odigo

Elevating contact centre agent engagement and performance

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Glossary:

AI: Stands for artificial intelligence, the ability of a computer program or machine to think, learn and communicate like a human.

Agent experience (AX): Refers to how an agent feels at work and encompasses factors including working environment, equipment, team support and types of tasks.

Agent console: The browser-based graphical user interface (GUI) software used by agents to manage customer conversations.

Algorithm: A set of instructions entered into a program to enable the completion of a specific task.

Ambassador: Any agent who interacts with clients remotely or in the field, including people who work on the move, and who embody the values of the brand they represent. Ambassadors ensure that each customer is provided a unique experience.

Analytics: The systematic evaluation of data or statistics.

Application programming interface (API): APIs define interactions between multiple software intermediaries.

Automation: The use of equipment or computer programs to accomplish tasks without human assistance.

Average talk time, also known as average handling time: The amount of time an agent spends talking to customers.

Bot: An AI-driven program that communicates through voice (voicebot), text (chatbot) or over the phone (callbot).

Channel-less communication: When multiple communication channels are linked into one smooth conversation, meaning the channels used are irrelevant.

Churn rate, also known as attrition/turnover rates: The annual percentage rate of employees who leave a job.

Customer experience (CX): How a customer feels when dealing with an organisation; it is the result of one or many interactions over a period of time.

Customer relationship management (CRM): The strategies and technologies that are used to manage and analyse customer interactions and data throughout the customer lifecycle.

Dashboard: A display of relevant KPI information and customer data to agents and supervisors regarding customer history and actions to be taken. Dashboards both benefit and encourage analytics and are applicable on any device an agent uses.

Data analytics: The science of analysing raw data as a means of drawing conclusions and forming predictions.

Data-driven approach: When strategic decisions are based on data analysis and interpretation.

First call resolution (FCR): When a customer's question or issue is resolved after a single interaction. FCR measurements are crucial as they enable contact centres to monitor the quality of answers, not just quantitative KPIs, thereby aligning customer experience and agent performance.

Gamification: The application of typical aspects of playing games (scoring points, competition) to encourage engagement.

Intelligent automation (IA): Combines robotic process automation (RPA) and AI technology to achieve end-to-end business process automation that advances a company's digital transformation.

Intelligent routing, also known as skills-based routing: Technology that connects customers to appropriate agents or bots through the application of pre-programmed rules based on their competences.

Interactive voice response (IVR): Technology that enables humans to interact with a computer-operated phone system through voice.

ISO-27001: An international standard on how to manage information security.

ISO-9001: An international standard that specifies requirements for quality management systems.

Key performance indicator (KPI): A way to measure performance and evaluate the success of an activity, individual or organisation.

Machine learning (ML): An application of AI that enables systems to automatically and independently learn and improve from experience.

Quality management (QM): In contact centres, QM ensures that agents' performances are consistent and effective; QM enables planning, monitoring and coaching opportunities.

Robotic process automation (RPA): Technology that allows the configuration of computer software to imitate human actions within digital systems to execute a process.

Self-service operations: Methods that allow customers to complete tasks on their own with an AI-driven program.

Sentiment analysis: The ability of AI to identify, quantify and study emotional states.

Speech analytics: The process of analysing recorded calls to gather customer information and improve communication.

Workforce management (WFM) solution: An integrated set of processes that a company uses to optimise employee productivity.

Prologue:

Groundbreaking and forward-thinking innovations are ushering in an exciting new world of contact centres. Integrating cutting-edge technology has been a cause and result of changing organisational mindsets and has gained momentum in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an increasingly digital world, contact centres are one of the last places customers can engage in human-to-human interactions, meaning the role of contact centre agents has evolved considerably.

Why? Because in an era when customers are accustomed to instant access and gratification, agents must provide exceptional customer care. Nowadays, they are the face (or voice) of a brand. These ambassadors are responsible for handling complaints, answering questions, resolving issues, promoting products/services and expressing a brand's values. The pressure on agents has never been higher to deliver expert customer service that drives long-lasting business and inspires loyalty.

Forward-thinking organisations understand the link between customer satisfaction and rewarding agent experience, which is why contact centres across all sectors are focused on improving agent experience and increasing agent motivation. To do so, they should embrace a holistic approach to agent welfare and make sure they have access to intuitive, agile and customised digital tools, skills-based training and real-time support from supervisors and colleagues.

However, while technology should augment agents, it should not be used as a substitute. The key differentiator in contact centre performance begins and ends with the professional expertise and human touch of qualified agents.

Thibaud Pietri
Chief Marketing & Product Officer, Odigo

Introduction:

Today, successful companies need to integrate cutting-edge technology with exceptional customer experience (CX). A report from Ombudsmen Services found that 28% of UK consumers report losing brand loyalty after receiving bad customer service. The best way to win the CX battle? Ensuring the quality of agent experience (AX), which leads to better performance and increased engagement. In this regard, a Gartner survey reveals that 86% of executives rank employee engagement as "having an equal or greater impact on customer experience than other factors such as project management and data skills". To improve AX, a customised approach should be adopted based on a company's needs and industry requirements. This can be achieved by:

- Updating organisational attitudes,
- Leveraging cutting-edge technology,
- Investing in people and processes.

Organisational mindsets have to evolve and not only reflect changing realities, but anticipate trends. This means adopting an approach that puts data front and centre, embraces channel-less communication and grasps the close link between customer and agent experience. Careful attention must also be given to agent working conditions, both on site and at home.

Additionally, substantial investment must occur in both hardware and software to enable agents to perform. Integrating cloud-based artificial intelligence (AI) and intelligent automation (IA) support, advanced data analytics and contextual routing strategies can increase efficiency and effectiveness. This, combined with better connectivity, ensures agents can work in a comfortable environment of their choosing, which delivers needed flexibility.

