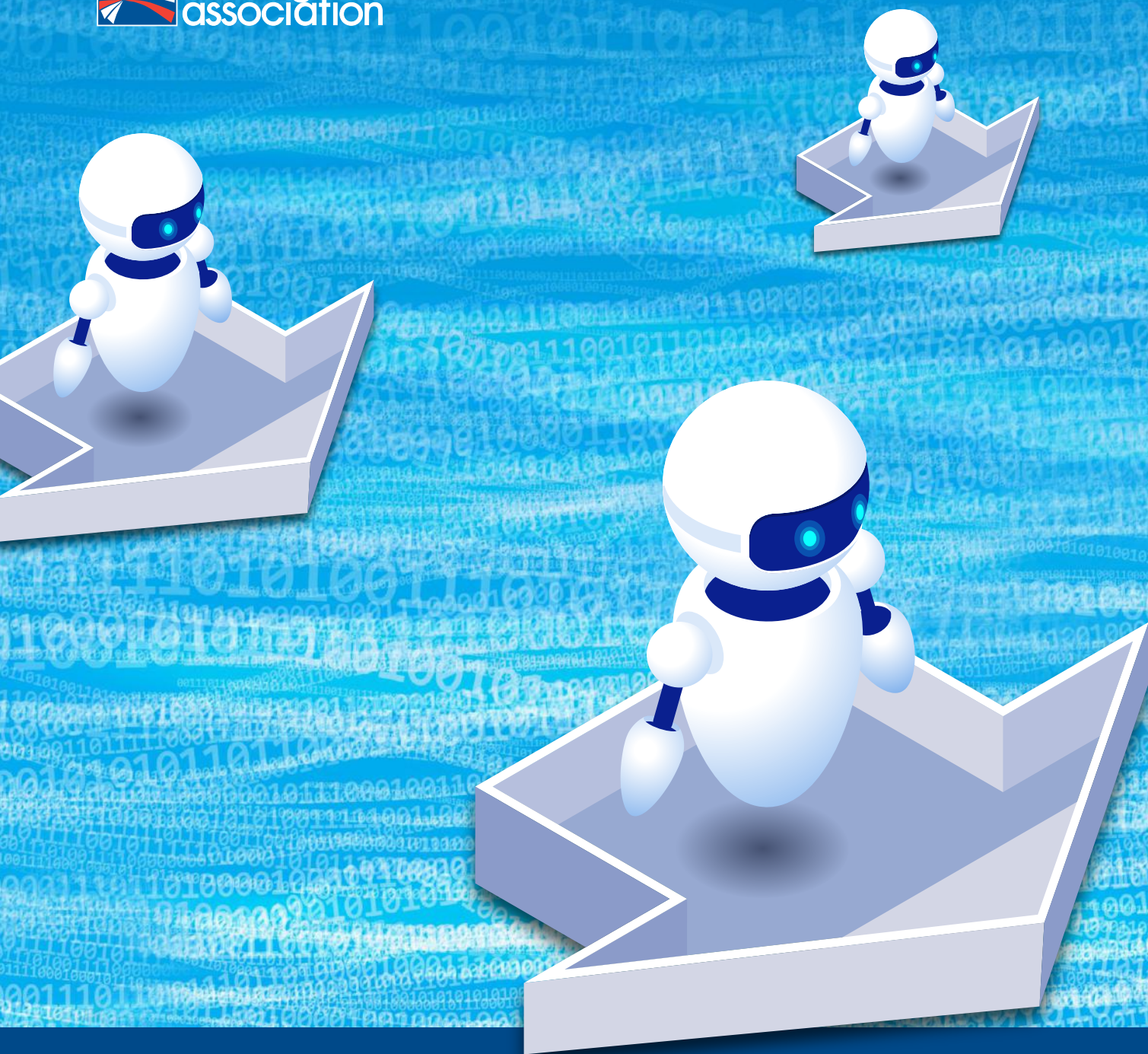




Navigating the AI Seascape

June 2024

A CCMA Research Initiative

Supporting Partner

Prepare for a smooth sailing

AI promises the biggest step change in productivity growth since the launch of the smartphone, or arguably even the introduction of the internet. But figuring out where and how AI (artificial intelligence) should be deployed, and getting the most out of deployments is challenging for even the most advanced organisation.

This latest research is a follow up to 'Navigating the Technology Seascape'¹ published in 2023 by CCMA, also supported by Route 101. This second piece offers a deep dive for every contact centre looking to understand and tap into the potential that AI offers. It features contributions from technologists and operations leaders representing many different industries and contact centre types.

With thanks to

The CCMA and Route 101 extend their sincere thanks to all contributors for their generous participation in the study:

Dan Allen, Deputy Director Landlord Support, NRLA

Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

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Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

¹ <https://www.ccma.org.uk/navigating-the-technology-seascape/>

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Foreword from CCMA

It feels like we've been talking about nothing else for the past 18 months or so. But when it comes to AI, the massive and universal interest from organisations of all shapes and sizes is matched by the size and steep trajectory of the learning curve required.

Some feel pressure to embark on the voyage sooner rather than later, given the amount of hype and consequently FOMO (fear of missing out) that surrounds AI. Every type of technology implementation promises benefits but brings potential pitfalls. AI brings a host of further considerations for contact centres to factor in.

Being so new and with the pace of development moving so rapidly, there is a lot for decision-makers

to assimilate. Not surprisingly, navigating the AI seascape can be intimidating for even the most experienced leaders.

This research has been designed to help. It presents success factors, potential obstacles, and learnings from leading brands that will be of interest to you wherever you may be on your own AI voyage. The prize for getting it right will be the biggest uplifts in efficiency, colleague and customer experience in a generation. Good luck, and happy sailing!



