

Contact centres

What does the contact centre of the future look like?

TRANSFORM WITH TECHNOLOGY

M247⁷

With the fall-out of COVID-19 still being felt across businesses globally, we ask how the pandemic could potentially change the shape of contact centres for good.

Contact centres are the vital link between a business and its customers. They're the first port of call for consumers seeking to speak to a business representative, and they play a fundamental role in fostering and ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty. But the current COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the many challenges faced by traditional contact centres, and shown businesses that there's never been a better time to start future-proofing those all-important customer relationships.

The biggest challenge so far

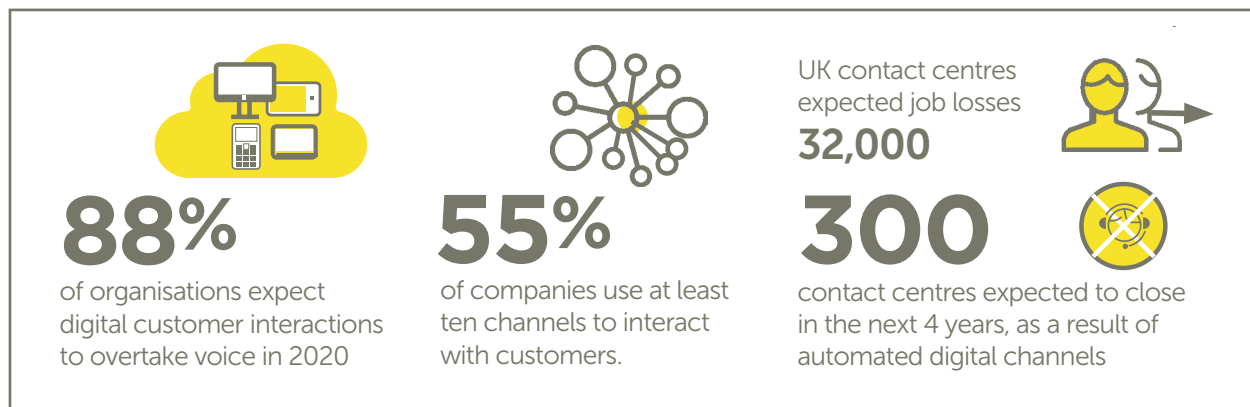
Since their introduction in the 1950s, contact centres have played a valuable role in business operations, helping drive revenue, improve customer experiences and increase sales. Over the past 70 years they have undergone a huge and near-constant transformation, from the telephone-only customer services hub of their early days to the altogether more holistic, cloud-based solution we see increasing in popularity today.

Contact centres are in the midst of another period of evolution right now.

Throughout the 2000s, many UK brands and businesses moved their contact centre operations offshore to countries such as India, where they could capitalise on lower operational costs and reduced labour spends. They reasoned that English was widely spoken in India, so there would be no language barrier for their customers, and that the massive savings made on labour could be used to grow the business. Some businesses experienced bad PR and reputational damage over these changes and have since undergone a process of on-shoring back to the UK in recent years.

Regardless of where your contact centre is based the global pandemic forced all workers in all countries to go home, and those businesses had to think on their feet to ensure the continuity of those all-important call centre functions. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the hand of many businesses. Some had already taken tentative steps into the realm of cloud-based contact centres, with as many as 31% of all UK contact centres¹ using remote-working agents to take calls. Others simply weren't ready.

The migration to cloud-based contact centres has begun



1. www.uctoday.com/contact-centre/contact-centre-statistics/

The COVID contact crisis

When businesses were forced to close their doors and send their workers home at the end of March, many were unprepared² for the increased demand on their contact centres. Consumers who had purchased goods or services ahead of the lockdown suddenly found themselves facing delayed or cancelled orders, and they needed to speak to someone to reschedule delivery or seek a refund. But many times they had no way of contacting the relevant company.

Where it went wrong

Electrical goods outlet Curry's was one of the businesses that found itself flailing, and customers began reporting call wait times of more than an hour on its customer services line. Homebase was similarly unprepared for both the lockdown and an influx of complaints and queries, and took the unprecedented step of suspending its customer services phone line entirely. It began directing customers to a contact form on its website instead, but many customers report having never heard back. And online retailer Very has essentially suspended complaints, telling customers they will deal with any queries once lockdown is over.

Of course, when one of the primary aims of contact centres is to foster favourable customer relations, the backlash against these retailers has been immense. Businesses suffer when their contact centres can't provide customers with the help they need, and the internal struggles of these companies have become a very public customer vexation. Customers who have been chasing refunds or lost, damaged or undelivered goods have been channelling their ire into negative reviews on such platforms as Trustpilot. Curry's now finds itself facing a service rating of bad or poor by a massive 67% of reviewers. Moreover, the complaints website Resolver has reported a surge in submissions from customers whose statutory rights are being ignored.

