



Part 5 | The Evolution of the Contact Centre

February 2022

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When every moment matters

Reframing the contact centre

In August 2020, the CCMA started on a journey to track how the contact centre is evolving during times of real change. This is the fifth part in a series of research reports kindly supported by Puzzel, exploring the evolution of the contact centre.

As this instalment is published, it has been two years since the start of the pandemic. It details how the industry is continuing to adapt to a business environment that has profoundly changed in that time. As in previous waves this report is based on qualitative research comprising group discussions with industry leaders representing some of the UK's leading brands.

With thanks to

We invited 17 contact centre leaders representing a diverse mix of vertical markets, contact centre types and experiences to a series of focus groups in January 2022 to explore how the industry is evolving. The CCMA and Puzzel extend their sincere thanks to these individuals for their generous participation in the study.

Julie Banks, Support Services Manager, Eurostar

James Blackwood, Head of Contact Centre, Eurostar

Bridget Colloby, Marketing Director, Towergate

Andy Cook, Customer Director, Ruroc

Sara Dodd, Call Centre and Customer Experience Director, Assurant

Craig Edwards, Group Sales and Customer Services Director, Hilary's

Laura Frost, Customer Relations & Contact Centre Manager, Anglian Water

Michael Gartside, Head of Central Operations, Wesleyan

David Goodchild, Continuous Improvement Manager, Car Care Plan Group

Ian Harrison, Head of Customer Engagement, Eurotunnel

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Atlanta Insurance Intermediaries

Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care, Estee Lauder Companies

Kate O'Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

Catherine Oehlers, Director of Customer Experience, Bowers & Wilkins (Sound United)

Rula Samara-Sellers, Head of Customer Contact - Customer Experience

Kelly Shippen, Head of Contact Centres, Leeds Building Society

Val Wonnacott, Business Improvement Manager, The AA

Foreword from CCMA

This fifth part of our Evolution of the Contact Centre series highlights the need to reframe how contact centres are perceived both internally and externally, to attract talent and investment and better reflect the crucial role that contact centres play within organisations. This is especially urgent in 2022 given the increased responsibility and impact of contact centre roles, coupled with a chronic shortage of talent.

In this report, five themes emerge for contact centres to consider in order to thrive during this challenging period and beyond. We make the case for the importance of reframing roles on the frontline, establishing a framework for attribution and fostering strong values-driven leadership that motivates colleagues. The insights suggest the importance of

promoting a culture of care that is demonstrated in the interactions between colleagues and customers, and it is clear how valuable the frontline is to the success of the organisation.

After a tumultuous two years we have entered a new phase, one in which organisations are focusing on investing in people for the long term. We are more confident than ever in our ability to adapt to the challenges that 2022 will no doubt throw at us. The future may remain uncertain, but it is also brighter than it has been for a long time.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Foreword from Puzzel

Contact centres are working harder, faster and more strategically than ever before. Shipping delays and staffing shortages – combined with customers' zero tolerance for Covid-related disruption – put extra pressure on customer service teams and their managers this past holiday season. But with infection rates now falling and restrictions lifting again across Europe, 2022 is looking brighter.

Already we're seeing big businesses shifting their focus from recovery to growth, and contact centres gearing up to play a leading role. In this fifth instalment of the Evolution of the Contact Centre, we hear how contact centre leaders are now collaborating with other parts of the

business, such as marketing and sales, to help better inform product development, improve sales enablement and drive more revenue. Leaders are also investing in new technologies and training programs to help their agents deliver more empathetic and personalised customer service, which will be crucial for earning back trust and loyalty this year. Get this right – and I believe we're in for an incredibly exciting year of CX.



Jonathan Allan,
Chief Marketing
Officer, Puzzel

Reframing the frontline

In the past two years the role of the frontline in contact centres has changed in many organisations. With automation and self-serve handling a larger share of simple interactions, the queries that find their way to human operators tend to be more complex and emotive.

“People can do all the transactional stuff online. By the time they contact you, they’re at some point of distress.” - Bridget Colloby, Marketing Director, Towergate

Ongoing disruptions to supply chains are creating demand for contact centres from stressed customers. It is crucial that contact centres work closely with sourcing and fulfilment colleagues to get ahead of issues before they happen, communicate with customers and report back the ramifications to the wider business.

