

Evolution of the Contact Centre

Autumn 2026 Edition



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Ten Themes Impacting the Contact Centre

From customer expectations being set by the world's largest brands, to an AI market moving faster than most organisations can absorb and a frontline that is being asked to carry more emotional weight than ever, this report is focused on capturing all the biggest challenges that UK contact centre leaders are navigating in the moment, and how they are driving the contact centres of the future.

In total, ten key themes were identified through the course of the research and are covered in the report.

1



Changing Customer Expectations

The 'Amazon effect', the drive towards frictionless service and the rise of complex interactions.

2



External Shocks

Government policy, economic volatility and the contact centre as an early warning signal.

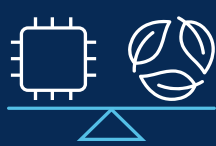
3



AI & Inflated Expectations

The gap between vendor promises, board ambition and operational reality.

4



AI Ethics & Sustainability

Ethical deployment, environmental impact and cost of delivery.

5



Change as a Constant

Transformation as a permanent operating environment, not a programme.

6



Communicating Change

Why the 'why' matters, and the importance of communicating to different audiences and stakeholders effectively.

7



Frontline Empowerment

Trust-based leadership, autonomous decision-making and the drive towards the contact centre as an intelligence hub.

8



Psychological Safety

Emotional labour, advisor wellbeing and the challenges associated with abuse via customer interactions.

9



Outsourcing & BPO

Data sovereignty, AI capability and the shift to strategic partnership.

10



Investment Justification

Customer Lifetime Value and the contact centre's commercial case.

Thanks to the Following Participants for Their Insights and Expertise

These findings stem from in-depth conversations conducted across three structured focus groups in the summer of 2026, each bringing together senior contact centre leaders from a range of sectors.

Lauren Jack,
Senior Operations Manager, Aegon

Danielle Platt,
Head of Customer Experience,
AJ Bell Business Solutions

Tim Wade,
Director of Customer Experience,
Believe Housing

Matt Williams,
Head of Customer Satisfaction, Bulk

Daniel Edwards,
Head of Customer Centre Operations,
Cadent Gas

Phil Quickenden,
Head of Customer & Registrations Services,
Camden Council

Jon Wells,
Director, Contact Centre Operations (UK),
Carnival UK

Joe Quinlivan,
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Kelly Vedash,
Head of Customer Service, L&Q

Kieran Holdcroft,
Operations Director, ManyPets

Rhian O'Hare,
Head of Customer Service, Marks & Spencer

Jasmin Caster,
People Services Manager,
McDonald's Restaurants Ltd

Sarah Williams,
Director of Customer Experience,
Notting Hill Genesis

Amit Tyagi,
Head of Customer Operations,
Sheffield City Council

Stephanie McDowell,
Head of Service Centre,
Willis Towers Watson

Sophia Cosgrove,
Head of Member Connect, XPS Group

Headwinds and Tailwinds

In 2020, the CCMA published the first in a series of research reports titled *Evolution of the Contact Centre*, with the aim of getting under the skin of how contact centres had changed operationally in response to Covid.

Such has been the pace of change in the intervening years, that as we publish what is now our eighth iteration of this research, revisiting and rereading that very first report almost feels like going back to a historical artifact.

However, some fundamentals have lived on. Rapid change, global uncertainty and an ongoing sense of turbulence continue to dominate the news feed, and our daily lives, as they did during the pandemic. How contact centres navigate through the turbulence continues to be a vital question. But today's leaders are also dealing with an entirely new set of challenges. How do we meet the various demands around artificial intelligence (AI)? How do we equip our frontline with the right skills for an AI future? How do we communicate to the wider business the strategic value of the contact centre, within this new world?

As shown in this report, the answers are wide-ranging and insightful, but often optimistic amongst the turbulence, too – a source of great inspiration when looking at the road ahead.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Great Expectations

There's an overarching theme in this research report that helps to reinforce something we already know: AI has reset expectations faster than any technology in the contact centre's history. For customers, for boards, and for the people working on the frontline.