Last but not least, elevating agent performance and engagement requires adjusting the processes that impact their work. Investing in meaningful training that upgrades skills, providing ongoing support through quality management programs and empowering agents through workforce management solutions are vital to agent satisfaction. The role of contact centre agents has significantly evolved and organisations need to reappraise how they fit into their customer experience game plan.

Chapter 1: Traditional company values meet new realities

Today's values affect tomorrow's success

The impact of COVID-19 across all sectors is fast-tracking digital transformation initiatives and inspiring drastic reevaluations of operations, strategies and tools, especially in regards to contact centres. Despite the financial pressures involved, a Lloyds Bank Commercial Banking and UK Tech News survey found that 72% of UK tech businesses saw an increase in demand for their services between March and August 2020.

While circumstances change, core company values should not. They define who a company is but also inspires where it hopes to go. Moreover, values define a company's culture, which shapes the interactions in the workplace and, in turn, relationships between agents and customers. Capgemini reports that 92% of executives agree that culture improves their company's value, though only 15% of executives think that their company's culture is where it needs to be.

Beyond establishing a positive work environment, corporate values can have a colossal effect on hiring and retaining talented staff. According to Glassdoor, 66% of UK millennials place culture even above salary when it comes to job satisfaction and 75% of UK adults would consider a company's culture before applying for a job.

Corporate values permeate all aspects of an organisation and will therefore have an impact on agent satisfaction and churn rates. The Telegraph reports that employee turnover is costing British businesses £4b per year. Contact centre managers across all sectors are facing the same dilemma. How can organisations improve agent experience while simultaneously enhancing customer service and reducing overheads? The solutions lie in the data modern organisations collect and store after every customer/agent interaction, regardless of time, place or channel.

Answers are found in data

Operationalising data has never been more important. Today, C-suites turn to data-driven approaches to generate growth, cut costs, optimise efficiency and strengthen bonds with their customers.

Roughly 60% of companies in the UK and US are increasing their investments in big data and analytics, according to a poll by consultancy firm OC&C Strategy Consultants. However, the changes should occur not just in financial investment, but organisational attitudes. Implementing data-driven strategies requires alignment of departments, governance of data and elimination of silos.

The real-world benefits of data for organisations' customer service are significant, but for agents, leveraging data simply makes their daily work easier, more productive and enjoyable. And raw data isn't half as useful as the analysis obtained through advanced – often AI-based – analytics. The latter is able to deliver insight and forecasting capabilities that give agents an edge.

Studies from McKinsey indicate that companies have already applied advanced analytics to reduce average handling time (AHT) by almost 40%, increase self-service containment rates from 5 to 20%, cut employee costs by up to $5 million and boost the conversion rate on service-to-sales calls by nearly 50%.

KPIs aside, understanding data means understanding customers. Who are they, where are they on their customer journey, what do they want and how do they feel? In an age when customers expect convenient, timely and efficient service but also demand to interact with brands when they want and on their terms, leveraging data is not optional, but essential.

An omnichannel approach becomes channel-less

The proliferation of communication channels in which agents must be proficient has a profound impact on agents' workflows. The wide array of options includes apps, websites, social media, email, text messages and phones, along with traditional visits to brick and mortar locations. **Today, agents must grasp the interconnectivity of each interaction over the course of a customer journey.**

This is no easy feat. Channel diversification is gaining momentum and customers are increasingly communicating on multiple channels. A BVA Market Research & Consulting study supports this trend, showing the average number of channels used per country as: France (3.4), Germany (3.5), the UK (3.7), Spain (3.8) and Italy (4.2). Further, the shift towards emerging channels is truly underway, with 40% of German, 41% of French, 42% of UK, 49% of Spanish and 55% of Italian customers turning to social media, apps, instant messaging and chatbot options.

Operationalising data empowers contact centre managers to develop schedules that optimise workforces, so the right skills are matched with the appropriate channels at all times. The result? Regardless of the channel used, agents can support customers in matters they are knowledgeable, experienced and comfortable with, leading to better agent experience (AX) and increased agent engagement. This subsequently improves customer experience (CX) and customer satisfaction (CSAT).

CX and AX – a symmetry of attention

Symmetry of attention, coined by the French Académie du Service, explains that happy customers are a direct result of happy agents. Basically, **if C-suites want customers to love their brand, employees need to love the brand first**. Their beliefs, passions and loyalty to a brand are contagious; regrettably, so are their reservations, dissatisfaction and mistrust.

How can contact centres keep their agents happy? Glassdoor reveals that the top three predictors of overall employee satisfaction are:

· The culture and values of the organisation,

· The quality of senior leadership,

· Access to career opportunities within the organisation.

Interestingly, financial compensation and monetary benefits are two of the least important indicators of employee satisfaction.

The afore mentioned factors indicate that the work environment is critical to agent satisfaction. Therefore, **to deliver best-in-class customer experience, organisations must first elevate agent experience**, while taking into consideration changing working conditions. This means establishing an environment that is conducive to agents' needs and preferences. If they enjoy a personalised experience, empowered agents are more likely to offer the same to customers by making the most of highly personalised data, which will create positive relationships and drive sales.