“If something that would normally take a week instead takes three weeks because of various different shipping delays around the world, you’re going to get people chasing it four, five, six times. Customers’ patience on anything Covid related has reduced to zero.” - Andy Cook, Customer Director, Ruroc

Empathy and soft skills are needed on the frontline more than ever, so that colleagues can deal with the increase in emotionally-demanding conversations and provide the care customers expect. Salaries are rising, not only in response to the talent shortage, but to reflect the changing job content.

“Empathy is a big one. Our people need soft skills so they can have better conversations with more meaning and depth. Customers want to trust us. They have come through a very tough time and they call us for reassurance more often than not.” Kate O’Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

“ To be effective on the frontline today requires a blend of technical, problem-solving and people skills. There is huge demand for high-calibre people, and our industry must offer the career opportunities and salaries to match. **”**

Stephen Yap, Research Director, CCMA

Recruitment in a candidates' market

Since last summer the number of open vacancies in the UK has risen sharply, due to a combination of factors. Young people are opting to spend longer in education as a result of the pandemic; there has been an increase in those suffering from long-term illness; Brexit has reduced the availability of overseas-born talent. More profoundly, in what has been dubbed the pandemic-led 'Great Resignation', people are re-evaluating their relationship with work.

Today, contact centres face heavy recruitment competition from other industries starved of talent.

"We're seeing less people in market, despite offering higher salaries. The job market is so buoyant people are competing on salary a lot more than they were previously." - Craig Edwards, Group Sales and Customer Services Director, Hilary's

Attrition is rising in some contact centres thanks to the 'double whammy' of tight labour market combined with the rising demands of the job. Some contact centres are seeing a high proportion of new recruits leave the job for easier jobs elsewhere.

"They may have just come out of university and so they may not have had a lot of exposure to a different demographic outside of family... understanding somebody in their 50s who's lost a parent may be tough for them." - Bridget Colloby, Marketing Director, Towergate

Some contact centres have brought in colleagues from care backgrounds specifically for the softer skills they bring. On the other hand, some of these recruits have found it difficult to adjust to the working environment.

"We're getting a lot of people coming through from the care industries. Some of them have worked

with dementia and dealt with bereavement. Those skill sets are fantastic. What they potentially struggle with is being in a fast paced, KPI driven environment, when they've not been used to these kinds of targets before." - Laura Frost, Customer Relations & Contact Centre Manager, Anglian Water

Addressing these challenges calls for an overhaul in the approach to frontline recruitment. Increasingly, contact centres are recruiting for soft skills up front. Values-based recruitment is emerging as a theme. A compelling organisational mission, brand values and matching career pathways are emerging as recruitment differentiators.

"We want people that are going to influence people and be role models...who are the right culture fit for us and create the right environment." - Laura Frost, Customer Relations & Contact Centre Manager, Anglian Water

"We do role-plays where we ask interviewees to reflect on scenarios - anything that they thought didn't seem right, or if they would like to change bearing in mind what they hear from customers. We ask them how they would feel, and what would they have wanted to happen?" - Kelly Shippen, Head of Contact Centres at Leeds Building Society

Some operations have effectively mobilised resources across functions to address staff shortages and maintain service during periods of disruption or peak demand.

"During the last two years we've mobilised our branch network so that they can take phone calls at times when we need them." - Kelly Shippen, Head of Contact Centres, Leeds Building Society

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"We're now doing events, pop up retail, and our guys love going to these. You meet a completely different type of person, the interactions are different and they get to go places they otherwise wouldn't do. When we're doing anything physical, we'll use our customer service team because who better to talk to our customers about our products?" - Andy Cook, Customer Director, Ruroc

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“ It's never been harder to recruit, when the pool of candidates is at all-time lows and there are so many other options available. Contact centres are opting to cast the net wider and look for non-traditional candidates but this may entail a longer on-boarding and acclimatisation period, particularly while people are working remotely. ”

Stephen Yap, Research Director, CCMA

Outsourcing and offshoring on the rise

Other than difficulties with recruitment, some contact centres have had to operate under-staffed due to the high incidence of Covid infections during the winter months. Some are turning to outsourcers to help fill the gap, while others are exploring resourcing options overseas.