Some of that reset has been over-promised. Not every vendor has delivered on their promises of great change, and the whole vendor community has learnt that tangible business outcomes are more important than a great demo.

But there's a quieter story in this research that is an equally as interesting: that AI is working alongside advisors rather than instead of them - summarisation, knowledge, transcription, live guidance and automating transactional tasks to allow advisors to spend more time on the high value and emotionally challenging conversations. But this in turn is presenting those working in the industry with new frontiers, obstacles and opportunities.

Leaders want the contact centre recognised as the intelligence heart of the business - the place where the organisation first hears what its customers think. This research suggests that shift is already underway.

Our thanks to the CCMA and to every leader who spoke so openly for this important and timely research report.



Alan Ranger,
VP International Marketing, Cresta



Change is the primary theme running throughout this research report, and arguably the most consequential change being experienced by contact centre leaders at present is in relation to the customer.

Customer expectations are no longer being set by organisations within their sectors – they are being set by brands such as Amazon, Deliveroo, Netflix and Uber.

Interestingly, despite it being fundamentally more difficult to deliver the expected experience thanks to the greater complexity on average compared with consumer sectors, public sector leaders describe their residents as expecting the same frictionless experience they receive from consumer platforms, while finance sector leaders highlight the growing expectation that complex, regulated problems can be resolved instantly.

“The speed of innovation we need to deliver has to be much faster than it’s ever been.”

Sarah Williams, Director of Customer Experience,
Notting Hill Genesis

Three pressures are converging – a rising demand for on-demand resolution regardless of underlying complexity, a continuous rise in emotionally-charged interactions as routine contact migrates to self-serve, and economic anxiety driving customers to seek quick fixes to difficult problems. The contact centre is increasingly managing the gap between what customers expect and what is possible.

“We are in the middle of a large transformation process around self-serve and it’s a significant education piece. Residents – our customers – are expectant about what they can do digitally, but they still want to call in and want us to provide more immediate solutions via the phone too.”

Amit Tyagi, Head of Customer Operations,
Sheffield City Council

“Personalisation from social media and AI has set a new standard, and the service industry is finding it incredibly hard to keep up.”

Kieran Holdcroft, Operations Director,
ManyPets





Many contact centres are absorbing the impact of external events – government policy, regulatory changes, media commentary, economic instability – before almost any other business function. Leaders describe “perpetually pivoting”, with demand patterns shifting overnight in response to events outside their control.

The 2024 Autumn Budget is held up as a recent standard bearer for how quickly external shocks ripple through to customer queries coming into contact centres, with unexpected changes such as the family farm inheritance tax suddenly leaving connected organisations – such as a farming pension provider, for instance – having to answer very specific and emotive questions about the future of its customers’ wealth and inheritance.

But even smaller events can trigger dramatic spikes, such as a Martin Lewis television appearance or a change in oil price, which can leave customers feeling uncertain and in search of a quick resolution.

Technology is helping with this, e.g. using AI to spot trending topics as they arise. But for knowledge management teams, keeping guidance accurate through continuous external change is now as important as any new technology deployment.

The contact centre is uniquely positioned as an early warning signal of public sentiment – a role whose strategic value is often underpriced. And leaders across sectors acknowledge it’s more imperative than ever that their contact centres keep abreast of news and developments, whilst also being mindful that the contact centre is where news and developments can often emerge first.

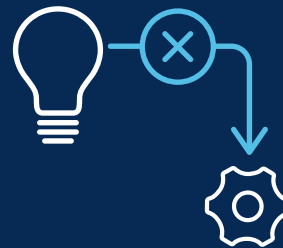
“Constant reforecasting is becoming part of everyday life. Announcements over the weekend can directly impact our contact volumes by Monday morning.”

Lauren Jack, Senior Operations Manager,
Aegon

“We are using advance analytics that help us understand how people respond to the changes we make, but there’s very little notice when changes are made at a governmental level. The budget is a great example, it’s a huge comms requirement and can throw things at you that you weren’t expecting.”