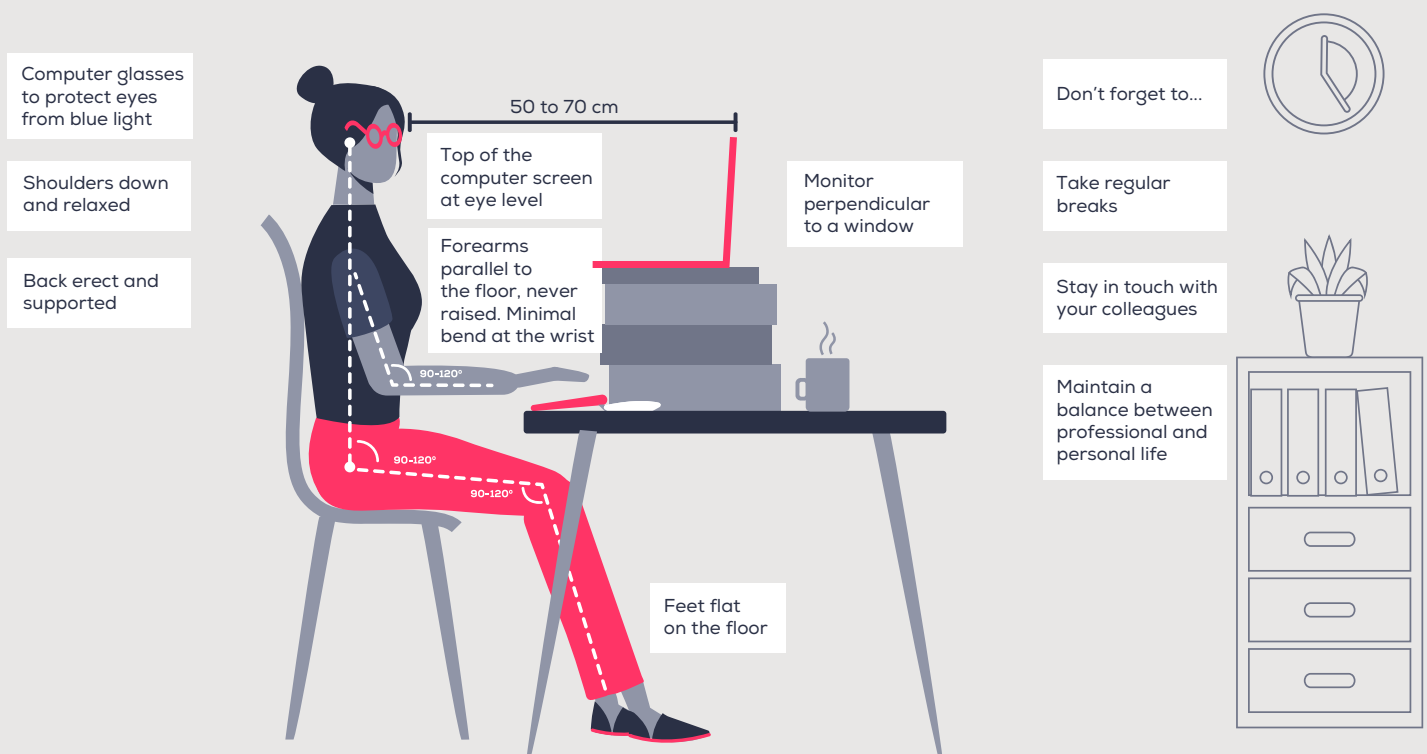# Enhancing the work environment – at the office and at home

According to the UK Office for National Statistics, 49.2% of employees are currently working remotely. And the trend started before Covid-19. In the decade leading up to 2020, the number of employees working from home rose by a quarter million. Though some managers have been skeptical of the effectiveness of remote work, research shows real potential for remote working. A report by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data & Methods, found that 41% of employees report no change in their productivity, while 29% report an uptick.

Clearly, the health and safety concerns connected to COVID-19 have influenced organisations' strategies. Take for example VOO, a leading Belgium-based telecommunications provider, which needed to implement swift operational changes to ensure business continuity.

In a week, this telco turned an on-site call centre into a 100% teleworking one. Not only were 188 agents working effectively from home, but absenteeism dropped from 62% to 5% and calls per team (per day) rose from 13,00 to 18,00 – a 38% increase in productivity.

How? Because the company knew that it needed to maintain standard operating procedures, ensure smooth operations and continue to provide quality customer support when switching to remote work, while also keeping the well-being of agents top of mind.

Providing the necessary hardware and software is only part of the solution however. Collegial relationships, administrative support and positive atmospheres are, as well, essential components of an agent's work. At home or in the contact centre, agents perform better when empowered with the right conditions and instruments to demonstrate their abilities.

Label
Computer glasses to protect eyes from blue light
Shoulders down and relaxed
Back erect and supported
Top of the computer screen at eye level
Forearms parallel to the floor, never raised. Minimal bend at the wrist
50 to 70 cm
Monitor perpendicular to a window
90-120°
Feet flat on the floor
Don't forget to...
Take regular breaks
Stay in touch with your colleagues
Maintain a balance between professional and personal life

How to maintain good posture while working from home.

Testimonial

"AI gives agents the support to best perform and enjoy their roles"

Gerry Brown,
Chief Customer Rescue Officer,
The Customer Lifeguard

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While contact centres are aware of the cost-saving advantages of AI, they should also keep in mind the increased engagement and higher satisfaction it brings to agents' work. Indeed, two of the great challenges today's contact centres face are:

- Attracting and retaining high-quality staff,
- Fostering an atmosphere that inspires confidence and rewards performance.

One way this can be accomplished is by implementing agile cloud solutions, such as Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS), that integrate with artificial intelligence (AI) software, including chatbots or voicebots, and can help agents locate, gather and communicate customer data intuitively and efficiently.

AI-driven software gives agents real-time, up-to-date customer information. This strengthens their abilities to provide effective customer service, as they become more knowledgeable and confident in helping customers resolve issues. Furthermore, thanks to sentiment analysis, agents can now understand the mood of a customer. As a result, traditionally skills-focused or demographic-based routing strategies can now be connected to the emotional state of a customer.

