customer view, predictive contact analytics and intelligent call routing are beginning to make their presence felt. Real-time speech and text analytics can mine both the content and the tonality of a conversation to help prompt advisors with useful suggestions, identify the nature of a caller's query and emotional state to help route the call to the right advisor, and capture transcripts and themes from conversations to assist with quality assurance and coaching.

Linking customer transaction and contact history to inbound telephony systems is also used in call routing and to equip the advisor with information that avoids the need for the customer to repeat themselves.

“We introduced something called a call assist tool, which helps guide advisors using decision trees through a kind of a set route, dependent upon what the customer is contacting us about. This massively alleviated the concern that our colleagues had about not saying something that they needed to. There is a customer benefit as you have more consistency. But first and foremost, it makes things easier for our people.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

Turning to the front line for customer insight

Most organisations implement customer-feedback programmes of some kind, with varying levels of sophistication. Some advanced Voice of Customer systems embed feedback captures within the customer journey itself, using a combination of customer surveys and transcriptions to generate data that is mined for insight.

Highly developed enterprise-level Voice of Customer platforms not only capture post-interaction feedback from the customer but also from the advisor. This is particularly useful for managing escalation cases, allowing advisors to record which actions were taken and to flag next steps which in turn generate notifications to relevant teams to follow up and log progress.

Some businesses go further and directly canvass their frontline teams for information about customers, recognising the rich and up-to-the-minute customer knowledge that resides in the contact centre.

“[In a previous role] we implemented speech analytics. We went from being not so interesting to the product team because they got all of their data from the app to them realising that a lot of customers weren't using the app and becoming interested.”

Justin Haines, COO, Paymentsense

“When doing development on our e-commerce website, the first place the UX designers go to is a group of advisors to talk about potential improvements that customers want to see.”

Steven Lee, Director of Business Service EMEA, LEGO® Group

The future of advisor experience

We hope that this article has given you some insight to why advisor experience is such a critical element for contact centre strategy. Here are five trends which will continue to re-shape our industry and elevate contact centres and the people who work in them, for years to come:

1. The **shift to hybrid working** has placed the spotlight on flexibility and welfare as well as productivity.
2. A **new appreciation of the value of the front line**, burnished during the pandemic, is helping contact centres forge closer connections to other parts of organisations.
3. As demand for simpler queries migrates to self-serve channels, human advisors take on more complex interactions with **increasing pay scales and recognition** to match.
4. Growing appreciation of the **contact centre as a place to build a career**, nurturing valuable expertise and acting as a gateway to roles elsewhere in the organisation.
5. **Technology that empowers advisors**, such as connectivity between the telephony platform and CRM databases, intelligent call routing and analytics and customer-feedback systems that incorporate advisor feedback and insights.