Stephanie McDowell, Head of Service Centre,
Willis Towers Watson





Contact centre leaders are almost universally exploring and testing the use of AI, but with notably measured caution. It's not necessarily the potential that's in question – successful deployments around summarisation, transcription and knowledge management being commonly referenced – but the dominant narrative is that there is a gap between what vendors promise, what boards expect and what can realistically be delivered.

Public sector leaders describe board-level pressure sometimes driven more by media coverage than operational understanding, while B2C leaders highlight a fast-moving vendor market that can sometimes feel tough to stay fully in touch with.

Regulated sector leaders flag an unexpected consequence: a rise in AI-generated customer contact into complaints teams. Reports suggest that some complaints are now running to dozens of pages of text, containing all manner of legislative language and citing niche and obscure regulations, and the act of deciphering and resolving them is increasing contact centre workloads. It's an outcome that could be considered ironic, given AI is a technology which is promoted as aiding efficiency.

There are still many clear benefits associated with AI, however, and AI has undoubtedly helped to bring the 'single customer view' – long held as a benchmark of operational maturity – back into focus. Some leaders see AI as potentially delivering a richer, behaviour-based single customer view within a few years – not through structured data fields, but through deeper understanding of how customers engage over time.

"Execs, boards and shareholders see AI everywhere and expect it – 'let's do AI' – However, without having a solid benefits case to support the 'real' challenge. The idea that AI can do everything and is apparently free is alluring, even though it simply isn't true."

Daniel Edwards, Head of Customer Centre Operations,
Cadent Gas

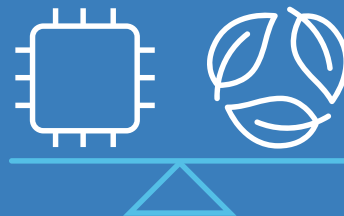
"AI-generated contact is a real and growing challenge. What used to be a single emotional message on one page is now numerous pages of legal framing we have to work through."

Kieran Holdcroft, Operations Director,
ManyPets

"With the market so saturated and everyone selling a similar product, you can find yourself in a state of choice paralysis. The tough bit isn't finding an AI solution, it's implementing it to do exactly what you need it to do."

Rhian O'Hare, Head of Customer Service,
Marks & Spencer





Leaders are candid that conversations about AI's sustainability impact – water consumption by data centres, carbon footprint, societal risks – are lagging behind conversations about efficiency, but that these are increasingly becoming discussions they feel a mandate to lead on. They are also being led by their customers' expectations around these themes.

Ethics are equally important, too. Where should AI's role start and end? Should an AI system ever handle, for instance, a pet bereavement or a pension support conversation, even if it can do so effectively? And what does that mean for organisational culture? UK consumer research consistently shows that customers continue to place significant weight on ethical credentials.

Future costs of AI are also beginning to weigh heavily on contact centre leaders' minds. Gartner's January 2026 research predicted that by 2030, the cost per resolution for generative AI in customer service could exceed the cost via human advisors. The assumption that AI automatically undercuts human labour is beginning to be seriously tested.

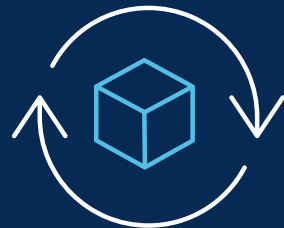
"Everyone has gone wild for AI, but we're not talking enough about the sustainability impact – the water used by data centres, the ethics of it all. Every organisation has a duty of care to address that."

Matt Williams, Head of Customer Satisfaction,
Bulk

"There's a speed to competency and everyone is racing towards it and then there's a danger that the bigger picture can sometimes get missed."

Amit Tyagi, Head of Customer Operations,
Sheffield City Council





Across every sector, change is no longer an event to be managed: it is the operating environment. Transformation timescales that once spanned five to seven years are now compressed to less than half that time, and advisor skill requirements are evolving faster than most organisations can keep pace.

B2C leaders are strong advocates for test-and-learn cultures – moving quickly, learning from failure without stigma and pivoting without waiting for perfect solutions. Public sector leaders describe the shift from major programmes to continuous incremental improvement, and the leadership challenge of keeping teams motivated through change that never ends.