Beyond managing basic, repetitive tasks, AI-based bots free agents to deal with more complex tasks. AI also provides information, support and insight which, combined with the right training, enable agents to make data-driven decisions. Today's contact centre agents are empowered with discretionary authority that streamlines processes, helping to form bonds with customers and maximising operational efficiency.

For organisations looking to drive growth and generate revenue, customer satisfaction and agent confidence are a winning combination. Leveraging innovative solutions that can span both human intervention and AI give credence to the old maxim: the happier the agent, the better the customer experience!"

Chapter 2: Augment agents with agile tools and emerging technology

The age of cloud

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition from legacy systems to cloud infrastructure. Gartner reports that the worldwide public cloud services market is forecast to grow 6.3% in 2020 to total $257.9 billion, up from $242.7 billion in 2019. Rising investment demonstrates that corporate management now understands the benefits of cloud implementation.

Techjury's research also reveals the permeance of cloud solutions across all sectors, as 81% of all enterprises have a multi-cloud strategy either planned or in the works. Research also shows that by the end of 2020, 67% of enterprise architecture will be cloud-based and 82% of workloads will reside in the cloud.

C-suites are increasingly looking to cloud technology, whether a private cloud owned and managed by an individual company, or a public cloud with data from many companies, securely stored and not shared with other participating organisations. Gartner reveals that cloud security spending increased 33.3% from 2019 to 2020, totaling $585 million, so while companies can feel confident in the safety cloud provides, for agents it is about autonomy and comfort.

Cloud applications and services make remote work possible through real-time communication platforms that only require an Internet connection. This helps explain the increase in remote work discussed earlier. **Agents can now work from anywhere, on any device, at any time**. Given the option to work remotely, agents can benefit from more flexible work schedules, less time spent commuting, more time with friends and family and a better overall work environment. A 2020 Buffer report shows that 98% of workers would like to continue to work remotely some of the time for the rest of their careers. **Cloud-based solutions deliver the elasticity agents want**.

The growing role of artificial intelligence and intelligent automation

Over the last few years, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) has continued at an unabashed pace, with the UK Artificial Intelligence market estimated to grow at a CAGR of 35.9%, according to a recent OMR Global report.

One of the most noticeable ways AI is being implemented in contact centres is through conversational agents, also known as bots. Powered by machine learning (ML) and natural language understanding (NLU), bots can handle written (chatbots) or vocal (voicebots, callbots) communication.

Though there are limits to the comprehension and communication levels of these conversational agents, many have proven to be adept at managing basic tasks and repetitive operations, freeing up human agents to concentrate on more demanding, sensitive or complex customer interactions. According to a mycustomer report, 80% of UK businesses are currently using some kind of chatbot solution.

Not only does this eliminate monotonous, de-motivating work, but agents can feel pride and increased satisfaction in resolving customers' issues. AI-driven programs that aid in text and speech analytics can support agents in handling interactions, improve upselling strategies, assist in monitoring process compliance and ensure authentication procedures and security measures are enforced. Additionally, the ongoing development of sentiment analysis will even assist agents in better understanding customers' moods and adopting the appropriate tone. In short, **AI is not replacing contact centre agents, but augmenting them into true brand ambassadors who can focus on high value interactions and deliver unprecedented expertise**.

Implementing intelligent automation (IA) goes hand in hand with AI strategies. DMG Consulting reports that all generations prefer speaking to a live agent when an issue is emotional or time-sensitive, but that these represent only 10% of contact centre interactions. Using IA for the remaining 90% of issues will drastically cut down on costs and increase a contact centre's efficiency. Furthermore, IA helps agents maintain 100% compliance rates with 0% risk of fraud, as IVRs that handle payment options and money transfers have proven to be highly successful. Intelligently automating routine tasks eliminates the chance of human error and takes an unnecessary burden away from agents. Instead of spending precious time on menial operations, agents can become ambassadors who promote products and services and increase customer loyalty through meaningful personalisation of the brand-customer relationship. Today's agents should be ambassadors that express a company's values, promote its vision and sell its offers.

Intelligent routing: matching customers to the right virtual or human agent

Call Centre Helper explains that **intelligent routing allows contact centres to use data in the CRM system and factor this information into the way they direct customers to certain agents**. Routing can be accomplished over any channel, be it voice calls, live chat or email.

Routing algorithms, based on an organisation's business rules, factor in various customer scenarios, such as intent, interaction history, channel, and waiting time, essentially anything a business deems important to their customer service strategy.

Contextual routing streamlines interactions, which is advantageous to both customers and agents. The former are not frustrated by being redirected and the latter can demonstrate their expertise on certain topics and feel satisfied in resolving issues.

Empowering agents with tools to succeed

Contact centre agents need to have at their disposal tools that enable productive working conditions and promote mental, emotional and physical well-being. In both areas, leading-edge technology has evolved so that software can be embedded with features and functionalities that increase effectiveness and satisfaction.

One way is through interactive voice response (IVR) technology, which can not only provide automated, pre-recorded greetings but also route customers to the agent ideally suited to their issue. Getting IVR right is crucial, as 78% of UK consumers will switch vendors after a poor contact centre experience, according to the 2020 CallMiner Churn Index. Advances in natural language processing (NLP) make it possible to humanise IVR that delivers real conversational value to customers. Along with helping agents during seasonal peaks and emergencies, IVR can be an effective self-service tool, measure customer satisfaction and free agents from mundane tasks. Beyond IVR, traditional support like real-time and historical reporting and recording capabilities have been enhanced with AI-driven sentiment analysis and next-best actions. This support has led to the age of augmented agents.