“ Businesses suffer when their contact centres can't provide customers with the help they need ”

Other companies – namely those who had embraced cloud-based technology – have fared much better amid the pandemic. Many will have had some of their teams working remotely already. Others will have been able to simply send their call-handling agents home and spin functionality out to them wherever they were. One M247 customer, for example, had already been using our hosted contact centre solution and was able to immediately send its 75 strong team home when lockdown was announced, transferring all functionality to them there, with no disruption to business.

“ Those who had embraced cloud-based technology - have fared much better amid the pandemic. Many will have had some of their teams working remotely already. Others will have been able to simply send their call-handling agents home and spin functionality out to them wherever they were. ”

2. www.theguardian.com/money/2020/may/17/service-falls-victim-to-covid-as-retailers-keep-customers-hanging-on

Pre-existing challenges

Of course nobody could have predicted a global pandemic. But even before COVID-19 threw a spanner in the works, call centres faced mounting challenges in a world where technology, and customer expectations, are advancing at a rapid rate. Agent retention, call-handling analytics, inconsistent customer experiences and technological integration all presented headaches for traditional on-premises contact centres while consumers began demanding multiple and seamlessly integrated points of contact and around-the-clock access to customer service teams.

Often a company's issues with delivering a high-end contact centre experience results from the fact that the business relies on a legacy on-premises system – their call-handling capabilities are out-dated, and legacy software can't or won't integrate with the myriad of platforms customers are using to make contact. But while cost, privacy and security concerns might have been barriers to the more widespread adoption of cloud solutions pre-coronavirus, not even the biggest brands in the country can afford to have customers turning their backs for good because of shoddy, or even non-existent, customer services.

Looking to the future, there will remain a social distancing issue for contact centres. They have long been thought of as 'petri dishes', with hundreds of workers packed like sardines into tiny cubicles and supervisors pacing the floor to offer support and guidance when needed.

When coronavirus spread to UK shores, contact centres were among the first businesses to send people home, and it's hard to imagine a wholehearted return to this way of working for quite some time. Social distancing measures are likely to be in place for a good few months even after the lockdown ends, contact centres are going to have to find new ways of working.

Cloud-based contact centres will offer the perfect solution for many businesses in this respect, and these businesses will undoubtedly be pleased to discover the knock-on effect on some of the other pre-pandemic challenges they had been facing. Let's take a look at some of those challenges, as well as the solutions a cloud-based contact centre can offer...

Pre-COVID obstacles

- Agent retention levels
- Call-handling analytics
- Heightened customer expectations
- Growing number of customer contact channels
- Technological integration of channels
- 24/7 always on society



Looking to the future, cloud-based contact centres can offer businesses solutions to 6 key challenges:

1. Business continuity

On-premise contact centres have traditionally acted as a single system. That's an 'all-your-eggs-in-one-basket' scenario, which leaves your contact centre vulnerable in case of data centre outages or issues. Not only can data centre outages affect your customers' ability to get in touch with you, they also impact heavily on agent output. If outages are frequent, business will be harmed by the ensuing reputational damage, both as a business and as an employer. Customers will go elsewhere, and so will your staff.



The Cloud solution

A virtual contact centre can be almost indestructible, experiencing on average 35% less³ downtime than traditional on-premises ones. With all your contact centre operations running out of fault-tolerant data centres, your business's remote agents are always connected – wherever they are – and you can focus on growing your business, with peace of mind in the guaranteed up status of your contact centre. Companies using cloud solutions for their contact centre services didn't have to worry when their workers were all sent home in March, because their teams could utilise softphone capabilities and hook up to the contact centre through their home networks almost instantaneously.

“Cloud contact centers experience 35% less downtime than their on-premise counterparts.”⁴

2. Technology and process integration

Legacy on-premise systems are often comprised of complex infrastructures with siloed technologies relying heavily on IT teams being able to get the various software applications talking to each other. If your contact centre solutions aren't integrated with applications that incorporate critical analytics data, you're losing time and money on every call as agents are forced to wait for CRM systems to load before they can process the call. Moreover, a lack of integration between software makes call-handling a much more complex process, and you run the risk of misdirecting callers and sending them around your teams in circles. These hold-ups will inevitably lead to customer frustrations, and this could mean they start shopping elsewhere.



The Cloud solution

As with most things cloud, contact centre management solutions have built-in integrations and plug-ins, including fast and easy integration with leading CRM solutions. What's more, a cloud contact centre gives agents a unified view of customer history, including purchases and previous queries, as well as preferred channels. This instantaneous view will ensure calls can be directed properly and quickly, and will undoubtedly foster customer satisfaction.

