

Leadership Series
Insurance

The Contact Centre as a Career of Choice

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Featuring

Kirk Bradley, Director of Customer Service, Bupa Global

Helen Shields, Contact Centre Director, Collingwood Insurance

Jason Mann, Operations Director, PIB Group

Jen Turner, Head of Sales and Retention, The AA

Anna Inglis, HR Director, The AA

Aidan Dale, Associate Director, BGL

Liz Hicks, Head of Operations, Ageas

Bridget Colloby, Head of Commercial & Specialty Marketing, RSA Group

Phil O'Shiel, Group Account Lead, Diligenta on behalf of The Phoenix Group

About the Leadership Series

The Leadership Series is the documented output from CCMA's Leadership Forum meetings. These meetings take place at the House of Lords and provide an exclusive opportunity for senior contact centre leaders to explore the key factors driving change in the industry and to consider how to continue to innovate for the benefit of the customer, colleagues and the business.

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Whether it's joining the police force, working in the NHS, or training to be a lawyer or accountant, many schools suggest these careers for students. However, a substantial number of young people leave education not knowing how they would like to build their career. Despite the fact that approaching 5% of the UK's working population are currently employed in the contact centre industry, it's rare for young people to single out customer service or the contact centre as their career of choice.

That's a particular concern for the insurance sector where effective customer service can prove a key competitive differentiator. So, we asked what organisations could do to help address this issue. Key questions included: is recruitment getting easier or harder? What's the career

path like for contact centre workers in the sector? How are contact centre jobs changing? And what new roles are emerging in today's insurance contact centres? Here's what our attendees thought.

Is recruitment getting easier or harder in the contact centre space?

According to Helen Shields from Collingwood Insurance: **"we have to recognise that there's still a stigma about working in a contact centre - however, people who join the industry quickly find that the experience is quite different. There's nothing boring about contact centres, no two days are the same. As an industry we've got to get better at telling our stories - getting**

into schools and colleges and telling people about the job and how their role could develop."

Anna Inglis, HR Director at The AA, agreed. **"Everywhere you look there are people who began their careers in the contact centre - not just in the customer service space but across all business operations. We don't do enough to signpost how the contact centre was a great springboard for future careers."**

RSA Group's Bridget Colloby added: **"it's perhaps more challenging to recruit into contact centre roles against often outdated job criteria. Particularly today with equality, diversity and inclusion front of mind, it's important that we keep pace with current thinking. We might need a softer skillset rather than focusing strictly on qualifications - we don't**

all start from the same place, and there's a danger we're overlooking people who would be great for contact centres."

From the Ageas perspective, Liz Hicks said **"about a year ago post-Covid, recruitment was proving difficult, and we had to think a bit differently. We focused more on remote recruitment and, while we're still assessing the results, we found that it worked really well for part-time staff but that it's also harder to build loyalty and a strong connection with the business. This, in turn, can make it more challenging for people to identify opportunities across the rest of the business."**

At Bupa Kirk Bradley feels it's important to be realistic. **"I've yet to find someone who's dream is to come in and work as a contact centre agent. People usually join because contact centres can provide them with role that fits in with their life. But we also need to recognise that many people want to do more – indeed they may already have their eye on "the next job". And, while there are many varied roles within the contact centre, these aren't immediately available. We generally like our people to spend around 12-18 months on the phones in order to really understand our products and stakeholders before they move on. Perhaps we're making it too hard and need to make things more flexible?"**

Aidan Dale from BGL agreed with Liz, suggesting that: **"in**

the short-term, post-Covid it was easier to broaden out recruitment, but it's really important that we think longer term about this. Are we recruiting the right people for what the future holds in terms of the impact from digitisation and AI? We have to make sure that we have core contact centre people, who can approach these issues from a customer service perspective." Jen Turner, who heads up Sales and Retention at The AA, says **"it's easier to recruit if you're still operating remotely, however we've seen better 'stickability' if they're hybrid roles with both home and office working. But you still need levels of volume recruitment if you're to maintain your staffing levels."**

