



The Hidden Cost of Over-Automation

CCMA Leadership Forum Series

The Leadership Series is the documented output from the CCMA's series of Leadership Forum roundtables. These 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 their industry - and to consider how to continue innovating and adding value for the benefit of the customer, colleagues, and the business.



At the Table

Sarah Trimby

Head of Patient Engagement,
Ascenti

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Customer Service Director,
BOC Gases

Tim Monk

Director of Customer Care,
British Airways

Daniel Edwards

Head of Customer Operations,
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Head of Contact Centre,
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Head of Customer Excellence,
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Susan Emms

Head of Customer Service,
Northumbrian Water

The Hidden Cost of Over-Automation

As contact centres accelerate their adoption of automation and artificial intelligence (AI), a vital question emerges: At what point does removing human support from customer journeys risk damaging the experiences we're trying to improve?

Senior leaders gathered at the House of Lords to explore how automation and AI have been implemented in their respective organisations, how they are balancing efficiency gains through automation with the enduring value of human connection, and what advice they give to fellow leaders concerned about the impact of 'over-automation' within their contact centre operations.

Key Discussion Points

Safety-critical limitations

In regulated industries like healthcare, utilities and emergency services, the consequences of automation and AI errors can be severe, requiring a far more cautious approach than other sectors.

Cultural resistance and accuracy

Leaders are concerned that automation and AI implementation increasingly faces scepticism from both colleagues and customers, with accuracy and sentiment recognition seen as significant challenges.

The handoff moment matters

The transition from AI/automated chatbot to human advisor remains critical to success. Poor handoffs create frustration that advisors often have to work hard to resolve, eroding efficiency gains from the use of AI, as well as customer trust.

A premium service paradox

Some leaders say their organisations are now positioning human service as a competitive differentiator rather than a cost to eliminate, recognising that fast and reliable access to their frontline advisors can be an important as part of their brand positioning.

Back-office opportunity

AI's most valuable role may be in supporting advisors through analytics, transcription, CRM input and trend identification, rather than replacing different aspects of customer-facing interactions.

Frontline reality check

Advisors don't always welcome automation. The promise of "more interesting work" and "increased complexity in their customer interactions" isn't always guaranteed to resonate. Complexity can increase pressure and change the job that some people originally signed up for.

Deflection versus resolution

Successfully deflecting a contact doesn't necessarily mean solving a customer's problem, and organisations must manage internal expectations about what automation can genuinely achieve.



Where Human Touch Still Commands a Premium

The Leadership Forum revealed that automation journeys vary dramatically across sectors. Leaders from travel and leisure emphasised the irreplaceable value of human validation when customers make significant financial commitments – i.e. for a premium holiday. For businesses where advisors build ongoing relationships with customers – encouraging repeat bookings with specific individuals – automation threatens a core competitive advantage that must be protected.

In contrast, utilities leaders described how AI helps predict weather patterns and potential service disruptions, enabling proactive communication that prevents issues before customers experience them. However, they cautioned that proactive contact can backfire if not carefully managed – potentially generating unnecessary inbound volume, for instance, if a proactive communication raises an alarm of some nature (such as a severe weather warning).

Healthcare and emergency service representatives stressed the non-negotiable importance of keeping humans central to critical interactions. When patient safety or life-threatening situations are involved, the risk of AI errors significantly outweighs potential cost savings. These organisations are focusing automation efforts on supporting advisors rather than replacing them, providing better information and tools while preserving human judgement for sensitive decisions.

Tim Monk

Director of Customer Care, British Airways

It's important to leave room in your customer journey for areas where you're not going to automate. For us one of those areas is the sales process, in recent times. Customers are picking up the phone and calling us to book their flights and holidays and enjoying the experience. So why not allow that to prosper? It's good for your people and good for your customers.



Susan Emms

Head of Customer Service, Northumbrian Water

Consider where AI might add value across the business, not just in your own area. Focus on where it can deliver genuine benefits. For us that's in predicting weather more accurately, and use that to better manage our network and protect our customers.

When Cost Savings Come with Hidden Price Tags

Leaders acknowledged that automation decisions carry significant brand implications. While AI can reduce costs, it may simultaneously reduce revenue if poor experiences damage reputation. The brand equity risk of getting automation wrong – particularly in high-profile failures – can far outweigh short-term efficiency gains.

Several attendees highlighted the margin pressures driving automation adoption, noting that contact centres have historically been expected to lead on cost control. However, premium brands are finding success by positioning human accessibility as a differentiator, rather than treating it solely as a cost to eliminate.

The data shows clear customer demand for self-service options in straightforward scenarios. One leader reported that 75-90% of their contact centres simple transactions now occur digitally, suggesting customers actively choose automation when it works well. The challenge lies in accurately identifying which interactions genuinely benefit from automation, versus those requiring human expertise, empathy or validation.

Jessica Ham

Senior Customer Experience Manager, National Grid

Engage your people. Engage your customers. This isn't digital, it isn't processes. Get value from listening to people and often you'll find their requirements are straightforward and don't need AI and over-automation.

Separating Vendor Promises from Contact Centre Reality

Multiple leaders emphasised that some technology vendors could be accused of 'overselling' AI's capabilities, with solutions rarely delivering exactly what's promised. This creates pressure to find alternative approaches when technology falls short of business expectations.