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Foreword from Route 101

In today's hyper-connected world, customers expect seamless and exceptional experiences across all touchpoints. AI has emerged as a powerful catalyst, empowering organisations to meet and exceed these heightened expectations. From intelligent virtual assistants and conversational AI to predictive analytics and real-time sentiment analysis, AI is revolutionising the way businesses engage with their customers and support their staff.

However, navigating the vast array of technologies, vendors, and implementation strategies can be overwhelming. A healthy dose of scepticism surrounds the promises made by vendors, whilst the speed at which these technologies have emerged and continue to evolve leaves many contact centre leaders unsure of where exactly to begin.

This research report aims to inform contact centre leaders seeking to harness AI's full potential while mitigating risks and challenges. Drawing upon industry thought leaders' collective expertise and real-world case studies, it delves into AI adoption's intricacies in the CX domain, exploring practical strategies for seamlessly integrating AI into existing customer engagement ecosystems.

At Route 101, we firmly believe AI is a transformative force that will redefine customer and agent experiences, not merely a buzzword. By embracing AI responsibly and strategically, businesses can unlock new operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and drive competitive advantage.

Building upon the insights from last year's research into "Navigating the Technology Seascape", this report dives deeper into AI's uncharted waters, equipping contact centre leaders with an indispensable compass to chart their course towards unparalleled customer experiences.

As you embark on your AI journey, remember that success lies in striking the right balance between technological innovation and deeply understanding your customers' needs and preferences. Embrace AI as a powerful ally, but never lose sight of the human touch that sets exceptional customer experiences apart.



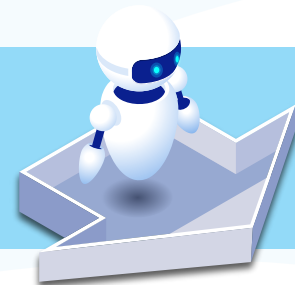
Russell Attwood,
CEO, Route 101

What makes AI different from earlier technologies?

We might know AI when we see it, but an established definition is conspicuously lacking. It is also true that many capabilities powered by AI

have existed for a long time in earlier, non-AI forms. Some of the ways in which AI may be distinguished from earlier technologies include the following:

- **Predictive and/or generative**
- **Discerns patterns that humans can't**
- **Self-learning**



Predictive and/or generative

Predictive AI uses mathematical models to predict outcomes based on past events. An example within CX is propensity modelling, e.g. predicting a customer's likelihood to purchase or to switch based on their characteristics and prior behaviours.

On the other hand, generative AI creates human-like text, images, video and audio content based on prompts, to assist with communication, learning and understanding.

Predictive and generative capabilities are often combined.

forms of analytics are limited to searching for patterns pre-populated by human designers. AI is able to not only search for pre-determined patterns at a speed and scale that is difficult to match by human hand, but it can uncover new patterns by itself.

"I refer to it as the 'needle in a haystack finder.' You know about your 'where's my order?' inquiries, your return inquiries. What's hard to find is the really low-volume stuff right at the bottom, which could be really important and in the past were drowned out. [With AI] you're finding more things and you're finding them much quicker." - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

"We've been creating predictive models in our industry for quite a while, for example a propensity-to-buy model. We're now able to put language on top of it, and have exposed all this clever model stuff, giving it a voice. People are waking up to the power that's there."

- Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

Self-learning

Crucially, AI is able to 'fill in the blanks' to spot links even where data is missing, and it has the ability to get better at doing so as it fills in more blanks. It is this characteristic that lends AI its true power and potential, and is why some observers believe that the time lag from hype to value will be much shorter for AI compared with past technologies.

"At present I see us probably using more predictive and less generative, just because most of the work that our agents do is quite transactional. It doesn't necessarily need the level of creativity that generative provides, or the individual personalisation." - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

"We now have a technology that can improve itself, which then becomes exponential. It comes up with its own logic itself. Which means that you can keep evolving it and it will find patterns in the data that you might not recognise, because when you're dealing with huge amounts of data it's just not possible for a human being to start picking out all of the different permutations of logic." - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

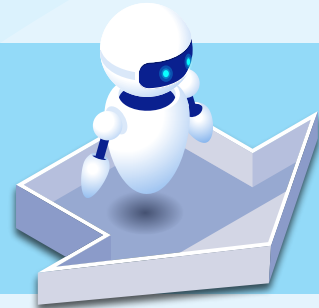
Discerns patterns that humans can't

Older technologies based on decision trees or earlier

Key benefits of AI in the contact centre

In this section we present some of the main ways in which AI benefits contact centres.

- A productivity force multiplier
- Extracting more value from data
- Cost out, quality up
- Hyper-personalisation of contact experiences



A productivity force multiplier

The excitement, hype and investment pouring into AI today all emanate from its potential to drive the biggest step change in productivity since the advent of the internet. Within the contact centre, there are countless processes and workflows both on the front line and in the back office to which AI could be applied. Automation is not new of course, but AI goes much further than automation through the application of advanced analytics and self-learning.

“To enable something that the human cannot physically achieve, or which would need 10,000 humans to achieve. To condense 10,000 hours into 10 minutes.” - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Extracting more value from data

The contact centre captures more data than any other department, but most organisations struggle to make use of all of this data. AI promises to change this, with almost infinite scalability.

“Our industry has been data-rich for some time, but making sense of the data and getting insights and actionable intelligence from it can be tricky.” - Dan Allen, Deputy Director Landlord Support, NRLA

“We manage on average one and a half million customer contacts a year. AI will help us to turn that into something that’s meaningful and actionable, whether it’s about our products, our range, our stores or the delivery carriers that we work with.” - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Cost out, quality up

Progress usually costs money, but early AI adopters report gains in operational efficiency, customer experience (CX) and employee experience (EX) at the same time as reduced costs.