At Diligenta we also have challenges. According to Phil O'Shiel: **"when we add employees through TUPE we often find that regional dynamics can cause issues in terms of salaries. We're also impacted by the contractor market – for example, we're seeing the age of those in specialist roles increasing as a number of candidates / colleagues are choosing to work in the contractor market. This can be a challenge especially in key specialist roles."**

Challenge of managing remote workers

When discussing recruitment

issues, it was clear that the task of managing remote employees was proving challenging for many around the table. Anna Inglis said **"that while in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, the AA had hired and trained many advisors entirely remotely, the future aspiration was a more dynamic model with training on site followed with the ability to work from home on a hybrid basis once competent in role."** Liz Hicks at Aegeas said they **"found managing remote teams more challenging, and that those employees that had a hybrid role felt more included and aligned to the company's culture."**

However, Kirk Bradley reported that early attrition from fully remote employees was currently much higher than that of office-based staff. Phil O'Shiel agreed that there was an unseen cost that came with managing remote workers. Anna Inglis felt that this was inevitable given the physical disconnect. **"It's great that we have been able to draw on a larger pool of remote workers, but so has everyone else. Where ability to work remotely has been the primary attractor for some candidates, it runs a higher risk of attrition in some instances. It's been an employee market for the last 18 months and lack of established connection to a brand or company can make it very easy to move on, especially where candidates have been**

applying for multiple jobs at a time so options to switch have been plentiful”.

However, organisations also need to do more to appeal to their local recruitment demographic. At The AA, Jen Turner says **“we’ve got a drive to build up our local community profile – it’s important that people don’t forget we’re here”**. Kirk Bradley recognises the challenge, recalling: **“when I was starting work, living in the west of Newcastle, everyone knew that there were only two contact centre choices – it was either British Airways or The AA. Now things are a lot more crowded.”**

How have jobs in the contact centre changed?

Leigh Hopwood, the CCMA's CEO, then asked how those around the table felt that jobs had changed in the contact

centre – and how might they continue to evolve? How could today's leaders convince people that they were part of an organisation with purpose that would invest in them and their careers?

Jason Mann, Operations Director at PIB Group, observed: **“perhaps the most striking shift has been the relentless nature of the job today – it’s rare now to see agents given time off the phones to learn. It seems we increasingly have a leadership focus that concentrates on performance management. Anyone can keep an eye on KPIs, but what we actually want is contact centre leadership that can spot talent and help take it forward. This requires long-term commitment, particularly when it comes to picking team leaders, building career paths, and establishing contact centres as great workplaces.”**

Kirk Bradley recognised the role that technologies such as AI and automation were having in reshaping contact centre operations. **“We had already got to a stage where everything was much more complex, with multiple products available, and multiple screens and systems that contact centre teams have to use. That’s why AI is so significant, potentially removing multiple interfaces and systems and giving agents a much clearer and more intuitive working environment. “What’s also happening is that the workloads are getting more complex as self-service and automation handle more and more of the routine customer journeys. That’s where AI can help again, ensuring that agents are offered an augmented experience that can provide them with the data and insights they need to manage the most challenging conversations. The result should**



be a much more engaging role for what will become a new generation of smart Customer Relationship Managers,” added Kirk.

Aidan Dale also singled out increased complexity – **“it means that agents need to be given much more context to support their interactions. They need to know about the entire journey, from initial web research through digital channels to the agent conversation.”**

Working with less autonomy?

A common theme in the discussion was the growth of compliance and regulation and the sense that there was less autonomy than before. Jason Mann finds that, with more governance and the need to perform across KPIs for finance business partners, there's much less time to be people focused. **“A sure sign of this is when you hear people saying, ‘I've not got time to...’ I'm sure we're all finding that there's less freedom to actually do what's needed.”**

Kirk Bradley warned against the dangers of needless complexity. **“I've seen detailed documents setting out how to identify a complaint or a vulnerable customer. Sometimes it's just too much to deal with and people make more mistakes. And all the time we're doing this we're often not doing the things**

that matter.” Aidan Dale agreed, recognising that **“of course business practices have evolved, but this often means you simply can't make necessary ad hoc people decisions anymore.”**

