



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

Contact Center Trends

PUTTING THE 'HEART' INTO THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE HUB

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REVIEW

What Happened to Our 2020 Trends?

HERE'S WHAT WE PREDICTED:

Texting is back (With Bells On) = **FAIL**

Omnichannel communication becomes standard = **PASS**

AI is here to stay = **PASS**

Contact centers in the cloud = **PASS with DISTINCTION**

Emotional intelligence grows in esteem = **PASS**

Time is of the essence = **FAIL**

OUR REPORT CARD



Seeing as we're home-schooling this year, we also get to mark our own grades. We tried to be fair, but if you think we've cheated, we'd love to hear from you.

Texting is Back (With Bells On)

We really thought companies would be excited to get behind RCS and all the potential it held. We were wrong.

The roll-out has been slow and may never fully materialize. We missed three quite big elephants in the room during our last report: Google, Amazon, and Facebook. These three communication tech giants have every reason to keep customers in their ecosystems (iMessage, Messenger, WhatsApp etc.) rather than hand their customers back to the old incumbents like AT&T.

After our mass exodus from the office, we're all at our desks more, reducing the need for text messaging. There's still a place for SMS, we're just not sure if it's in the contact center. Yet.



Omnichannel Communications Becomes Standard

Omnichannel workstations are now being deployed at the same rate as voice-only stations. We suspect as technology gets better, they'll continue to grow.

Voice channel still makes up more than 50% of the customer demand, and we think this year demonstrated the need for the voice channel in the long term.

Omnichannel certainly has its uses. And its main use will be freeing up the phone lines from basic enquiries. There are so many occasions when one just needs an answer from a real person, but it's not urgent. In this case, it's actually less convenient to call.

This is where live chat and social media support have their benefits. Many of our customers have found that when opening their chat channels, they're actually dealing with an almost entirely new level of inquiry.

Omnichannel makes sense, but let's make sure it's actually omnichannel, and not just live chat or bots.



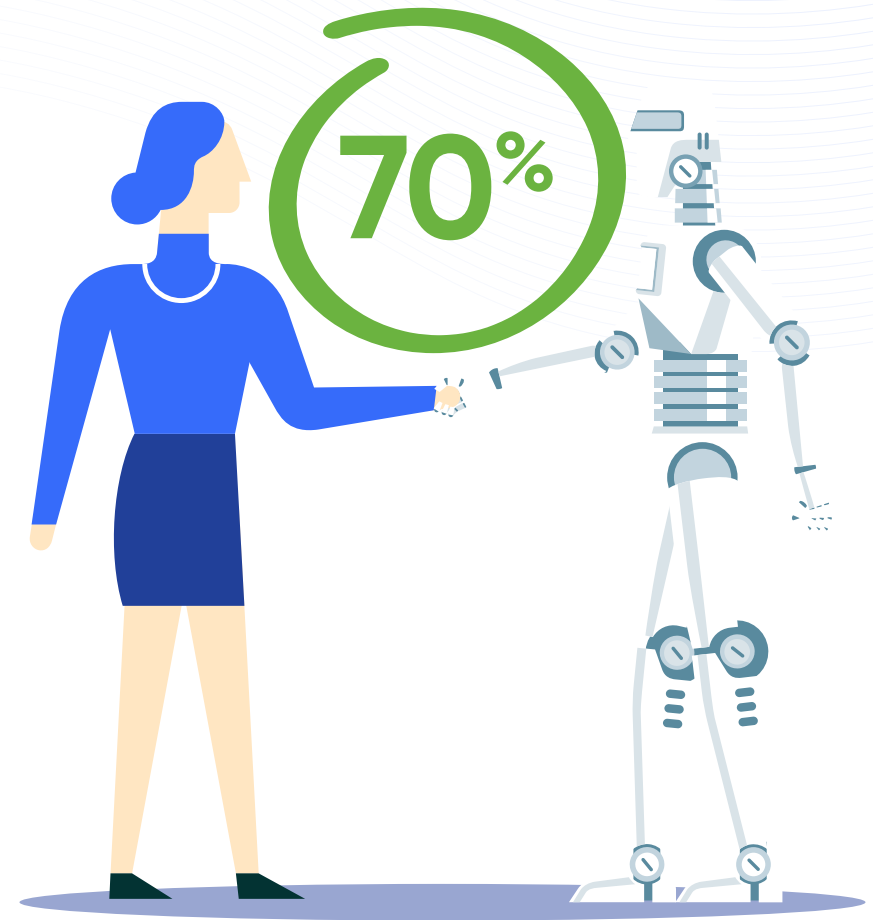
AI is Here to Stay

We're not going to boast about this one – the pandemic set the stage for AI to prove its omnipotence.