“A lack of integration between software makes call-handling a much more complex process.”

3. www.callminer.com/blog/call-center-statistics-you-should-know/

4. 88 Call Center Statistics You Must Read: 2019 Data Analysis & Market Share, Finances Online;

3. Inconsistent customer experience

Today's consumer is always on the go and they need to be able to get in touch with you in whichever way suits them best at whatever time of day they try to reach out. That means they want to be able to email, call, chat or get in touch over social media, and they'll want to be able to rely on the same level of service, wherever they approach you. This is where so many legacy on-premise contact centres struggle, because they rarely support all these capabilities. And even if they do, it is common for each one to be dealt with on a separate system and managed by a different team, making it difficult to track any single client's interaction history. This means more hanging around for the customer as the agent tracks down the relevant information, and a less positive end-user experience.

Continuity matters to callers who have contacted support before: "72% of consumers say that when contacting customer service they expect the agent to 'know who they are, what they have purchased and have insights into their previous engagements.'" ⁵



The Cloud solution

When cloud contact centre communications are integrated with your critical systems, agents have instant access to a customer's information, regardless of whether they make contact via phone, chat, email, app, social media or SMS. Easy access to information means an agent is quickly able to tailor their responses with previous interactions in mind, and direct people to the appropriate team member immediately. This drives continuity and success in communications, and thereby positive, consistent customer experiences.

4. Agent attrition

Retaining staff has long been one of the fiercest battles for contact centres. Often insufficient training, unsatisfactory work environments, out-dated or complex software systems and dealing with frustrated callers who have been kept hanging on the line are common reasons given for employee turnover. But when labour accounts for as much as three-quarters of a contact centre's running costs, it's vital for managers to be able to recruit, train and retain the right workers.

Employee turnover: The stats



The Cloud solution

Cloud-based technologies offer plenty of solutions to help with agent retention, from performance management tools to automated training systems that enable gamification such as workers completing in-app quizzes or learning via video-based content at their own own pace, from the comfort of their own home. Cloud solutions also make forecasting, scheduling and assignment rotation quick and easy, helping to avoid repetition overload and burnout cited by many outgoing contact centre workers.

5. 100 Essential Customer Service Statistics and Trends for 2019, Nextiva;

6. www.corporate.centralus.co.uk/articles/call-centre-turnover

Another way cloud solutions can aid staff retention is by offering increased remote call-handling opportunities – if a contact centre traditionally struggles to attract and retain staff in the local area, a virtual contact centre means managers can cast their recruitment net across a wider geographical area.

5. Analytics

In legacy contact centres, front- and back-office systems typically aren't connected on the same platform, and they offer limited data for analysing both agent performance and customer experiences. Moreover, on-premise call centre metrics typically lack the capability to compile real-time data to support agent performance management, never mind presenting the data in an easy-to-use format.



The Cloud solution

Most cloud-based contact centre solutions come with in-built analytics tools. So whether you're looking to manage your team workloads more effectively or determine the best call-handling routes or customer pain points, you'll be able to access that information in a couple of clicks. The real-time nature of cloud solution analytics means coaching for staff can be done on the fly, and insights-based action can be taken at any time. Easy access to metrics and analytics means managers can easily spot patterns and identify the things that are impacting on the overall customer experience, and they can address these issues in a co-ordinated way. If, for example, one particular call queue seems to be experiencing longer wait times, they may be able to move agents around and bolster that team immediately, to decrease the wait for callers.

6. IT demands

Contact centres traditionally rely heavily on IT teams, especially in legacy infrastructures where an IT manager's ability to update customer service rules is limited. The longstanding process of raising a ticket and waiting for an issue to be resolved can cause massive delays for everyone, and this all impacts negatively on both customer experience and employee morale as agents are forced to deal with frustrated customers.




The Cloud solution

A virtual software system puts IT managers in control only when they need to be. Many cloud-based contact centre solutions are extremely intuitive, meaning IT managers can tap into the tools they need as and when they need them, with confidence that they will do exactly what they say they will. What's more, with the specialised development of contact centre suites, these tools have been tried, tested and perfected and are ready to hit the ground running. A simple upgrade or flick of the switch, and IT managers can get back to working on other business-critical issues.

The contact centres of the (near) future

There are so many ways a cloud-based solution can work for your contact centre, your business and most importantly, your customers. The ability to carry on handling calls and dealing with enquiries at the moment, while all your teams are working from home, is what's going to make you stand out as a company that carried on caring about its customers.



To find out how our
technology can transform
your business get in touch

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