What is an augmented agent? It is a contact centre agent, supported by AI, with real-time access to relevant insights. Agents are augmented because, while they engage with customers, AI can monitor interactions, share a wide range of information and provide agents with practical guidance.

Indeed, AI has had proven success in searching databases and forwarding data to agents, saving crucial time and energy. Moreover, AI can detect rising and falling tones, a key first step of emotional intelligence that informs the agent about a customer's mood. With this information, AI can, for example, recommend the appropriate language for a given situation, among other use cases.

Cutting-edge agent consoles now provide real-time, 360-degree customer views. Agents benefit from comprehensive histories that explain who a customer is, where they are in their customer journey, why they are calling and what documents/processes are needed, making it easier to increase resolution rates. Instead of interrupting a customer to ask for this information, agents automatically have access to this crucial data, which achieves a more enjoyable experience for customer and agent alike. According to a Zendesk report, the most important element of a good customer experience is interacting with an agent who understands the issue (51%) and has the potential to resolve that problem quickly (49%).
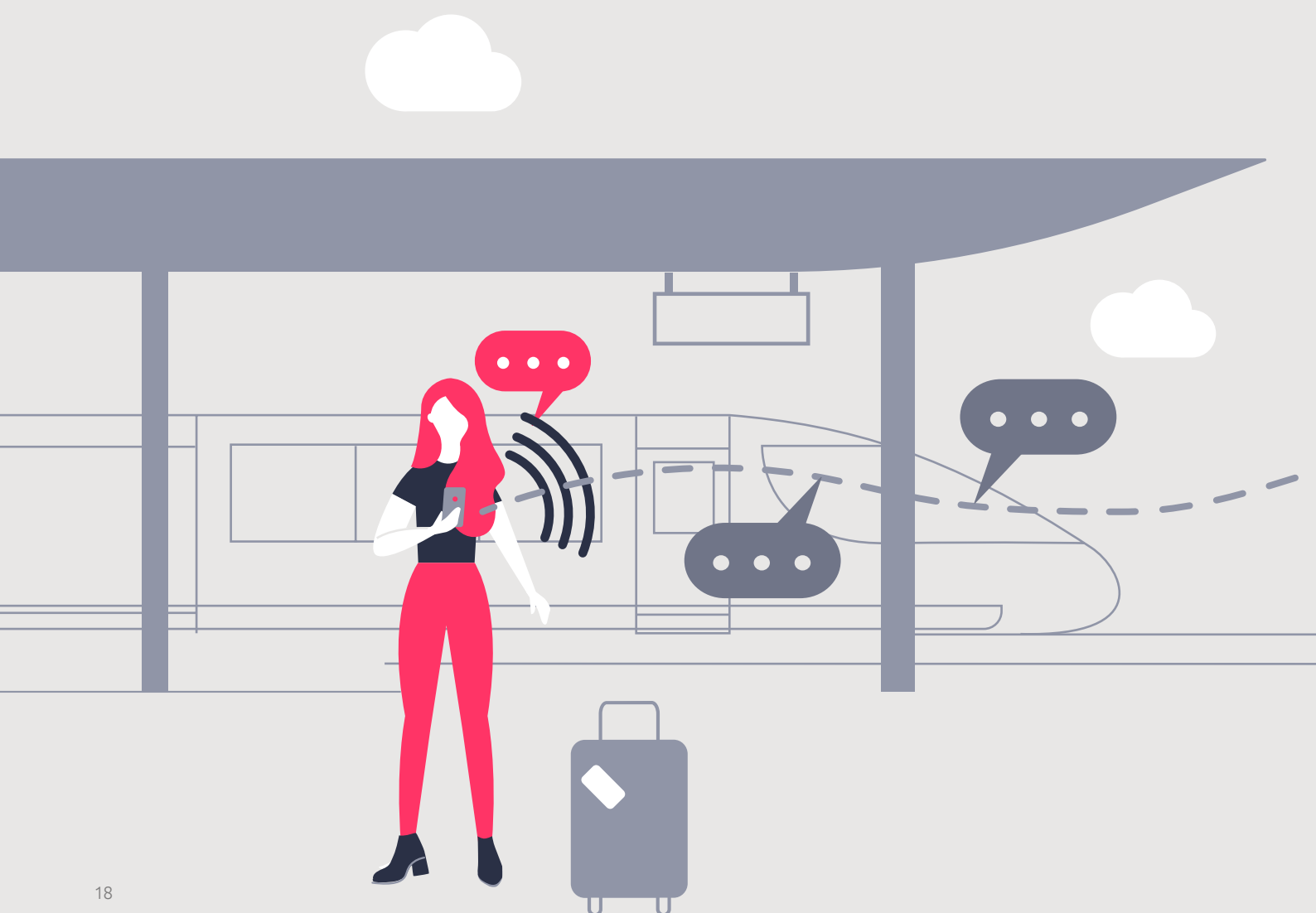
Connectivity and Internet speed

5G networks are having a profound impact on communications, with increased network connectivity translating into better, more secure and swifter access that enriches customer experience, according to Capgemini and Odigo. Beyond providing improved conditions in contact centres, the access and speed that 5G aims to provide could help in empowering agents to work effectively from home.

5G networks are singularly distinguished for unparalleled capacity and ultra-low latency, which helps explain the push to upgrade. Recent testing recorded Verizon 5G ultra wideband download speeds at 988.37 Mbps, an 820.2% improvement over LTE.