It is not uncommon for contact centres to see higher attrition among people recruited remotely. How to immerse remote workers in an organisation's culture, offer them adequate pastoral care and help them feel a sense of belonging to the team, are vexing challenges for leaders.

"It's very tempting for us to spread the net wider, because then we will get more people. But we need to consider are they going to see our culture if they don't get to the office?" - David Goodchild, Continuous Improvement Manager, Car Care Plan Group

"About three years ago when we were starting to see attrition rates increase, we ran open days to give people a feel for the organisation. We've not been able to do that during the pandemic and that's made a huge difference to the quality of the people taken on." - Craig Edwards, Group Sales and Customer Services Director, Hilary's

At the same time as the importance of soft skills on the frontline grows, learning and teaching those soft skills is immensely more difficult when operating remotely.

"I always used to think of it as osmosis when you're in the office. Our advisors are missing out on learning skills and observing a more senior person demonstrating empathy." - Bridget Colloby, Marketing Director, Towergate

"In the call centre, agents see their team leader's body language when they're talking to people and how they make themselves available." - David Goodchild, Continuous Improvement Manager, Car Care Plan Group

Despite these challenges, there is no question that remote working is here to stay for many organisations. 'WFH' has become normalised, and some will be reluctant to return to the office after having re-calibrated their lives.

"Not everyone will want to adopt hybrid working patterns and return to the office. Some have made lifestyle changes whilst working from home." - Catherine Oehlers, Director of Customer Experience, Bowers & Wilkins (Sound United)

“ The limitations of remote working have become clearer in recent months. Nothing can replace the 'osmosis' of the office and both managers and junior colleagues are finding it more challenging to coach and be coached over a screen. As contact centres develop their hybrid plans a key consideration is making the most of office time. **”**

Stephen Yap, Research Director, CCMA

Reframing the team leader

In the era of remote working, the responsibilities of the manager are markedly different. Huge pressure is being put on managers to safeguard the well-being of their teams in the face of demanding work that is often being carried out alone at home. However, working from home naturally favours task-based activities and is less optimal for people-based activities. The manager may feel very productive from a task standpoint, but the people side may be suffering.

“Our managers tell us that they get a lot more done when they’re at home, They don’t always realise that what they’re not doing is developing that next level of manager.” - David Goodchild, Continuous Improvement Manager, Car Care Plan Group

Without the ability to teach via physical proximity, bandwidth becomes a huge barrier. Some contact centres are opting to reduce team size and reduce the volume of escalation calls team leaders are required to take, to free up time for people management.

“Are we set up to cope with the increase in mental health and well-being support that is now laying on the doorstep of people managers? Giving them the skills and also the capacity. Are team sizes too big? We need to have a fresh look at these things.”

- Kelly Shippen, Head of Contact Centres, Leeds Building Society

Some contact centres are supporting managers in innovative and creative ways to develop the people skills they need to manage effectively in the hybrid era, such as bringing in actors to help coach.

“Last year we rolled out a manager development programme bringing in actors to demonstrate soft skills. Every quarter we move on to a different topic. The actors are also coaches who help develop our managers.” - Rula Samara, Head of Customer Service - Customer Experience

“ As the job of the frontline becomes ever more complex and well-being continue to be high on everyone’s agenda, managers are needed more than ever. Freeing up managers to be able to provide pastoral care is one of the most valuable things any contact centre can do today. **”**

Stephen Yap, Research Director, CCMA

Reframing the contact centre externally

As the job content and the skills required to thrive on the frontline evolve quickly, the gap widens yet further between public perceptions of life in contact centres, versus the realities of the job.

In 2022 the popular perception of contact centre careers as low-skilled is a major barrier to attracting the right calibre of people. Changing external perceptions is more important than ever.

“There are very few call centres that are still having people do mundane tasks. That’s all been automated. What’s left is really challenging and really interesting.” - David Goodchild, Continuous Improvement Manager, Car Care Plan Group

As frontline roles become ever richer and more sophisticated, this increases the potential for contact centre colleagues to transition to other positions.