“That’s kind of the Holy Grail, right?” - Dan Allen, Deputy Director Landlord Support, NRLA

Hyper-personalisation of contact experiences

AI has the potential to tailor interactions down to the individual level: predictive AI is used to tailor propositions to maximise their appeal and utility to the customer, while generative AI personalises language and tone of voice to improve communication.

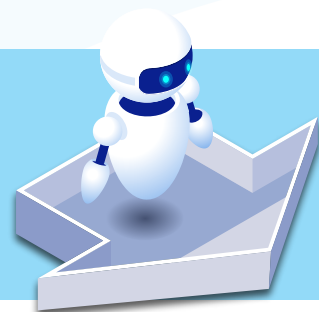
“There’s an ability for generative AI to bring creativity into the contact centre that’s seldom existed before. To make every customer interaction unique.” - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Is AI right for you?

AI has captured the imagination of organisations of all shapes and sizes, but it can be difficult to know how and where to set sail on a voyage of discovery.

In this section we cover some core considerations for contact centre leaders seeking to develop an AI strategy.

- Developing a point of view
- The contact centre is a good place to experiment
- Alignment with brand values
- Learning from peers



Developing a point of view

Not every organisation is an early adopter. Many have made a conscious decision to be followers particularly when it comes to AI, embracing a 'wait and see' approach rather than attempting to set sail in uncharted waters.

Even if AI adoption is expected to be some way off, it is imperative that contact centre leaders stay abreast of developments and acquire enough knowledge to be able to actively make informed decisions.

"There's just so much potential, but I think people are still trying to understand where it fits best. It feels quite broad at the moment, and it needs condensing. You have to get on the journey to learn, pick a couple of use cases, really hone in on those and almost forget the rest of the noise."

- Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

"You have to know whether you want to or not. Implementing could come further down the line. You might never do it. But you're making a conscious choice. Either you're in, or you're watching and learning with a plan to become active. Or you've decided to not be active. You've got to be in one of those three camps, because if you're not you're either missing a potential golden opportunity or you're being led down a path that you're not ready for." - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

"AI has solutions to problems, but we're not in a position to be able to clearly articulate what the problems are yet until we understand the technology. It's chicken and egg for us." - Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

The contact centre is a good place to experiment

For many organisations, the contact centre is the ideal place to house an AI testbed. Contact centres may enjoy more autonomy compared with other departments, while benefits can be felt across the organisation rather than be confined to an individual business unit.

"The contact centre sits horizontally across divisions and silos, and does get a little bit more leeway and remit to be trailblazing as a result."

- Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Contact centres process huge volumes of data, making them well placed for AI applications.

"There's nowhere else in our business that has that scale of human interaction through digital touchpoints. We are the obvious use case in our organisation for AI at scale." - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Alignment with brand values

A key part of decision-making around AI adoption will be the organisation's ambitions for customer and colleague experience. Not every organisation aspires to be a technology leader, and some contact centres handle mainly repetitive and transactional queries and may not gain as much from the transformational potential of AI.

On the other hand, brands which tend to be early adopters of technology and which have a highly diverse customer base will likely be keen to explore how AI can further enhance customer and colleague experience.

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"That day we spent with the CCMA in Edinburgh was invaluable, because it gave us access to other people who were either ahead or behind us. We just don't have time to spend with every vendor, and this short-circuits an awful lot of experimentation." - Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

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"Reflect on who you are as a business and as a brand. What your customers will be willing to experience."

- Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

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Learning from peers

To cut through the hype and sales pitches and obtain objective, practical information, the best sources are other contact centre and CX leaders.

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"Conferences and networking events are really useful because you get to speak to people who are using the technology, so you get more of a 'warts and all' perspective." - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

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"Not just a webinar or a seminar, but actually sat around a table talking about a topic with peers with Chatham House rules. That's where you learn a lot. And you'll go away and call up a supplier because someone mentioned them." - Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

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AI use cases in the contact centre

Within a short space of time a myriad of applications for predictive and generative AI in the contact centre has emerged. In this section we

explore some of the most commonly deployed use cases.

- Enhance chatbot experience
- Agent assist
- Writing aid
- Synthesise and summarise
- Personalisation
- Faster, more accurate QA



Enhance chatbot experience

Perhaps the most obvious and customer-facing application of AI technology is within chatbots, to deliver a more natural-language and nuanced experience.

“A customer can have a proper conversation with generative AI. They're not having to choose from buttons.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

“It's a support mechanism for colleagues, and helps humans to add value where they need to understand, think and make decisions. Thinking of Consumer Duty, for example, the outcome is potentially tailored depending each customer's unique situation.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Some contact centres have dramatically reduced on-boarding and training time due to the improved and more timely access to information that AI can bring.

Agent assist

A host of AI use cases reside within a category of applications that has become known as agent assist. These extract data such as from knowledgebases or CRM systems and place relevant information on an advisor's screen, to support them in real time during the course of a customer interaction.

“Previously it was somewhat manual and arduous to find the right information and could lead to a customer potentially waiting on hold. In our business we give advice. It's not a clear-cut decision tree in a lot of instances, so being able to present relevant and contextual information to the advisor really empowers them to get to the right answer more efficiently.” - Dan Allen, Deputy Director Landlord Support, NRLA

“We've gone from a process of six weeks to two weeks of getting an agent on-boarded, talking to customers and that's all because of AI.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

Writing aid

Another way in which AI (specifically generative AI) supports the front line is assisting in text-based channels such as chat and email. Not all advisors have the same ability to write clearly and quickly with minimal spelling or grammatical errors: AI tools help level up less capable writers, and saves time drafting responses.