Having powerful Internet capabilities gives contact centre agents the capacity to perform from anywhere, allowing them to decide their working environments. This freedom contributes to rising satisfaction levels.
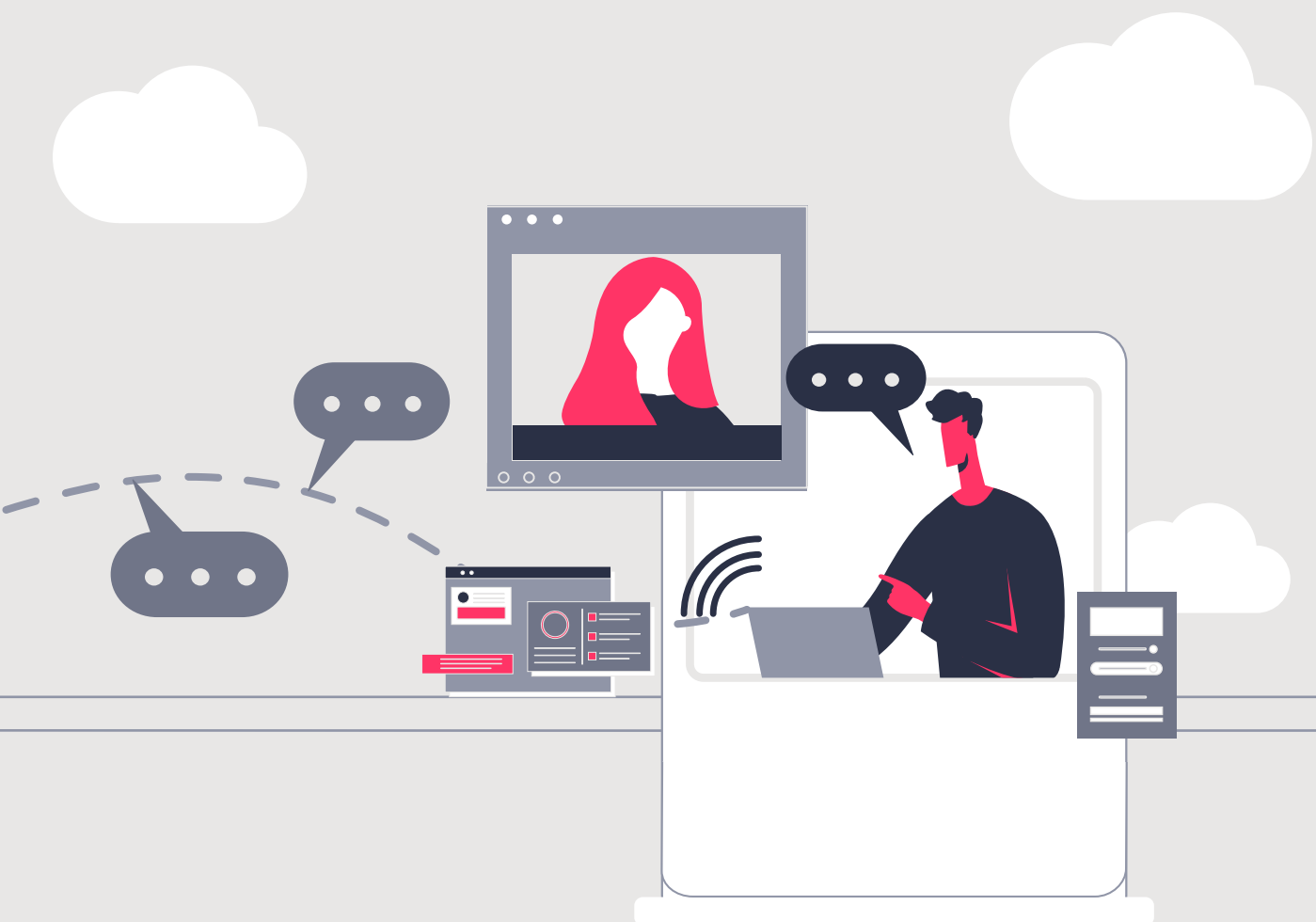
Testimonial

"New working conditions require new methods of support"

Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA (Call Centre Management Association)

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Homeworking capabilities were important in the past, but today COVID-19 has accelerated the need for contact centres to undergo digital transformations allowing for secure and effective advisor performances. Our members tell us that advisor safety and the economic fallout of COVID-19 have led them to take a good look at their contact centre operations. The drive to a more flexible working approach means there is a desire to replicate on-site working conditions. Contact centre managers have turned to technology and strategies that focus on advisor well-being and engagement, including more effective use of Quality Management (QM) solutions, Workforce Management (WFM) platforms and gamification.

Monitoring advisors is about more than making sure they follow protocols and deliver high levels of service. Our members tell us they are investing in advisors' development and helping them enhance their abilities. QM solutions can make it easier to praise advisors' strengths, identify areas of improvement and provide on-the-spot help. QM solutions can also maintain close links between management and advisors that safeguard productivity and give advisors confidence that, though working by themselves, they are not alone.

To work remotely, advisors require the right set of tools, but perhaps they should also be given greater autonomy in planning their schedules. To that end, our members recognise that WFM solutions play an important role. Entrusting advisors to plan, swap and bid for shifts simply reflects today's needed flexibility. These systems enable business operations to run smoothly so that advisors are able to comply with standards and practices. Truly, giving advisors a voice in planning shifts can have a profound impact on increasing job satisfaction.

Finally, we hear our members talking more about gamification. Gaming elements have long been a proven success in increasing motivation, instilling a sense of achievement and boosting morale. The competition and recognition from colleagues and management that gamification provides can be a cost-effective strategy to engage advisors in the toughest roles whilst establishing camaraderie across the team, especially while working in isolation."

Testimonial

"Agent satisfaction is key!"