This year saw the kind of challenge where we would expect AI to shine. Yet, in the throes of lockdown and the scramble to meet soaring demand, AI wasn't the lifesaver many businesses hoped it would be. After all, not much of what happened in April was 'routine.' And that stifled the chatbots' utility.

In some cases, AI chatbot technology was useful. IBM's Watson was reported to have learned how to handle simpler requests and divert call volume. As we suggested last year, AI was most useful when helping humans do their jobs better.

Many companies implemented chatbot technology in the hope of diverting simple and common inquiries. In some cases, this was successful. But many chatbot solutions are only as helpful as the person who sets them up.



There is still a place for chat bots in tomorrow's contact center, but it's not in place of human agents. It will be most helpful when crunching data, streamlining operations, and facilitating faster, more effective human-to-human conversations.

Contact Centers in the Cloud

This predicted trend seemed fairly obvious in late 2019. Most contact centers were aware of cloud-based technology. Many of them were already putting it into their roadmap.

We still felt our prediction that 65% of service providers would move to the cloud in the next two years was a bit bold. In the end, it proved to be quite modest.

The last time we checked, more than 80% of contact center agents worked from home in 2020. And around 65% of them are still remote.

The rapid move to virtual working forced companies to upgrade their technology and move to the cloud in a matter of days. Many execs had planned on months and years to make these changes.

We're now looking at an industry that's ~80% cloud-based.

Necessity removed the cost-barrier for most organizations. And now the infrastructure is paid for, there's no going back from here.

90%



Time is of the Essence

Time certainly was of the essence — and still is — but this trend didn't turn out quite the way we'd hoped. There were bigger queues and longer hold times in 2020 than we've ever seen before.

Most companies were struggling to answer the phone, let alone worrying about their service levels.

The pandemic thrust contact centers onto the front lines, and it became clear to all just how essential agents are to maintaining human connections — and keeping the lights on.

That said, it was disappointing how many big brands struggled to handle the floods of calls. The solutions have been available for a long time, so we hope to see this grade improve significantly next year.

30%



Emotional Intelligence Held in Higher Esteem

This is the trend we are happiest to see grow.

When we published our Trends 2020 report, this seemed like a bit of a long shot – a nice to have. It’s something we should all be striving towards but we know that the realities of the industry meant this was likely to be a slower-burning trend.

The truth is, the contact center industry has abnormally high employee turnover due to the emotionally-taxing and demanding work and little room for career growth.

And while it’s easy enough for the industry experts and influencers to make predictions to head us in the right direction, they can seem detached from what’s happening on the contact center floor.

The pandemic changed everything.

65%



We were all pushed into conditions we didn’t understand and were badly prepared for, which made us more empathetic.

And that’s the driving force behind our trends this year: empathy.

TREND #1

Increasing Empathy

The one word that came up time and time again in our research was 'empathy.' That doesn't happen all the time; we had to listen.

An increasing sense of empathy due to the ongoing pandemic will be the force driving many of the contact centers trends in 2021 and beyond.



I see the CX industry finding new, faster and more efficient ways to meet their customers' needs, maybe through the use of new technology, while also balancing a deeply personal, empathetic human connection."

– SHEP HYKEN,
CX EXPERT



I believe COVID will have a human empathetic impact on the CX industry and contact centers."

– DAVID BEAUMONT, FOUNDER,
CUSTOMERSERVICE IS REAL



Contact center agents had to up their listening and their empathy beyond what they had ever faced before. "

– KATE NASSER,
THE PEOPLE SKILLS COACH™



Empathy will continue to play a larger role in interactions going forward."

– BLAIR PLEASANT,
INDUSTRY ANALYST



Consumers feel isolated as it is – demand for empathetic human connections is increasing, not decreasing."

– KRISTYN EMENECKER,
EXECUTIVE LEADER

Why So Empathetic?

This year we all got served a big slice of empathy pie. COVID-19 wasn't 'someone else's' problem. Nobody escaped the long lines and endless waiting times.

And contact centers were suddenly 'frontline' workers. At their own risk, many worked around-the-clock to ensure customers had access to critical services – and often emotional support. That will have a lasting impact.