Leaders across sectors describe a push towards being more 'agile', with the aim of moving faster with transformation programmes. However, applying agile principles within legacy environments can create frequent blockages, including the governance structures that most contact centres have in place and the loss of control that can come through the agile process.

As a result, more leadership time is consumed on 'unblocking', sometimes on a daily basis. A large part of this unblocking is often overcoming legacy and traditional approaches, and being able to say 'we don't have to do it that way' to other organisational stakeholders.

"There's so much change that you need to be willing and agile enough to test and to be able to test again if you fail."

Joe Quinlivan, Head of Customer Care,
Gousto

"Change has moved from being a standalone programme to just being day to day. Two years ago we were introducing a new contact centre platform, and now we're doing it again. Historically that gap would have been seven or eight years."

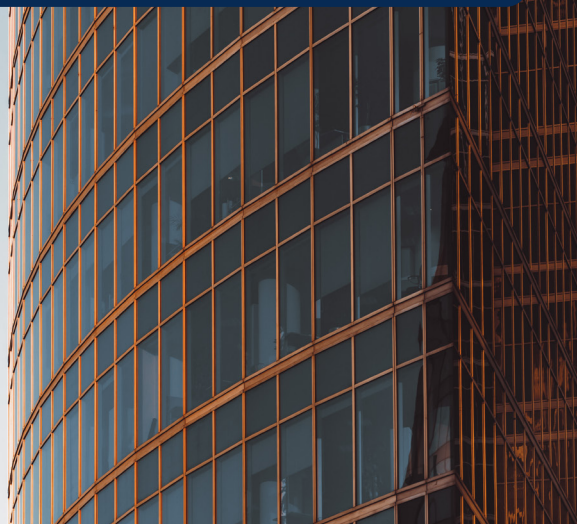
Phil Quickenden, Head of Customer & Registrations Services,
Camden Council

"We're introducing vibe-coding to rapidly turn ideas into working prototypes that customers and colleagues can see, test and shape. That iterative approach not only accelerates innovation, it helps people imagine what's possible, build confidence in new ways of working, and become active participants in change rather than observers of it."

Tim Wade, Director of Customer Experience,
Believe Housing

"We are very much in a constant cycle. We've tried things that didn't work, pulled them and gone again. The constant change cycle demands that discipline."

Sophia Cosgrove, Head of Member Connect,
XPS Group



6

Communicating Change



If change is constant, communication is no longer a supporting activity – it is a strategic capability. Leaders emphasise that the quality of communication during change is often more consequential than the change itself.

Two aspects of communication are becoming vital: the need to tailor audience-specific messaging – e.g. a board and an advisor need fundamentally different explanations of the same change – and the importance of explaining the ‘why’ of any major change programme. Leaders also acknowledge that performance often dips before it improves after change, and that communicating this upfront is part of managing the journey.

“Being open with your teams and knowing how to communicate to them is vital. We’re building a podcasting room because some of our colleagues interact well with communications in the form of video and audio podcasts. Varying and different ways to communicate to everyone and knowing how to do it is a must.”

Sarah Williams, Director of Customer Experience, Notting Hill Genesis

“Constant and consistent communication is becoming more vital. We always talk about trust – and that means explaining to teams the ‘why’ behind everything and being honest that not everyone will respond positively at first.”

Jon Wells, Director, Contact Centre Operations (UK), Carnival UK

“You have to lead with empathy - it’s a non-negotiable. Your people will always be at different stages of the change curve, and it’s your job to bring them with you on the journey - not just inform them of the destination.”

Matt Williams, Head of Customer Satisfaction, Bulk

“Knowing when and how to communicate change is huge. Sometimes calling it an ‘enhancement’ rather than a ‘change’ transforms the conversation.”

Daniel Edwards, Head of Customer Centre Operations, Cadent Gas



7

Frontline Empowerment



Leaders describe growing trust being placed in frontline colleagues, with a move away from command-and-control models toward more autonomous, empowered ways of working, with decision-making being pushed closer to the customer.