Part of this comes from the continued move to integrate contact centre operations more tightly into the business. Liz Hicks at Ageas remembers how **“we used to be able to do our own thing, and the contact centre wasn't really thought about that much by the rest of the business. Now we're an integral part of the Ageas operation, but we perhaps don't have the traditional career development pathways that would have been in place 10 or 15 years ago. However, there are still many options for people to develop, with opportunities often available in compliance, finance and marketing – but they're not as clearly defined.”**

Building a career path within the contact centre

Leigh Hopwood then asked: **“given you've all been in multiple roles in your careers, are there now set career paths for today's contact centre professionals – or does progress tend to be more accidental?”** Liz Hicks felt that **“contact centres were still a great place for people to feed into other roles. Recruitment is tough, so it's always better to keep**

people internally.”

According to Aidan Dale, **“when I started it was a much more linear path and I was hungry to get off the phones – but perhaps progress was a little bit too prescriptive. At BGL we recognise that the contact centre is a great starting point – it's the people environment for the business, and our contact centre people frequently build on their skills by moving on to other parts of BGL to develop their careers. We're happy with that – providing they remain contact centre champions!”** Leigh Hopwood wondered if contact centre leaders were energising their employees to progress into other areas. Aidan thought that **“while the contact centre is still regarded as the recruitment agency for other parts of the business, it wasn't a proven model. We have to recognise that – as an industry - we're still not good enough at investing in our people and are still too focused on costs.”**

Jen Turner recognises that the contact centre can provide a springboard for lots of people, with potential future customer roles including NPS Manager, Social Media Manager, or Resource Planner. Other functions included employee experience management, wellbeing support, as well as a much greater emphasis on data and analytics. Kirk Bradley added that people from the Bupa contact centre had also gone on to roles including IT Director and General Manager

of Care Homes. Anna Inglis believed that it was important to share these stories and also for leaders to champion their own contact centre experiences.

“But it also needs to be a two-way thing,” said Jen, **“with contact centre employees pushing to achieve their own career objectives. At The AA we’re pleased that there’s real enthusiasm for this, with a recent career’s session attracting 60 people even though it meant missing their lunch!**

“However, we’ve also got to make sure we give employees the roles they need to develop. For team leaders, for example, it’s important to get rid of the sitting behind the desk bit – I can worry about the KPIs, but I want my team to be busy supporting team members and adding value for customers,” she added.

Jason Mann questioned whether perhaps the role we were asking team leaders to play was too hard. **“When I first entered the contact centre industry it was more of a meritocracy, and both team leaders and managers had more time to help. Now I worry that we’re just using team leaders to soak up additional functions that aren’t necessarily in their remit. It seems that whenever there’s a new IT system, it’s always the team leaders who are left to come up with the workarounds and**

ad hoc adjustments that are always needed.”

And while team leader time gets swallowed up by other issues, there’s also a steady, incremental increase in the number of people that team leaders have to look after. **“It used to be a 1:6 ratio for team leaders, and that’s now grown to around 1:14,”** said Jason. Others recognised this trend, adding that the role had also become more complex with the need to support hybrid and remote workers.

Elevating contact centre roles – language makes a difference!

Aidan Dale believed it was increasingly important for leaders – and the rest of the business – to work hard to elevate roles in the contact centre. **“If we describe people as just FTEs we’re actively damaging the role – effectively treating our people as numbers. The whole language thing is particularly important – we’re not talking about agents or FTEs, our people are fulfilling a vital customer manager role and the words we use need to reflect this.”**

Leigh Hopwood echoed this, describing the CCMA’s mission to humanise the role. **“Words make a difference when it comes to recruitment. We talk about frontline colleagues instead of agents and are mindful that titles such as**

advisor don’t work in the insurance sector as it has more specific implications.”