“Contact centre advisors have options to become account execs and ultimately go face-to-face with high-net-worth private clients, or they could progress into Operations.”
- Bridget Colloby, Marketing Director, Towergate

“There’s no longer a glass ceiling for people who work in customer-care environments.” - David Goodchild, Continuous Improvement Manager, Car Care Plan Group

While job content is evolving and salaries are rising, expectations of new recruits are very different to what they were even just a few years ago. Contact centres must work hard to ensure that the colleague experience keeps pace with changing expectation.

“The people that we see coming through have a different mindset...different expectations of work. How easy is it to marry that up with the environment that we work in? I suspect expectations are accelerating faster than we can keep up with removing non value add activities, to enable people to actually have a richer conversational-type role.” - Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care, Estee Lauder Companies

The critical importance of attracting the right people and managing attrition extends far beyond operational dimensions. More than ever, customers have turned to contact centres for help and reassurance in uncertain times. The contact centre has become the front line of brand experience, and the quality of the people on the front line has a direct impact on how the brand is perceived.

“ The public perception of contact centre careers as low-skilled roles with limited opportunities could not be further from the truth today. As a result, many people who would thrive in contact centres will not be considering roles. It’s time for contact centres to go on a PR offensive. ”

Stephen Yap, Research Director, CCMA

Reframing the contact centre internally

One of the positive outcomes of the pandemic years has been an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the contact centre from other teams. By and large, internal perceptions have moved on faster than external ones, but in some organisations there a gap remains between the true value that the contact centre brings versus how it is seen by other departments. A greater appreciation of its strategic position will be instrumental in helping contact centres secure ongoing investment and internal collaboration.

"We're here to drive customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, revenue, lifetime value of the customer, all of those things... Yet senior management can see us as a cost centre."

- Ian Harrison, Head of Customer Engagement, Eurotunnel

As salaries inevitably rise in a candidates' market, there is a greater onus than ever before on leaders to justify the business case for greater remuneration. Savings from automation may not necessarily reach the bottom line, but rather need to be directed to colleagues' pay.

Already well established in marketing, the topic of attribution is emerging on the radar of contact centres and the wider customer experience (CX) community. A parallel may be drawn with the explosive growth of digital performance marketing, thanks to robust attribution methods: similarly, establishing attribution frameworks will be of tremendous benefit to help attract investment in CX and contact centres.

"We were able to establish a direct correlation between consumers having a conversation with someone in the contact centre and higher propensity to repeat purchase."

- Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care, Estee Lauder Companies

In some sectors contact centres can strengthen their commercial foundations by getting involved in revenue-generating customer journeys, but this is much more difficult in regulated industries where the onus will always be on customer care.

As a minimum, top management must recognise the contact centre's pivotal function as the customer champion. Naturally, the head of contact centre has a key role in ensuring it is seen this way.

"I am here to be the voice of the customer, helping the exec to understand that we have a broader role to play in supporting our customers: attracting them, retaining them, looking after them."

- Bridget Colloby, Marketing Director, Towergate

Since the pandemic, organisational mission and values have taken centre stage in attracting and retaining both customers and colleagues. More than ever, winning brands are distinguished by strong leadership from the top, from executive members who understand the value of putting the customer first. This cascades all the way to colleagues on the frontline, who are inspired and empowered to demonstrate the organisation's values through their interactions with customers and are appreciated elsewhere in the organisation for doing so.

"Kindness and making the right decision for the customer and the planet are going to be so important. I think businesses that don't show this in their values and objectives might fail in the next few years."

- Kate O'Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

“ Organisations that are serious about customer experience realise their contact centres are far more than just operational cost centres, but that investment in the contact centre directly impacts customer and business outcomes. ”

Stephen Yap, Research Director, CCMA

The five themes that will drive contact centre strategy in 2022 (and beyond)

1. Recruiting people with soft skills as the job content becomes more complex
2. Reframing the contact centre externally – to attract people with the right competencies
3. Reframing the contact centre internally – to secure investment and collaboration
4. Giving team leaders the time to spend supporting their teams
5. Getting the hybrid model right and allowing learning through osmosis to happen.



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