The contact centre's role as an intelligence hub is prominent. Organisations are increasingly using frontline insight to identify upstream process failures and feed intelligence into product, policy and service design. In regulated sectors, moving away from speed-based advisor metrics toward rewarding effective resolution and outcome quality is cited as one of the most impactful cultural changes leaders can make.

The critical nature of this is not underestimated by contact centre leaders, given that many frontline colleagues are still young, and confronting customer scenarios of which they have no personal life experience. The changing role of the frontline is having profound implications on hiring, training and ongoing support, with frontline teams increasingly being asked to make sometimes difficult decisions and deal with stressful, charged situations.

“More strategic leadership is required much more closely to the frontline. Our role is to unblock pathways and reopen doors – and to push decision-making down to the people who actually know what’s happening.”

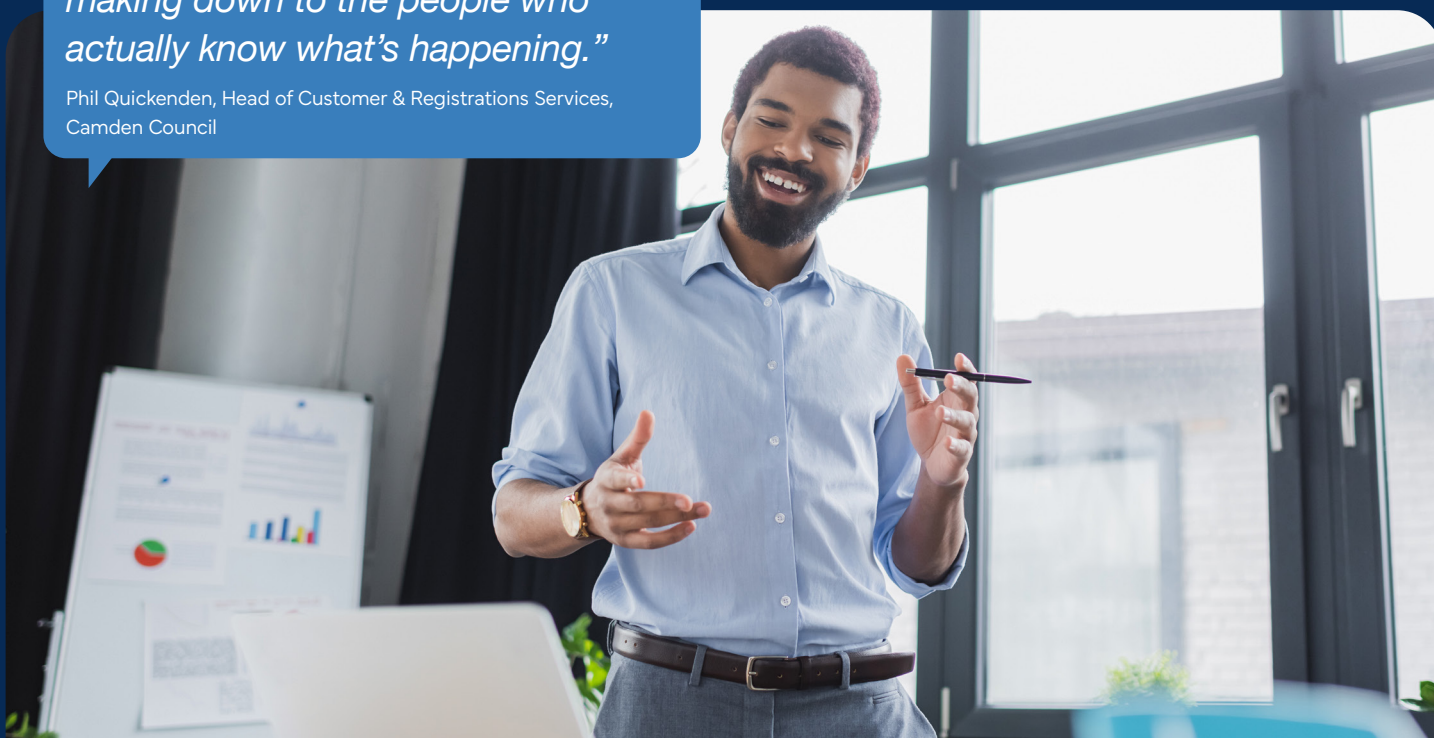
Phil Quickenden, Head of Customer & Registrations Services, Camden Council

“Our team members have seen their roles change so they now manage the experience of a customer across their entire journey with us. The skillset to do this is broader.”