Successful implementations discussed by attendees shared common characteristics - they started with a clear problem definition, were tested rigorously and prioritised customer feedback throughout rollout. Organisations monitoring satisfaction scores daily during a rollout demonstrated willingness to pause or roll back if performance dropped, rather than forcing adoption regardless of impact.



The cultural challenge emerged as a consistent theme. Change management requires honest conversations with frontline colleagues about how their roles will evolve. Framing automation purely as making work "more interesting" or "more complex" often misses the mark with advisors who value the aspects of their current role that automation threatens to eliminate.

Hybrid Models and The Emerging Consensus

Some people in the contact centre industry subscribe to the idea that the best customer service can sometimes be "no customer service at all". The idea being customers shouldn't need to contact you, and when they do, it represents an 'interruption' or failure point. This perspective suggests that in some industries, automation's highest value may be earlier in customer journeys, helping to prevent contact rather than just handling it differently.

Despite this, many contact centre leaders are exploring hybrid human and automation models as an optimal approach. Automation handles routine, transactional interactions where customers value speed and convenience, while preserving human touchpoints for complex, emotional, or high-value scenarios. The most successful organisations are transparent about this choice, sometimes explicitly offering customers the option between faster AI service or more empathetic, reassuring human assistance.

Several leaders advocated for giving frontline advisors ownership of automation development, teaching them to build their own bots and shape the AI journey. This approach addresses cultural resistance while building valuable capabilities for the future workforce.

Resisting the Pressure to Automate Everything

The discussion concluded that organisations shouldn't feel pressured into automation and AI adoption, especially if their current model serves customers well. The technology represents a tool, not an inevitability, and should be deployed strategically where it solves specific problems rather than universally as a cost-cutting exercise.

Success requires bold exploration of possibilities balanced with cautious implementation that prioritises customer outcomes. Leaders must challenge vendor claims around AI, test thoroughly, engage colleagues and customers throughout, and remain willing to slow down or reverse course when results don't meet expectations.

Most critically, they must remember that contact centre colleagues aren't as easily replaceable as AI enthusiasm sometimes suggests - and that maintaining trust, both internally and externally, remains paramount.

Approaching Automation without Over-Automating

What advice do contact centre leaders give to their peers looking to introduce AI and automation into their operations without risking damage to their customer and colleague relationships?

Daniel Edwards

Head of Customer Operations, Cadent Gas

Ensuring we do AI and automation in a way that instils confidence in our customers is integral. That means offering choice. For instance, you can ask – do you want to be dealt with potentially quicker by an AI or do you want a more premium human service? Be honest and put that message upfront.

Rachel Folkemer

EU Contact Centre Director, Enterprise Mobility

The implementation of AI and automation tools shouldn't be viewed as a replacement for human contact. Instead, they should be leveraged to enhance the customer experience and elevate the advisor experience.

Philip Hardy

Head of Contact Centre, Caravan & Motorhome Club

Use your data more. There's lots of great ideas out there around what you can do with AI and automation, but is that something that your customers specifically will want? And what about your colleagues? Using specific data points to either bring in AI or to push back against any demanding parties in the business is important

Stuart Peet

Customer Service Director, BOC Gases

It sounds like a contradiction, but you have to be both bold and cautious. There are so many opportunities to improve your offering with AI and automation, but it's important you don't make decisions you regret. Explore what's possible, but always test and learn.

Iain Stevenson-Wood

Director of People & Operations, Neilson Active Holidays

Don't be peer-pressured into AI. If your model isn't broken, then don't use it. New fads and fashions will continue to come along. You don't have to jump into anything if you don't think you need to.

Stephen Satterthwaite

Head of Contact Centre, Neilson Active Holidays

Always be sure you ask – how is automation going to impact the customer, and whereabouts in their customer journey? And how is it going to improve the customer experience?

John Murphy

Head of Customer Excellence, NHS SBS Ltd

Teach your frontline advisors how to build their own bots. Give them ownership of the AI and automation journey, and new capabilities for the future in our industry.

James Blackwood

Head of Contact Centres, Eurostar

Be careful not to over-deflect, don't ignore what the customer is asking, regardless of the route you take to do it – whether it's AI or via human voice. Our mantra is – no one left behind. By that we mean both customers and colleagues.

Mick O'Brien

Head of Business Integrity & Compliance, First Customer Contact Centre

Our people aren't as easily replaceable as the buzz around AI is trying to suggest. Choose AI based on whether it's right for your business. Don't be forced into using it. Which points of your business can AI help with? Make sure you're really clear about that.

Hollyanne Burgess

Head of Contact Centre, Doctor Care Anywhere

The risk of AI not working and not doing what we intended it to do completely outweighs the cost saving. Patient safety and trust is so central to what we do. So taking our time, making sure our data is right and that any changes we make are in a way that supports our patients and people, is vital.

Marko Ivanovic

Global Consumer Relations Director – Digital Strategy, Haleon

Think about the two costs and benefits of AI automation: brand equity and operational costs. Yes AI can improve aspects of your business, but it can also erode some too. It can bring your costs down (or sometimes up), and it might even bring your revenues down if it leads to anything that damages your brand reputation.

Sarah Trimby

Head of Patient Engagement, Ascenti

Automation is a huge risk if you get it wrong, so involve your frontline staff in any decisions relating to AI and automation. Get their feedback and understand what the customers are saying. Get a full picture of what is happening first, before you do anything.



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