Aside from chatbots whose answers are heavily vetted and scripted in advance, few organisations

are as yet happy to let AI handle responses without supervision. In almost all cases a human is still required in the loop, to sign off on AI-crafted replies before they are sent to a customer.

“ We’ve been able to use AI quite quickly in terms of generating responses. A human still has to proofread and send, but they don’t have to type it from scratch or cut and paste anymore.”

- Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

“ A letter might take half an hour to 45 minutes to compile. With generative AI it can be done within a matter of seconds. It might take five or 10 minutes to review, so obviously saves time.”

- Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

“ The AI analyses thousands and thousands of previous chat transcripts and offers suggested replies. It still needs people to judge whether a reply is fit to use.” - Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

The tonality and language of a text conversation can be customised by AI, to suit an individual interaction.

“ It can shift the tone of a response, for example if the customer is being formal or informal. The agent can focus on the outcome for the customer, and the technology can get them to the well-worded response that usually takes the time to do.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

“ You can tell generative AI what persona to take and it will give you a different slant.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Although the generative AI applications cited by the contact centre leaders we interviewed pertain mostly to text interactions, the technology already

exists to be applied to voice as well. Contact centres are naturally treading carefully on this front given the ethical considerations surrounding the possibility of voice ‘deepfakes’.

Synthesise and summarise

Within the contact centre there are many ways to take advantage of AI’s potential to parse vast amounts of data into digestible insights.

“ Call transcriptions and summaries can be done very well with the latest large language models, with more consistent results than most humans can achieve. If you take complaints for example, dealing with 300-400 complaints a week with to two or three calls on average per complaint (that need to be reviewed). That’s over 1,000 hours of work which AI can streamline, so that colleagues can spend more time on making the correct decision for the customer.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

“ The agent has their own chatbot to answer questions and summarise tickets accurately.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

Using AI to identify the intent, context and sentiment behind a customer’s query is of universal interest but will particularly appeal to contact centres which see high levels of diversity in query nature and/or customer profiles. Categorisation is performed post hoc to analyse demand patterns, but can also happen during a live interaction as part of ‘agent assist’.

“ We use it to analyse what customers are talking about, what their contact reason is, and also how they feel. An agent used to have to fill out a form at the end of every single contact before they could move on to the next customer. If you’ve got a team of 100 agents, they’re all recording that data differently. Whereas the AI is doing it consistently at scale. It’s had a huge impact for us.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

Improved management information is another benefit of AI's ability to synthesise and summarise at scale.

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" I can ask AI to pull the last three years' worth of data for policy counts, as well for the products that those teams are servicing, then tell me what it sees and summarise the data for me in a graphical format. What might have taken an analyst an hour or so to produce is now done in minutes." - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

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Personalisation

AI's ability to spot patterns lends itself well to flagging customers that may need specialised support, based on CRM data or on the language and/or tone of an interaction. Examples include identifying vulnerable customers, or customers at risk of switching.

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" Using generative AI to summarise calls we found out that around about 7% of our calls are from potentially vulnerable customers, whereas we only logged less than 1% as vulnerable. Not everyone is trained to spot the little prompts and clues within a conversation. Whereas the AI is constantly listening, and prompting the agent to probe further on the call." - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

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" Propensity to churn is certainly of interest to us. Knowing about this helps us be more proactive with our customer base." - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

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Faster, more accurate QA

Deploying AI within QA processes promises more consistent, much faster and more scalable QA capability versus using humans alone.

However, leaders should be mindful that AI models need to be fit for purpose before they can be deployed for QA, with relevant and specific model training tailored for the organisation and

its customers. In this respect an AI model is no different to a human analyst.

Leaders should also be mindful of the possible reaction from colleagues when they learn that their performance is being assessed by robots.

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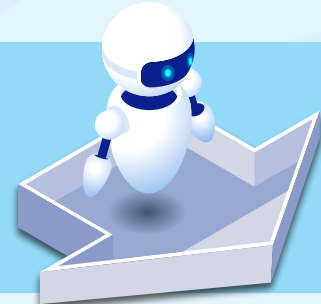
" I ran a few test transcripts through a language model and asked it to score how professional was the conversation. It was clear that the models that we were using were still very generic. What is a professional conversation in the context of a contact centre? You need to train these models to be specialised for our context. But then it starts branching into ethics. Would you let an AI model determine your bottom 10% performance in the company? Would we trust managers to use this information? How confident can we be that the model has been trained properly?" - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

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Key considerations: strategy

In the next section of this report we discuss some important considerations for contact centres on an AI voyage, grouped into strategy, people and technology.

- Clear objectives up front
- The value of a roadmap
- Alignment with other departments
- Guardrails and governance



Clear objectives up front

A core guiding principle of any technology implementation, or indeed any change programme, is to start with a clear-eyed understanding of the reasons for change. It is all too easy to get caught up in FOMO due to ubiquitous AI hype: it is not unknown for top management to instruct operating units to adopt for fear of being 'left behind', without having thought through the reasons why.

"If you just start working without a clear goal, you'll be all over the place. The key is understanding what your objective is to start with. What metrics are you trying to change and why are you trying to change them?" - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

"People want to try and fit AI into a use case because AI is hot and is deemed innovative, rather than thinking about what problems they're looking to solve. And actually, is it AI or is it something else that will do the best job?" - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

The value of a roadmap

It is incumbent on leaders to understand the art of the possible versus the organisation's readiness to adopt, and the milestones and stages along the voyage. Identifying near and longer-term time horizons and what can be achieved within each is an integral part of any AI roadmap.