Amit Tyagi, Head of Customer Operations, Sheffield City Council

“People will always be the enablers of your customer experience. A happy team means happy customers. Making safe spaces to share, challenge and contribute is fundamental to that.”

Jasmin Caster, People Services Manager, McDonald's Restaurants Ltd





As routine contact migrates to digital channels, advisors are left handling the most emotionally demanding interactions, such as bereavement, financial hardship, mental health crises and domestic difficulty.

The cumulative emotional burden is increasing significantly, and the most forward-thinking organisations are responding with deliberate structural investment in wellbeing.

B2C leaders also highlight a rise in abusive customer behaviour, with several describing it as unprecedented. Japan has moved to legislate protection for contact centre workers, and several leaders suggest the UK could be heading toward a similar debate.

“We’ve hired a specialist practitioner to help with resilience training. Younger colleagues who came through the Covid years have different vulnerability needs and aren’t always equipped with the resilience these roles now demand.”

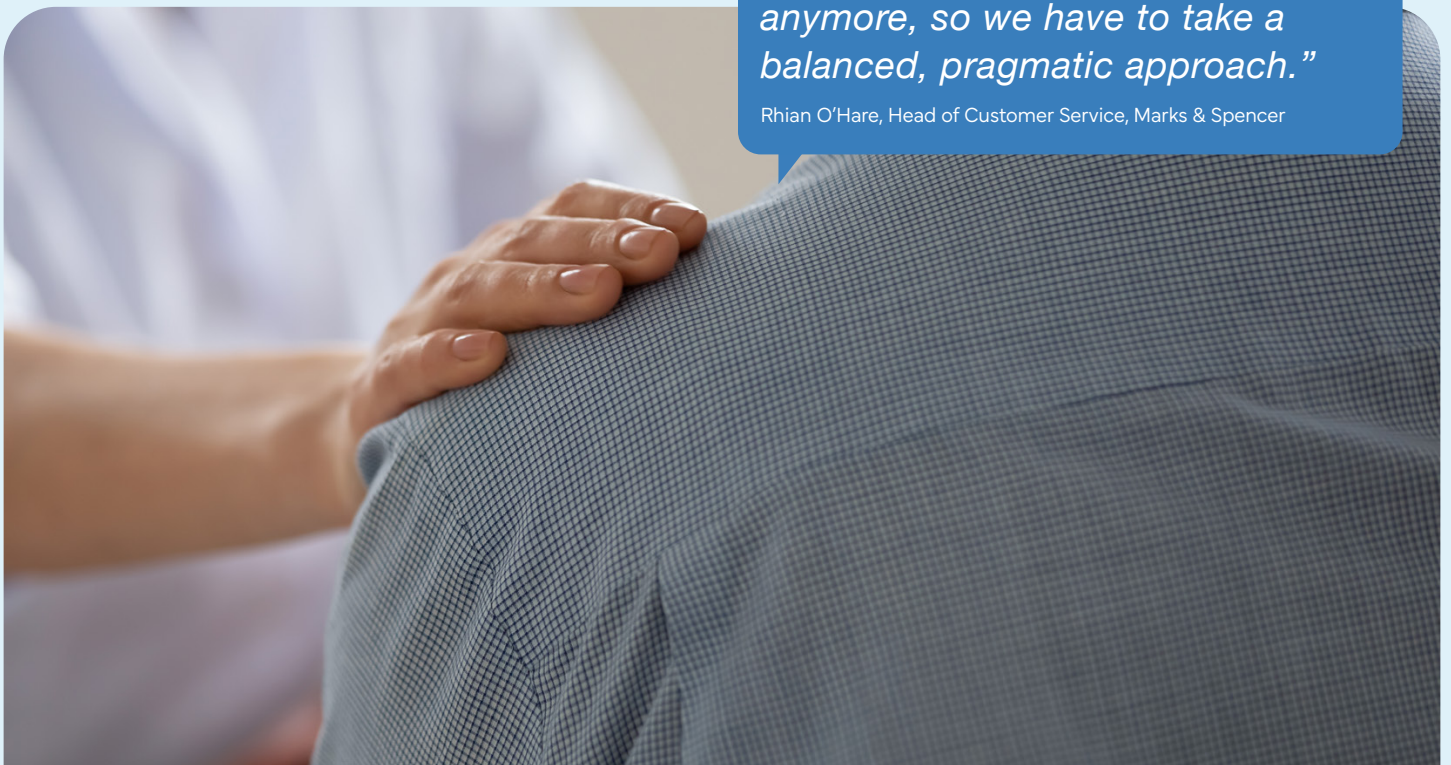
Kelly Vedash, Head of Customer Service, L&Q