This opened up a broader discussion around how the language also mirrored the distinction between managing and leading within the contact centre. Phil O’Shiel believed that **“leaders were there to inspire their people to do the very best they can, and yet management words like shrinkage, attrition and adherence had very little to do with that.”** Kirk Bradley agreed, arguing that **“contact centres are all about successful conversations and getting things right. If all a leader does is talk about AHT then there’s an underlying disconnect.”**

Respecting the role

It was also felt that there was a danger that the broader business needed to demonstrate more respect for contact centre operations.

Bridget Colloby said: **“it’s easy for the rest of the business to stereotype who works in the contact centre”**, while Kirk Bradley talked of **“company-wide meetings where contact centre employees couldn’t attend because it meant they would be off the phones”**.

Aidan Dale suggested that **“if people in the contact centre are being left to handle the most complex interactions then we need to invest in them, more skills, more training,**

more empowerment. There's a strong case that we should be applying some of the savings that are being unlocked through digital channels and automation to support this."

Ensuring wellbeing

Leigh Hopwood also suggested that the last few years have seen an increased focus on colleague wellbeing, with the pandemic and the rise in remote working leading to greater awareness of mental health issues. What progress have organisations made?

Kirk Bradley applauded how the contact centre sector had become much more empathetic, but also suggested the need to be circumspect. **"Contact centre leaders need to ensure a duty of care for their colleagues, but they also need to understand where the boundaries are. The pandemic brought about a blurring between home and work life that can itself cause issues."**

"Wellbeing has also become a recruitment topic, with candidates asking about our support for mental health," said Anna Inglis. Liz Hicks agreed, suggesting that **"like parental leave or health provision there's a sense that in recruitment terms this needs to be part of the standard offer"**. Like Liz, Bridget Colloby said that **"when it comes to recruitment, people just want clear policies."**

Recruiting for an increasingly hybrid workforce

Leigh Hopwood concluded the Leadership Forum session by asking how contact centre leaders were adjusting to managing their mix of contact centre and remote people as well as full-time and part-time employees.

Liz Hicks reported how for Ageas **"our experience with full-time remote workers was a bit mixed, although part-time remote employment has worked well. We reckon that if up to around 30% of your workforce is part-time it's OK, but after that the cost base will change - with an increased load on team leaders. We also find that, after a year, retention for part-time colleagues is strong while around half of full-time remote people will have left."**

The forum concluded with a

discussion around the role of apprenticeships in contact centre recruitment. Phil O'Shiel challenged the team suggested that **"any young contact centre recruit was effectively an apprentice?"** but understood the value of diversity and opening up opportunity to a broad base. Liz Hicks at Ageas said they focused more on technical apprenticeships, while Kirk Bradley championed the apprenticeship model but acknowledged that it didn't necessarily transition into long-term employment. However, having begun his contact centre career at RSA while finishing his A-levels, Kirk did feel there was more that could be done with apprenticeships - **"going to university and getting saddled with debt doesn't work for everyone. Why not make apprenticeships equivalent to A-levels or degrees, and help people get a head start on their career?"**



About the CCMA

For nearly 30 years, the CCMA (Call Centre Management Association), as the longest established contact centre industry body, has been dedicated to supporting contact centre professionals across the UK. Founded on the principles of sharing best practice and networking to improve skills and knowledge, the CCMA is a thriving community that represents leaders from a huge cross-section of the industry.

Membership of the largest community in the industry offers unique opportunities, such as free annual benchmarking of 25+ KPIs, free entry into the UK National Contact Centre Awards and free tickets to the UK National Contact Centre Conference, invites to Executive Networking Dinners and exclusive events for members-only. Members also benefit from discounted training through the UK National Contact Centre Academy, the industry's training partner.

To support the industry further, the CCMA conducts regular original research for download, including the annual Salary and Skills Guide and the Voice of the Contact Centre Consumer research, the Evolution of the Contact Centre tracking the industry's progress and Good Practice Guides on a variety of topics.

www.ccma.org.uk

About Sabio

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Through its own technology, and that of world-class technology leaders such as Amazon Connect, Avaya, Genesys, Google Cloud, Salesforce, Twilio and Verint, Sabio helps organisations optimise their customer journeys by making better decisions across their multiple contact channels.

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