"For us, the question was how far do we go with chat? Do we aspire to fully automate chat? Listening to people who have been down the path was helpful." - Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

"We're at the point now where we need deep integration to take us to the next level, and we're not ready for that. We need to invest, and it becomes a strategic decision. Any business case that's put forward builds in the time and cost involved in enabling it." - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

In some instances, AI's benefits may only be fully realised in stages. For example, start with the foundational layer of automation and data integration that delivers better reporting and analytics in the first instance. Once that is in place, it could be followed by a later stage that unleashes the power of predictive modelling to help drive decisions, or generative to enhance customer interactions.

Alignment with other departments

The voyage of AI adoption typically raises questions and considerations that extend beyond an individual business unit, as organisations seek efficiencies and consistencies that can be applied as widely as possible. This is especially pertinent to contact centres being a horizontal function: change in the contact centre can have a direct bearing on other functions.

As such, it is advisable to work in lockstep as much as possible with other departments, many of whom will be undertaking or evaluating an AI voyage themselves. In fact, the prospect of AI deployment can confer a golden opportunity to collaborate.

“ It allows my team to get involved in a wider project which also involves the marketing team and other operations teams who are using AI as well. AI is bringing us together.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

For large organisations which confer substantial autonomy to individual units, silos can be a major barrier to AI implementation.

“ We are currently quite siloed across teams, even though they operate similar processes, so very little multi-skilling. A lot of that’s to do with the underlying technology.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Guardrails and governance

With generative AI having grabbed the mainstream limelight and a number of high-profile instances of ‘hallucinations’ having made headlines, awareness of potential risks and the need to establish relevant protections has also grown beyond the technology community and is now very much on the radar of business leaders.

“ I wouldn’t let a large contact centre just start interacting with [any model]. There are too many unknowns and unintended consequences that could have a negative impact on our business. Having said that, the safety controls are being developed at pace. If I ask ChatGPT who’s the worst performing person in the company, it will refuse to answer. And over the last six months the models have started to give citations of where they’ve got their insights from.” - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

Every organisation must put into place appropriate governance, making use of frameworks available in the public domain if needed.

“ You need a policy around ethical use of AI. Pose questions, and look at ethical scenarios. Thankfully there are companies who have been pretty open with their approach. Microsoft open source their principles and you can find their ethical framework online. It’s there for everyone to use. Always start with high-level policy, then your governance can be built around those rules.” - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

“ It’s not yet in the picture for us, but I can anticipate a time where we might have given wrong or misleading advice based on AI and will need to have some sort of risk-mitigation process in place.” - Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

Organisations must find the balance between establishing suitable safety precautions without unduly constraining the power of the technology.

“ When you add guardrails, you need to be aware that you are taking away some of the models’ knowledge because they’re not allowed to then tap into the bit that makes them seem more human. It’s a careful balance and comes down to how risk adverse a business you are.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Until now much of the conversation around risk mitigation has been led by the technology community, but ultimately it is the business owners who will be accountable.

“ Techies realised the implications soonest. We also realise we’re not best placed to do it, and therefore we have to make noise because otherwise it’s going to fall on us.” - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

“ Gen AI is different, because you need the data scientists to understand the real dangers behind it. When I was about to do the Gen AI chatbot trial, I sent the technical architecture to the data scientists and they signed it off.” - Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

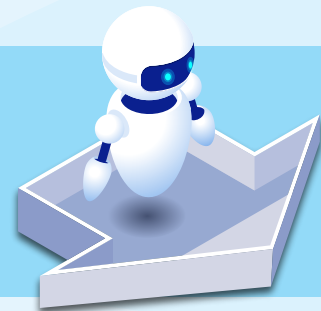
Key considerations: people

In some instances, AI will slot seamlessly and intuitively into existing workflows. In other instances, deployments are disruptive and entail fundamental changes to the way that people work.

Preparing teams in advance for disruption and

supporting them through change is especially critical when AI is involved. In this section are some considerations raised by the contact centre leaders we interviewed.

- **Colleagues involved at every step**
- **The need for reassurance**
- **Roles will change**
- **New career pathways will emerge**



Colleagues involved at every step

Involving the front line is not only about bringing them on the voyage, but ensuring their knowledge and experience is brought to bear along the way.

“ We’ve learned that if you involve the agents, you’ll get more value. You’ll get faster adoption, and you’ll get the insight from those guys who do the processes manually day-in and day-out. You wouldn’t get a new team member and just put them in another room, away from the team.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

“ We did a lot of UAT (user adoption testing) with our front line. They’re our best advocates in terms of knowing how customers ask questions, how they would navigate the journeys, and they understand intents better than anyone else.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

The need for reassurance

Communication is of the essence in any change management initiative, but when AI is involved there is even more at stake. Ubiquitous public discourse surrounding potential threats that AI poses in the workplace and in wider society will inevitably lead to concerns from colleagues that must be sympathetically listened to and addressed.

“ First and foremost when we introduce things, we have to be really clear about our intent. That we’re doing it to support, not replace. It’s important that we put that message front and centre. New technology can be a scary thing for advisors.” - Dan Allen, Deputy Director Landlord Support, NRLA

“ They’ll feel involved and heard, and they’ll be quicker to realise it’s not coming to take away their jobs, but is coming to work alongside them to make their lives better, to make customers’ lives better. We used to have one person managing QA, building score cards, trying to manage the teams, trying to get through a certain percentage of tickets. Now we’ve got AI doing that and that person hasn’t gone. It’s freed them up to work with the AI and build the scorecards and work more collaboratively with the team.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

“ Change management is difficult. A lot of people will understandably be worried about losing their jobs, and you may not get a lot of engagement if they’re stuck there. The ‘penny drop’ moment is when you explain AI is there to assist you in doing your job and to make humans more productive.” - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

If done well, involving colleagues in change creates advocacy and advocates who then go on to positively influence peers.