“If an advisor has a tough call, knowing they can speak to a team leader and take a ten-minute break makes a real difference. We’ve also relaxed our approach to AHT, so advisors feel empowered to resolve issues properly.”

Danielle Platt, Head of Customer Experience,
AJ Bell Business Solutions

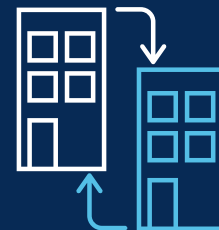
“Psychological safety is a growing concern. I’ve introduced an abusive customer policy – something I never expected we’d need. The customer isn’t always right anymore, so we have to take a balanced, pragmatic approach.”

Rhian O’Hare, Head of Customer Service, Marks & Spencer



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Outsourcing & BPO



Contact centre leaders in specific sectors are raising questions about the future fit of traditional outsourcing models. Public sector participants highlight growing data sovereignty concerns, with geopolitical uncertainty making certain offshore arrangements feel riskier than they once did.

Regulated and finance sector leaders question whether Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) partners have the strategic value-add to remain competitive medium-term – noting that the cost arbitrage advantage can erode within two years, at which point technical capability becomes the more important question.

B2C leaders describe a BPO market in transition, from a per-seat model toward one where proprietary technology, agent-assist capability and genuine brand alignment define

differentiation. The expectation is that future partnerships will be deeper, more collaborative and more genuinely integrated with the client's culture and technology ecosystem, something the CCMA's own [2026 UK Contact Centre Outsourcing Report](#) has found is already a reality for some UK BPO relationships.

"Every company is going to be different, but partnership certainly feels more important in this day and age. Finding the right use cases, finding what you need and ensuring a BPO is with you on the journey."

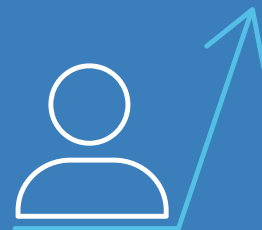
Matt Williams, Head of Customer Satisfaction, Bulk

"The entire landscape feels like it is going to be changing over the next couple of years. The cost of living, the rises in inflation and technology advancement - they're all issues that will be impacting outsourcing discussions for many organisations."

Sophia Cosgrove, Head of Member Connect, XPS Group

10

Investment Justification



Many leaders report a meaningfully different way of thinking about contact centre value. The language of Average Handle Time (AHT) and cost per call is giving way to Customer Lifetime Value (CLV), retention impact and commercial contribution.

Leaders describe building direct links between customer satisfaction and commercial outcomes – providing a business case that resonates at board level in ways operational metrics do not. The contact centre is increasingly positioned not as a cost to be justified but as a commercial asset to be invested in, and leaders are being invited into strategic conversations around growth, loyalty and value creation as a result.