François Julia,
Director of Remote Customer
Relationship Operations
at SNCF Voyages

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Our mission? To meet the needs of our customers – 120 million high-speed passengers in 2019 – by dealing with their queries related to travel, trip preparation, post-travel, or potential complaints. In total, we manage an average of 4.5 million remote interactions per year on voice (60% of interactions) and written channels (webmail – 25% of interactions, messaging – 15% of interactions), real-time and asynchronously.

Voyages' ambition is to transform the attention given to our clients into an obsession. To do so, we must overcome two major challenges: always be in touch with their expectations, and know how to retain their trust, which is fragile by nature. To this end, we have to ensure that customers do not have to adapt to our journeys; rather we accommodate their expectations. This means meeting the requirements of immediacy, availability and synergy between channels. This is only possible if the contact centre is an aggregator of interactions with the brand.

This is where our 800 or so agents, based at 15 sites, come into play. Customers will judge the brand on the quality of their answers, their attitude and the efforts they make to provide solutions. Indeed, if a bot is capable of providing a solution, only the call centre agents can provide the empathy and listening skills that customers expect. For them to be able to satisfy customers, we must first make sure that they are in the right conditions to do their job. Agent satisfaction is key! Their performance and well-being are divided into 3 areas:

- Immediate environment (solid management, workplace, comfort, company values),
- IT ecosystem (infrastructure, office automation, software solutions),
- Knowledge (including both know-how and interpersonal skills).

A rewarding agent experience is the result of a proper balance in these three areas. It is necessary to empower call centre agents, providing them with tools to provide the best response, which includes giving them the best possible understanding and visibility of customer journeys. Regardless of when they intervene, agents must feel that they are in control of the conversation, that business behaviours are mastered, that their working environment is healthy, that the right procedures are deployed and that the company provides them with the right set of tools. This requires good knowledge management, training and, of course, strong managerial follow-up – the manager being a key relay in a structure like ours, where a national headquarters works with 15 sites located throughout various regions.

Once these conditions have been met, the question arises as to how to measure agent satisfaction. At SNCF Voyages, we do this through an annual survey, supported by monthly surveys conducted more spontaneously. This voluntary survey allows us to measure employee confidence. Its purpose is to measure how trust is developed and their relationships at work; the links with their colleagues and their manager, all within a quality-of-worklife approach. And while this is useful, among other things, in the context of action plans over 1 to 3 years, it is also and above all a fantastic opportunity for collective dialogue and exchange before defining, together, the actions to be put in place."

Chapter 3: Elevate AX through the right people and processes

Ensure expert knowledge through practical training sessions

To stay at the top of their game, agents need continuous training and access to a rich knowledge base. Organisations know that keeping their skills up is crucial for delivering world-class customer service and keeping them engaged. According to the Open University Business Barometer 2019 report, a lack of adequate training costs UK businesses £4.4bn a year.

Training should focus precisely on agents' needs and practical applicabilities, align with company goals and enable them to adapt to changing dynamics. Gartner reports that the number of skills required for a single job is increasing by 10% year over year, but that over 30% of the skills needed three years ago will soon be irrelevant.

Additional training increases agent engagement levels, motivation and performance. A LinkedIn study reveals that 94% of employees say they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning and development. Providing agents with a credible career path and the training they need enhances performance, improves customer experience, reduces turnover rates and encourages staying loyal to an organisation. **Increasing agent loyalty to a brand not only ensures talented, skilled agents remain with a company, but also saves on costly hiring and onboarding of new staff**.

Leverage quality management (QM) and workforce management (WFM)

Implementing QM software proactively helps agents understand, meet and exceed expectations. A convenient, time-saving tool, it enables greater visibility of an agent's and team's performance. Through user-friendly dashboards, agents can make coaching requests, review their past interactions and achieve clarity through self-evaluations and assessments from their contact centre manager, with whom they can communicate effortlessly. Additionally, they can compare their results and KPIs with that of their peers. This has never been more important, as **the new teleworking reality demands regular, open communication between agents and management that encourages real-time support and guidance**.

A quality management system does not just monitor agents' activities. QM helps agents learn to become as proficient as possible. Through an easy five-step process of act, record, select, assess and report, agents can identify strengths and weaknesses in their customer service. The ongoing process of surveying, measuring, analysing and rating agents makes them more efficient and skilled. QM strategies make it easier to reward good work and dedicate training to those in need of support.

While quality management concentrates on improving agents' performance, [workforce management](#) empowers them with convenient methods of organising their schedules in a cost-effective manner. Instead of dedicating staff to handle timetables, workforce management systems enable agents to organise, swap and bid for shifts that suit their needs. Requesting scheduling changes or booking time off for holidays is achieved in a simple, transparent way, all while following their contact centre's rules and regulatory framework, all of which are built into the system. Agents no longer feel powerless in regard to their schedules, as they can help shape them, leading to increased engagement, higher satisfaction and a more dynamic work atmosphere.

Increase engagement through gamification

Introducing gamification is a proven method for motivating and engaging agents and can be used effectively both in a contact centre or through remote work. According to a study by TalentIms, 89% of employees say gamification makes them feel more productive, and 88% say it makes them happier at work.

Deploying gaming aspects into agents' work incentivises them to accomplish goals, making it easier to meet KPIs. Establishing performance metrics connected to agents' KPIs, like FCR rates, or organisational expectations, such as logging in for shifts on time, provide opportunities to implement a points-based system. Agents can collect points, compare themselves with colleagues and compete for a prize. Training courses, customer interactions and agent performance can all be gamified, depending on the contact centre's strategy. Research by TalentLMS found that gamification makes employees more productive (87%), more engaged (84%) and happier (82%) at work. This means agents are more likely to take early morning shifts and put in extra effort at the end of a long day. Agents enjoy the fun challenges and appreciate being recognised for successes, which can be automatically displayed on dashboards or leader boards.