“Expose the technology to them early. If it's agent assist, let them see up front how clever the system is.” - Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

Roles will change

While AI will not lead to a wholesale replacement of the human workforce but instead help humans be more productive, there can be no doubt that job content will evolve. Some colleagues will embrace this quicker than others.

As repetitive and lower-skilled tasks are increasingly handled by AI, the roles of human colleagues become increasingly multi-faceted, with a corresponding uplift to seniority and salaries. This presents a natural progression of a voyage that began some time ago with automation and self-serve.

“You're not replacing people's roles. You're making people's roles better and more purposeful.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

“It drives more effective and richer [customer] conversations, more multi-skilling, more interesting work. We know that because we've already moved up the curve.” - Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

Generative AI's capability to draft responses is good news for the organisation thanks to better consistency and efficiency, but some frontline colleagues may see it as a direct threat.

“We've got 150+ agents who were used to writing everything for themselves every day. Then suddenly they've got this thing and they don't need to write. A lot of them didn't like that because they come to work to speak to people. They want the autonomy and the creativity and you're taking

some of that away from them. There's a fine line.”
- Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

“Agents are used to tweaking and personalising their words. And we're saying, no, we want you to use these messages. When we rolled it out, we had to stop the urge for chat agents to keep tweaking the messages.” - Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

New career pathways will emerge

Beyond re-defining existing roles, AI leads to entirely new roles being created. An example of this are chatbot product managers, for whom experienced frontline advisors are well suited as they can transfer their knowledge to the AI chatbot and help train it on an ongoing basis (in a similar way to how a team leader coaches a team member).

“Two of our high-performing consultants are now bot managers, working with our technical teams to build flows and journeys based on intents. We're introducing conversational AI to our pre-sale journey, and our bot managers will be pivotal to that because they're our enablers to deliver those journeys and react to customer demand as it comes through.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

“We've had similar conversations about taking a really good agent and move them into making the AI better. The AI is doing thousands of tickets a day, compared to this agent that might do a hundred. Take their knowledge and put it into these thousands of tickets.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

“After Consumer Duty came in last summer, our group data team essentially became prompt engineers for three months. We can now transcribe and understand calls to an excellent level of accuracy and summarise them. And we can ask the AI to identify possible customer vulnerabilities that we may have missed.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Key considerations: technology

CCMA's research 'Navigating the Technology Seascape'² published in 2023 offered an in-depth look at technical considerations for contact centres undergoing any new technology implementation. This section builds on that research, within the

specific context of AI. The following are some commonly-cited elements to be considered during AI deployments.

- Tech estate integration
- Data alignment and governance
- Knowing the limitations
- Choosing an LLM model
- Nurturing your AI



Tech estate integration

To function correctly, AI relies on the free flow of large quantities of data. In almost every large organisation there are barriers to this happening due to legacy systems and systems fragmentation. As such a little or a lot of systems integration is usually needed before AI can work as intended, but this is often difficult to achieve in practice.

"We can't get to the next phase of self-service without integration with other platforms that helps us provide both context and personalisation. We've reached a level where we can't optimise any further with what we've got. To get to the next level comes effort and challenge, and potentially third-party data and platforms in some use cases. There's a lot in there, and a high risk of failure."

- Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

Multiple systems can be a feature not a bug, required in order to deliver specialist functionality. In such circumstances organisations should think about how their discrete platforms can inter-operate from day one, with inter-departmental collaboration.

"Our marketing team is looking at using AI for shopping. I've already got a bot that specialises

in supporting customers with problems, but won't do what the marketing team needs it to do. And the marketing team's bot isn't going to be able to do what mine does. So we need two bots, but we want them to work hand in hand with each other. A customer might be shopping on the marketing bot, but then has a question which is answered by the other bot seamlessly." - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

With AI being a lightning rod for attention in organisations, it could be the lever to inspire a long-awaited integration effort that has hitherto stalled due to cost or complexity.

"It becomes a much more strategic decision around future-proofing your business. It forces the need." - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

Data alignment and governance

Data alignment and good governance is the foundational layer for any AI implementation. The degree to which this already exists varies massively between organisations, but any business that expects to see long-term value from AI must expect to invest to get up to scratch.

² <https://www.ccma.org.uk/navigating-the-technology-seascape/>

"Data is the big one. Where's all your data stored and how accessible is it? We've been busy getting all of our data into a secure cloud, and getting complete transparency of what our data is used for and where it goes." - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

"One of the things we ought to be doing is thinking about how we can get our data into a format that can be shared and managed in a way that it can produce some sensible outputs. For example, better tagging our calls or making sure that we've got good voice quality on our calls so that it can transcribe them to produce a training set."

- Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

"Because Gen AI pulls in data from multiple sources, you've got to contain your data. Particularly in our world of financial services, it's so important that you've got a language model that you've built or one that you trust that is fed by your knowledge database and is contained and not just going out trying to grab information from anywhere." - Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

For 'agent assist' use cases, contact centres must first ensure their knowledgebases are suitably formatted and consolidated to be effectively interrogated via APIs. This is a particularly significant task for contact centres which are still operating with a limited or non-existent knowledgebase (relying on human advisors' knowledge), and must therefore create one from scratch.

"We need to get all our knowledge articles into a format that I can train an AI on. They'll be in Word documents, in PDFs, in emails." - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

Efforts to consolidate data can extend beyond the knowledgebase into CRM territory, and indeed wherever any relevant data exists.