“We’ve done a significant amount of work connecting customer satisfaction with lifetime value. Customers who leave poor satisfaction scores show a 15% reduction in lifetime value. That’s a huge justification for everything we’re investing in.”

Joe Quinlivan, Head of Customer Care, Gousto

“We’re talking more about Customer Lifetime Value. If we take time to resolve an issue and protect a customer who will buy with us ten more times within a year, that matters far more than whether our AHT was within target.”

Rhian O’Hare, Head of Customer Service, Marks & Spencer

B2C organisations are the most advanced in achieving this, as their commercial outcomes are clearly defined and customer data is often more aligned to join the dots. But while it is much harder to achieve in other organisations – such as those in public sector and regulated industries – it’s still considered a worthwhile ambition to work towards.





Future Ambitions

Despite the challenges with the pace of change, the complexity of technological adoption and the structural barriers, there is striking optimism among contact centre leaders.

The consistent vision is of AI absorbing the routine and transactional interactions, freeing human advisors to focus on what they uniquely do well: complex judgement, emotional intelligence, human connection.

Alongside this is a strong aspiration to see frontline roles elevated from a job people can sometimes 'fall into' to a career that attracts talent, rewards skill and is recognised as one of the most important in any customer-facing organisation.

The ten themes paint a picture of an industry at a significant inflection point. The contact centre is under more pressure than ever from rising expectations, external volatility, AI disruption and budget constraint. But it is also more strategically important than ever, and many leaders understand that with unrivalled clarity.

What is most striking is the consistency of challenges across very different sectors. Public sector, regulated industries and B2C organisations are grappling with the same fundamental questions. The answers will look different in every organisation – but navigating change with honesty, ambition and genuine care for colleagues and customers remains a primary objective.

"Yes, we need to iterate and be innovative, but we have to get our people excited about that and not have them worried about the aspect of change."

Tim Wade, Director of Customer Experience, Believe Housing

"No more 'I'm just an agent'. I want people to feel empowered, and for this job to be seen as a vital one that people are genuinely proud to have."

Lauren Jack, Senior Operations Manager, Aegon

"Humans will always be in the loop, especially in our industry. Headcount won't change dramatically, but we'll see faster customer outcomes, better vulnerability identification and more sophisticated risk management."

Stephanie McDowell, Head of Service Centre, Willis Towers Watson

About CCMA

For more than 30 years, the CCMA has been dedicated to supporting contact centre leaders. We push ourselves to do more for our thriving membership base, which is the largest community of industry professionals in the UK.

The CCMA was founded with the goal of sharing best practice and networking to improve skills and knowledge in order to progress contact centre operations – and we live by that to this day.

We give those who work in contact centres the chance to discuss ideas and share experiences through member-only events online and in-person. Member organisations are invited to become Accredited through the Contact Centre Standards Framework and get independent guidance on where they can improve. There is the opportunity to compare operations against industry standards and 25+ KPIs, via our annual CCMA Benchmark.

Our training arm, CCMA Academy gives contact centre professionals at all levels a structured learning opportunity to support both personal and professional development for the benefit of their operations. We also celebrate the progress our industry is making through the UK National Contact Centres Awards. Those that win go on to share their stories through channels such as the UK National Contact Centre Conference, Best Practice Visits and CareerTalk, while also providing input into our CCMA Circles and other events.

In 2026, the CCMA coordinated the UK's first National Contact Centre Day, a celebration that engaged more than 4m people both within and outside the sector, via online and in-person events held by a vast range of organisations across the country. The event will take place annually, with the next National Contact Centre Day set for 3 March 2027.

www.ccma.org.uk



About Cresta

Cresta is the AI operating system for customer experience, where human and AI agents work together to power the entire customer lifecycle. Cresta automates conversations and back-office processes, augments human work, and puts insight into action, so each conversation makes the next one better. Companies like United Airlines, CVS Health, and Marriott use Cresta to turn every interaction into a competitive advantage.

www.cresta.com

Not a member?

There is no better time to join us. The industry is changing and we are giving our members more opportunities to learn, to network and to support each other.

www.ccma.org.uk/membership



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