Gamification techniques and rewards-based programs vary and should match an organisation's culture and cater to agents' needs, preferences and expectations. Linking gamification to an organisation's values instils a sense of community and not only results in better customer service, but encourages personal development.

Coordinate collaborative support

Establishing a positive work environment is important, but the best way to have a high-functioning contact centre is through consistent, dependable support coming from management, AI-driven tools and fellow agents.

Interactive voice response (IVR) technology, which provides pre-recorded greetings and connects customers to the right agent, can also enable call conferencing software, allowing agents to consult with their peers while interacting with a customer. This real-time assistance supports agents in achieving positive resolutions.

Agents can also receive direct support from managers through call monitoring, whisper coaching and call barging. Call monitoring means a manager can listen to a call without an agent or customer knowing they are there. Later, a manager can highlight positive and negative aspects of the interaction, giving agents real-world insights into their strengths and areas of improvement. Call whispering describes when a manager gives advice to an agent during a call without a customer realising, and call barging occurs when a manager engages in interaction and both agent and customer are aware. These strategies are designed to provide agents with worthwhile support that seeks to improve their performances and advance their development.

Cross-functional teams

Successful contact centres rely on agents to provide complete end-to-end service. This has prompted two major new developments in contact centre agents' roles:

- Agents must develop expertise in a wider range of subjects,
- Teams of agents must be cohesively integrated so that knowledge is shared and a swift resolution can be reached.

Agents are no longer trained to be specialised in particular areas and must not work in silos. Working in an open environment with qualified professionals raises agent satisfaction levels. Boston Consulting Group puts it best: "Trained in handling more than one type of request, employees have a greater sense of ownership, purpose, and influence." Engaging multi-disciplinary teams also translates into exceptional customer experience. McKinsey research indicates that cross-functional teams resolve 95% of customer requests during the first contact, thus preventing a negative experience that can come from multiple handoffs.

Conclusion

The current trends of embracing an open organisational culture, leveraging cutting-edge tools and providing committed, quality support to increase agent engagement and performance levels are here to stay. Forbes reveals that "almost three-quarters of managers think that changes made to accommodate the pandemic will become permanent models for the customer service industry."

The role of contact centre agents, and the conditions in which they work, are continuously evolving. ISG, a leading global technology research and advisory firm, reports that many large companies are striving to implement conversational AI to handle low-level customer requests. Learning how to integrate technology that strengthens both customer and agent experience will be the focal point of contact centres' digital transformation efforts.

In an era when contact centres should be regarded as value centres, agents are a company's best opportunity to represent brand values and form meaningful bonds with customers. One Forrester study on customer experience shows that 60% of positive comments were about human behaviour, 37% mentioned going the extra mile and 23% focused on a human touch.

Beyond timely answering questions and satisfyingly dealing with complaints, **agents need to solve problems, explain issues, promote products and instil loyalty**. This is no small task. The entire organisation has to be involved in supporting agents' abilities. Customer service, product development, business analysis and IT all have an impact on the training, tools and methods agents need to deliver world-class customer service.

Changing times, technology and expectations have led to a transformation of accepted norms. The age of the traditional call centre agent monotonously reading a script is over; the epoch of the augmented contact centre agent, as ultimate brand ambassador, has begun.

About the authors

Johanna Raux

Johanna Raux is an engineer at Odigo who specialises in bid management and pre-sales. With more than 15 years of experience in contact centres, as a trainer, consultant, client service manager and team leader, she leads Odigo's efforts in winning deals. To this end, she coordinates proposals and offers, provides quotations and conducts demos of Odigo's solutions. She is also a workforce optimisation specialist who has worked as a consultant and trainer for 10 years developing various workforce optimisation (WFO) solutions.

Johanna is passionate about helping organisations improve agent experience and performance through QM and WFM solutions. Fascinated with cutting-edge developments that deliver new possibilities and capabilities, she strives to augment agent experience with technology that integrates AI with the human experience.

Elisabeth De Longeaux

Elisabeth De Longeaux is a Product Marketing Manager within the Odigo product team in charge of developing offers for contact centres in the Odigo Suite. The past 15 years have seen her involved in e-commerce, before moving to digital and information technology and the servicing of key accounts, where she focuses on digital transformations and customer service solutions. Her main responsibilities include developing offers, product marketing and managing cross-cutting projects.

Elisabeth's extensive experience contributes to the development of Odigo products, especially in the context of channel-less customer relationships.

Corentin Messerschmidt

Corentin Messerschmidt is Head of Odigo Innovation Lab, which drives the company's forward-thinking visions of customer and agent experience. He has over two decades of experience in the CCaaS sector with expertise in technology management, large project management and sales.

Corentin is excited about the tangible benefits AI and IA bring to contact centres, to the benefit of customers and agents alike, and is proud of the international recognition Odigo has received from industry experts for its advanced AI and NLU capabilities. For the last two years he has been spearheading Odigo's cutting-edge developments in conversational IVR and AI solutions and is an AI enthusiast who can't wait to see some of Odigo's visionary innovations implemented into organisations' customer experience ecosystems.

"Go beyond an omnichannel experience, create a story with your client."

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About Odigo

Odigo, a Capgemini brand formerly known as Prosodie-Capgemini, helps large organisations connect with individuals through world-class, cloud-based contact centre solutions. Its cutting-edge, proprietary technologies enable a seamless, efficient, omnichannel experience for its customers and a satisfying, engaging experience for service agents.

Odigo serves more than 400,000 agents and business users globally. With a 25-year history of industry firsts, Odigo has more than 250 clients around the world.

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Customer experience as it was meant to be