"If you're looking to not just improve, but transform how you're meeting customer demand and the experience you're giving, then you're looking deeper into your organisation and all the data you hold about customers. Where is all of that held? How does it knit together? What system holds what and how can I tap into it? Can the AI scrape it?"

- Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Knowing the limitations

While AI technology is advancing by leaps and bounds it seems on an almost monthly basis, experienced contact centre observers point to ongoing limitations that must be considered for any implementation. One example is the difficulty that LLMs (large language models) can experience when interpreting context and nuance in text-based channels.

"Where there is a requirement for a high degree of context in the interaction, or high emotion, it feels like we're a way off being able to solve for those through AI at the moment." - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

"It's the context of the conversation that's particularly hard, particularly in written language. Our biggest channels by far are in written form."

- Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

This problem can be exacerbated in the chatbot channel as customers tend to be less verbose when using chatbots. In this case AI can actually be a solution, by applying generative AI to help fill in the blanks between a customer's words.

“ We’ve learned that customers interact with a bot differently to how they would ask on the telephone. They’ll provide a much more rounded view of the request on the phone, whereas in the chatbot space it’s one or two phrases which makes it quite difficult to ascertain the intent. We encourage customers to provide a bit of a bit more context with their request. That’s where I think generative can help, being able to almost predict what the customer’s referring to and helping to build out the context.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

Today’s limitations may be gone tomorrow, particularly when the AI model is tailored and trained accordingly.

“ We use the term ‘white mail’ internally to refer to a white piece of paper arriving by post. Four or five months ago, Copilot was picking that up as a ‘white male.’ But now it’s already clever enough to actually understand in the context of the sentence, this refers to mail or letters. That’s an example of how quickly AI models are updated and move on in each release.” - Simon Sneyd, Head of Performance & Planning, Group Operations, Royal London

Choosing an LLM model

Deciding which LLM (Large Language Model) to use is a key decision when deploying generative AI. Different models have their own strengths, while using a model developed by an existing platform partner (such as cloud provider) may confer efficiencies when a contact centre is already using that partner’s infrastructure.

When evaluating LLMs, contact centres should consider the extent to which they require language and context that is specific to their own organisations and customers. And if this need exists, whether the LLM is sufficiently tailored and/or the feasibility and ease of the contact centre training the LLM using its own data.

“ Look for companies that are tailoring for the contact centre, rather than just a big generic model which looks great in a demo but doesn’t actually add a lot of value in a contact centre.”

- Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

“ A hybrid approach could be possible. If you’re using a third party for the delivery of conversational AI, you could use APIs to provide your proprietary source information to the model. Rather than you having to replicate all aspects of the journey, you could use a solution that handles the conversation well, but augment it with your data for the business-centric knowledge and ability to personalise journeys.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

Nurturing your AI

Like humans, AI models benefit from ongoing feedback and coaching.

“ With AI you can’t just implement it and leave it. You have to work with it like a person, like a superpowered agent. As much as we do QA checks on agents, we also do them on AI responses as well. Teach your bot like you train your agent. This also helps with adoption as it’s seen as one of the team. Essentially it’s doing the same job as an agent is doing.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

One of the most important trends now emerging is the use of AI models to train and validate other models.

“ When we deploy technology in the traditional way, the tests are binary. Either works or it doesn’t. With AI, the test isn’t binary. It’s coming up with a reasoned response to something, and it’s fairly subjective and very hard to have a binary yes or no. The industry is starting to have other AI models that we know have a good perspective on what we’re trying to do, check the answers of the main model.” - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

“ We’re using AI to QA AI.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

What to look for when picking partners

Building on the principles outlined in CCMA's research 'Navigating the Technology Seascape'³ published in 2023, this section covers key

considerations when choosing technology partners within the AI space.

- Single versus multiple vendors
- Leveraging existing relationships
- Track record
- Aligned values
- Ease of integration
- Strength of account management
- Pilot/proof of concept
- Tailored demo
- Working with systems integrator/consultancy



Single vs multiple vendors

Being a fast-developing technology category, the AI seascape features a plethora of vendors from the major CCaaS and cloud brands to highly specialised niche providers. Advanced organisations with a significant in-house development capability may be well placed mix and match to achieve best-of-breed capabilities. For those with less resources at their disposal one-stop-shop solution is far simpler, albeit the technology may not be at the very leading edge.

"If you've got good control of your data, it's easier to integrate different vendors. I could see how people could branch out and have two or three different types of service, all feeding off the same datasets. [Whereas] a single vendor will keep your data secure and structured in a single place. But be aware it is your data and make sure that you're covered contractually. I have seen companies in other industries who will create these rich data sets and provide you with this rich functionality, but if you ever tried to leave them you would not get that data at all. To tie you in." - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

Leveraging existing relationships

Inevitably, most contact centres will in the first instance seek to work with existing partners. Any lack of leading-edge functionality will be vastly outweighed by easier implementation. Major players are investing heavily in their AI capabilities, to better compete with specialists.

"Look at how you can leverage the vendors you already work with. Our core technology provider has a pretty strong offering given their scale in this space, and therefore that's where we'll tap into. It will cost us a little bit more than maybe trying to drive our own solution, but the trust element is there." -

Nick Coleman, Senior Manager Customer Care, Dunelm

Track record

Today it appears that everyone has a mature AI capability, yet just two years ago very few people had even heard of LLMs. If you're risk adverse, look for partners who can demonstrate proven credentials and case studies within the contact centre space, especially for generative AI which is still a relatively new technology.

