CCMA Leadership Series | July 2026

Is the AI Agent the Frontline of the Future?

CCMA Contact Centre Management Association

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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

Nick De Bruxelles
Head of Advice & Support Services, Age UK

Helen Potts
Head of Customer Experience, AJ Bell Business Solutions

Jonathan Rushton
Corporate Operations Director, Ant Marketing

Leigh Hopwood
CEO, CCMA

Emma Barr
NEC Director, Circle Health Group

Louise Peers
Head of Contact Centre Services, Crimestoppers

Alan Ward
Head of Customer Operations & Strategy, D.C. Thomson

David Chaney
Director of Services, Communities & Improvement, Diabetes UK

Julie McCombie
Head of Information Technology, Diabetes UK

Laura Scott
Chief Operating Officer, Dialect Communications

Hollyanne Burgess,
Head of Contact Centre, Doctor Care Anywhere

Lee Lucas
Head of Customer Operations, National Accidental Law

Paul Hughes
Head of Direct Sales & CX, Mitel

Neal McMahon
Head of Sales, Mitel

Jessica Ham
Senior Customer Experience Manager, National Grid

Rachel Lewis
Head of Businessline, Natwest Businessline

Rule Samara-Sellers
Head of Customer Experience, Novuna Consumer Finance

Jason Mann
Operations Director, PIB Group

Dean Hurst
Chief Operations Officer, RSVP

Lucie Child
Head of Customer, Transport for Greater Manchester

Jo Foxall
Customer Experience Director, Transport for Wales

Gary Robson
Head of Customer Service, Westminster City Council

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Agentic AI in the Spotlight

The vision being sold by some technology vendors around the globe is bold: frontline colleagues in contact centres each overseeing a team of AI agents that manage the bulk of day-to-day customer contact, escalating to humans when necessary. It promises scale, efficiency and a fundamentally different approach to working, and the scope is broad. Rather than a chatbot confirming that a refund is "being processed", an agentic system might verify identity, check a payment system, identify a failure, resubmit the payment, update the customer and notify the back office - all before human intervention.

So how close is that vision to reality? To explore this question, senior contact centre and customer experience leaders from across charity, healthcare, financial services, retail, transport, utilities and the public sector came together at the House of Lords to discuss the current and future impact of agentic AI.

The discussion revealed a room united by genuine interest and cautious optimism, but equally united in the view that most organisations remain some distance from the autonomous future many vendors are currently promoting.

Key Discussion Points

Organisations feel pushed toward adoption

One of the strongest themes to emerge was a sense that the market is pushing organisations toward AI adoption before many have fully understood the implications. Leaders described the current climate as noisy, with vendor narratives and industry pressure making it difficult to separate genuine value from hype. While AI adoption was broadly seen as an inevitability, leaders agreed that **many organisations are still working out where the real value lies, rather than adopting technology reactively to keep pace with competitors or client expectations.**

Optimism is real but tempered by operational reality

Enthusiasm for agentic AI was widespread, but it came with an important caveat – technology cannot fix what an organisation has not fixed itself. Leaders acknowledged that AI often exposes weaknesses in existing processes rather than resolving them, and that organisations reliant on complex manual workarounds are likely to see those weaknesses amplified, not eliminated, by automation. One leader summarised the risk plainly: putting AI over a broken process simply produces a faster, more visible failure. Several leaders noted that agentic AI pilots had already served as a valuable, if uncomfortable, stress test of their operations.

Knowledge management is the essential foundation

Across the table, knowledge management was repeatedly identified as the single most important prerequisite for AI success. Leaders agreed that AI is only ever as good as the information it can draw on, and that fragmented, outdated or poorly maintained knowledge bases will directly limit what any AI system can achieve. There was strong interest in tools capable of not just consuming knowledge, but actively maintaining and improving it, with leaders viewing this as one of the most sensible and immediate starting points on the wider AI journey.

Governance, trust and risk remain the biggest barriers

Despite genuine enthusiasm for the technology's capability, leaders were candid that governance, not capability, is what's holding back wider adoption. Discussion centred on the need for stronger guardrails, oversight of decisions made on behalf of customers and clarity around accountability when an AI agent gets something wrong. Leaders broadly agreed that the pace of technological advancement is currently outstripping the governance frameworks many organisations have in place to support it, particularly in sectors handling vulnerable customers or sensitive information.

Cost pressure is a major driver, but the business case is incomplete

Cost reduction remains one of the clearest commercial drivers behind AI investment, a pressure felt particularly acutely within outsourced contact centre environments, where clients increasingly expect efficiency gains to be delivered through automation. However, several leaders questioned whether current business cases fully reflect the true cost of AI adoption. Concerns were raised that ongoing maintenance, governance, data quality investment, continuous optimisation and change management are frequently underestimated, with many business cases weighted too heavily toward headcount reduction and too lightly toward the operational effort required to sustain success.

The future workforce raises real concern

The impact of agentic AI on the next generation of contact centre talent generated some of the most animated discussion of the day. Leaders raised concerns about how new employees will build foundational experience if routine work becomes fully automated, and how future leaders will be developed if entry-level opportunities diminish. At the same time, leaders acknowledged a shift in expectation may be coming from the other direction too: some suggested that AI-enabled workplaces may increasingly become a factor in attracting talent, rather than simply a threat to it.