³ <https://www.ccma.org.uk/navigating-the-technology-seascape/>

"You often get ones that come saying, 'oh, I've done this. I've done that.' I ask 'have you ever done it in the UK? Have you ever done it with financial services?' And the answer is no. Especially in our [highly regulated] world, you can't take risks so we see keeping 'human-in-the-loop' as essential initially." - Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

Aligned values

Deploying AI, particularly when LLMs are involved, can go above and beyond other types of implementations with specific requirements for example on data flows and LLM training. It can take time to get the best from an AI implementation. Difficult questions and ethical considerations may crop up along the way. As such, the chemistry between partner and client and a shared commitment are even more than usually critical.

"It's about finding a vendor that suits your requirements, your strategic ambition and shares the same values as you as a business." - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

Strength of account management

Customer success teams are especially valuable in AI deployments given the pace at which the technology is developing, and the learning curve. They should be adept at proactively monitoring progress, flagging issues as soon as possible, and being responsive to client queries.

"Our provider is looking at our metrics and analytics as much as we are. And not just looking at them, but proactively acting on them. They'll come to us having identified an issue. And they're so responsive if we go to them." - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

"Your optimisation and your value rely on vendors understanding you really well and proactively coming to you with ideas, telling you what's

happening or that they've just built this capability that they think you should try." - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

For smaller clients, choosing a smaller provider may be a way to get comparatively more time and attention than if working with a large global player.

"Our provider has high-quality people that are really engaging and spending time with us. If we'd gone with a much bigger provider, we wouldn't be getting that level of attention. It's almost like they've not got any other customers, as if they're just solely invested on us, which I know isn't the case because they've got loads of customers. But I feel that they're part of our team. They're with us that much." - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

Pilot / proof of concept

In most instances AI capability will be new and unfamiliar to a contact centre, as opposed to being an enhancement of an existing capability. There will likely be scepticism, or at least a curiosity around whether it actually delivers on its promises. Technology providers who are willing to invest in providing a proof of concept will enjoy an advantage.

"Any vendor that can offer a pilot has a leg up. They trust their product's going to succeed. And it gives you a real live understanding of the potential of what's in front of you and offers a learning experience at little to no cost to you. It can help to bring the people sitting on the fence over to the side that you want them to be on." - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

Tailored demo

A product demonstration that is customised to a client's needs and circumstances will always be more impactful than a generic one. Buyers should be open to investing time and if possible sharing some of their data, to help prospective partners to tailor.

“ Create a tailored demo with our data. That's the thing that gets traction.” - Paul Cooper, Head of Technology Delivery, takepayments

“ Vendors are trying to differentiate by building industry-specific models. For an insurance business, you're looking for a model built for language surrounding claims, policy changes, cancellations, cover explanations. In a demo it gets people on board very quickly, because they're talking the same language.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

“ From my experience over the last couple of years it's given us an extra level of support, and more resource both from a technical point of view and an account management point of view.” - Jonathan Beirne, Chief Customer Officer, musicMagpie

Working with systems integrator/ consultancy

In just a couple of short years every vendor now boasts an AI capability, but it can be difficult to cut through the sales pitches to ascertain the true strengths and differences between providers.

Even for highly experienced technology and contact centre professionals, getting to grips with the AI seascape can be an intimidating and time-consuming task. One option to surmount the learning curve quickly would be to engage an intermediary, an SI (systems integrator) or consultancy, in the evaluation process or to help implement, or both.

“ There are other technology categories where it's nowhere near as crowded. and I would trust us as a business to make that evaluation ourselves. But the AI market is so crowded and there are so many subtleties in terms of difference. We went the consultancy route to help us navigate and shortlist.” - Dan Cotton, Head of Operational Innovation, Simply Business

“ There are lots of snake-oil salesmen out there.” - Alastair Gilchrist, Chief Technology Officer, NRLA

When an SI or consultancy is involved in implementation, they can become part of the client's in-house development team, adding resource and capability and acting as a bridge when working with technology partners.

8 considerations

for exploring the AI seascape for contact centres

- 1 AI applications may resemble earlier automation implementations, but AI technology is differentiated by its ability to self-learn and improve itself.
- 2 Common benefits of AI in the contact centre are as a productivity force multiplier, extracting more value from data, hyper-personalisation of contact experiences and achieving the 'holy grail' of better quality at lower cost.
- 3 When deciding when and how to adopt AI, its worth developing a relevant point of view, aligning with brand values, and learning from peers.
- 4 Some of the leading use cases of AI in the contact centre include enhancing chatbots, agent assist, synthesise and summarise, personalisation, and faster, more accurate QA.
- 5 When developing your approach to AI have: clear objectives up front, a roadmap, alignment with other departments, guardrails and good governance.
- 6 Any AI deployment should consider the impact on colleagues. Specifically, involve colleagues along the way, give them reassurance, look at how roles across the contact centre will change and new career paths.
- 7 There's plenty to consider when you're looking to implement AI from tech estate integration, data alignment and governance, to knowing its limitations, choosing a Large Language Model (LLM) and ongoing model training and customisation.
- 8 When selecting and working with AI technology partners, some considerations for contact centres include working with single versus multiple vendors, whether or not to leverage existing relationships, track record, values alignment, ease of integration, strength of account management, the availability of a pilot/proof of concept and tailored demo, and the potential benefits of partnering with a systems integrator or consultancy.

About the CCMA

For 30 years, the CCMA (Call Centre Management Association), as the longest established contact centre industry body, has been dedicated to supporting contact centre leaders 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 our 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 such as the many Special Interest Groups and CONNECT. 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 Salary and Skills Guide, 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 Route 101

Route 101 is a provider of next generation, SaaS customer engagement platforms, offering award winning solutions from market leading vendors. The business delivers a full range of services to ensure clients get the maximum value from the solutions provided, which includes all associated consultancy, professional services, training, and support.

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