Navigating the Market Hype

At present, there is widespread concern from contact centre leaders that the narrative around agentic AI tends to focus on features rather than business outcomes, creating unrealistic expectations at executive level that filter down into unrealistic timelines and budgets for operational teams.

During discussion, leaders called for a more balanced conversation - one centred on the specific business problems organisations are trying to solve, the outcomes they want for customers, and the cultural readiness of their organisation, rather than one driven by the pace of vendor product releases.

There was a shared view that the contact centre is increasingly being treated as a testing ground for agentic AI capability across the wider enterprise, which brings both opportunity and risk. Opportunity, because contact centres often have the data and process maturity to lead responsibly. Risk, because they are also disproportionately exposed to vulnerable customers and emotionally sensitive interactions where the cost of getting something wrong is highest.

Cost Savings Versus Value Creation

Cost was never far from the surface of the discussion, but leaders were keen to push back against the assumption that AI adoption is, or should be, primarily a headcount reduction exercise. While cost pressure is undoubtedly one of the strongest commercial drivers behind current investment – particularly for outsourced operations under pressure from clients to demonstrate AI-led efficiencies – leaders in the room described a more nuanced reality in their own organisations.

Many are using AI to reduce administrative effort, improve access to knowledge, strengthen quality assurance and increase the effectiveness of existing teams, rather than to remove roles outright. Leaders generally favoured this value-creation framing over a narrower cost-reduction one, warning that organisations pursuing AI solely to cut headcount risk damaging the very customer experience the technology was meant to improve.

There was also candour about the limitations of current business cases. Several leaders felt that the upfront cost savings promised by vendors rarely account for the ongoing investment required to sustain success - continuous data quality work, governance overheads and the change management needed to embed new ways of working. Leaders agreed that a more honest, complete business case is needed if organisations are to avoid disappointment further down the line.

The Human Factor

Leaders repeatedly returned to the importance of empathy, human judgement and safeguarding responsibilities that cannot reasonably be encoded into agentic AI. This was felt particularly strongly among leaders from healthcare, charity, legal and public service backgrounds, where accuracy, care and emotional intelligence are frequently central to a successful interaction, and where the consequences of an AI system getting something wrong extend well beyond inconvenience.

Rather than viewing the future purely in terms of automation replacing advisors, many leaders described a shift already underway, from advisors performing repetitive administrative tasks toward advisors supervising, validating and quality-assuring the outputs of AI systems. This reframes the frontline role rather than eliminating it, though leaders acknowledged that what this means in practice - in terms of skills, training and performance management - is still being worked out across the industry.

Leaders also challenged the assumption that AI adoption automatically equates to headcount reduction.

There was broad agreement that pursuing AI adoption purely to remove human roles, without regard for the resulting impact on customer experience, carries significant risk.

The impact on the current workforce and their wellbeing has to be considered now, and that a future where there is complete automation of day-to-day contacts is likely increase cognitive load for frontline teams rather than reduce it.

Ethical and Environmental Considerations

Leaders felt that ethical and environmental questions are not currently receiving the same level of attention as productivity and cost.

Bias in AI decision-making, transparency of automated decisions and the broader societal consequences of large-scale automation were all raised as areas warranting closer scrutiny.

Leaders were candid that bias introduced during implementation can significantly affect outcomes, reinforcing the view that governance and testing must be treated as essential components of any deployment, not an afterthought.

The environmental footprint of large-scale AI adoption was also raised as a genuine and growing concern, with some leaders questioning whether sustainability considerations should be formally built into procurement and tendering processes going forward. There was a shared appetite in the room for clearer industry guidance and stronger standards around responsible AI adoption, reflecting a sense that the industry's conversation about AI has, to date, focused disproportionately on what the technology can do, rather than what it should do.

Confidence and Caution

Leaders hold a genuinely high level of confidence in the underlying capability of agentic AI technology. However, that confidence was consistently paired with caution about execution. Leaders agreed that the technology is advancing rapidly, that the opportunities are significant, and that the associated risks are increasingly well understood - but that considerable work remains before autonomous, customer-facing agentic AI becomes a realistic proposition at scale.

Success, leaders agreed, will depend far less on the sophistication of the technology itself, and far more on process maturity, knowledge management, governance, data quality, organisational culture and workforce readiness.

Key Takeaways

- **Agentic AI adoption is accelerating,** but organisational readiness - not technological capability - is currently the limiting factor for most organisations in the room.
- **Knowledge management is foundational, not an afterthought.** Poor or fragmented knowledge will directly limit what any AI system can achieve.
- **Governance and accountability frameworks need to evolve at the same pace as the technology itself,** particularly around who owns the outcome when an AI agent makes a poor decision.
- **Business cases for AI should account for the full cost of ongoing maintenance, governance and change management,** not just the upfront promise of headcount reduction.
- **The impact on future talent pipelines deserves as much attention as the impact on current operations,** particularly around how entry-level roles and career development evolve.
- **AI should be positioned as a tool to support and augment frontline colleagues, not simply replace them** - with human judgement, empathy and safeguarding remaining essential, particularly in sectors serving vulnerable customers.

CCMA Contact Centre Management Association

0333 939 9964

www.ccma.org.uk

info@ccma.org.uk