"Contact center agents are responding with genuine empathy and care since they feel as worried and concerned as their customers do about this pandemic and its impact on everyone's lives. That 'I really know how you feel' awareness will stick with them hereafter."

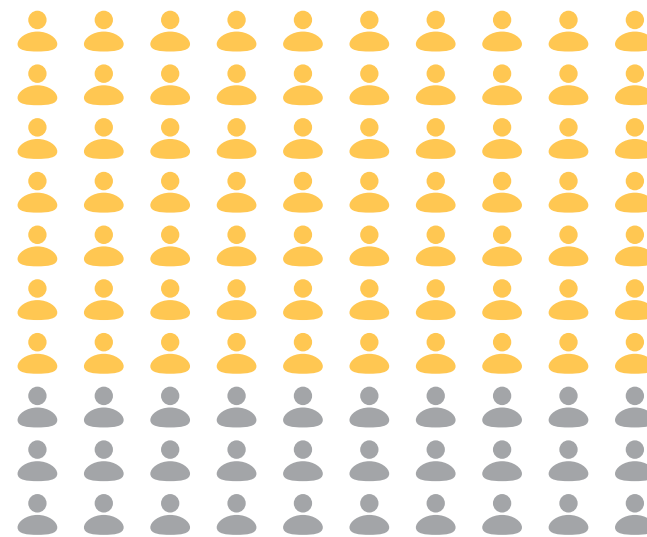
– **Bill Quiseng**, CX Speaker & Consultant

Customers also became more empathetic. **CallMiner** found that nearly 70% of customers said they were more compassionate and understanding of agents and support departments' challenges during the pandemic.

"Customers are savvier about health, safety, and employee treatment and will continue to be aware. They'll look for businesses that prove they are putting the health and safety of both customers and employees first."

– **Jeannie Walters**, CEO of **Experience Investigators**

70% of customers said they were **more empathetic** to call center agents.



When consumer desires change, it impacts the bottom-line – and that drives change. The companies that adapt the fastest will reap the benefits of improving their customer experiences and employee conditions.

THE EXPERTS ON EMPATHY



Contact center agents had to up their listening and their empathy beyond what they had ever faced before. I predict that all the leaders, managers, team leaders, and agents will look back and realize how much they grew from the empathy and compassion they gave and how it helped their customers – their fellow human beings.”

– [KATE NASSER, THE PEOPLE SKILLS COACH™](#)



Call centers will need to go beyond simply resolving the problem at hand and looking over the horizon for customers. That will mean that active listening, and a grasp of company offerings and solutions, will have to be a part of the call center hiring and training strategies.”

– [TONY JOHNSON, FOUNDER, IGNITE YOUR SERVICE](#)



As most people have been touched or have known personally someone affected by COVID, support matters may be looked at more sincerely and authentically with a true ‘walk in the customer shoes’ mentality.”

– [DAVID BEAUMONT, FOUNDER, CUSTOMERSERVICE IS REAL](#)



Empathy will continue to play a larger role in interactions going forward. Customers are looking for empathy and a sympathetic ear. This will require a change in metrics and KPIs, as these calls and interactions will take longer. Metrics like AHT will give way to KPIs such as CSAT, NPS, FCR, etc.”

– [BLAIR PLEASANT, INDUSTRY ANALYST](#)

Is Empathy Really a 'Trend'?

Many of the experts we spoke to noted that empathy would influence decision-making in the coming months. Is it really a trend? What does it mean in reality?

Let's not get carried away. Empathy isn't something you just 'have.'

Empathy is something you have to work at, something you have to nurture.

Contact centers will need to work hard to nurture this empathy. It will involve a concerted effort to listen to the customer and design experiences with their needs first – not the company's needs. Metrics like First Contact Resolution, Agent Satisfaction, and Customer Satisfaction will gradually become the 'North Star' metrics.

"Consumers are more attuned to their needs, wants, and desires.

Those working in contact centers or on the front lines must be aware of these fears and modify their approach to service."

— Steve DiGiola, Customer Service Author & Trainer

Executives should expect this sentiment to grow in the coming years.

Fortunately, it's in our businesses' interest to nurture empathy.

Even a **minor improvement** to your CX can add tens of millions of dollars in revenue by increasing retention and share of wallet.



Customers are showing they want to do business with companies that align with their values, and that's not going anywhere. They watch for ways employees are treated and how brands contribute to their communities as a basis for deciding who they do business with. Younger generations are showing this as a primary driver for their decisions, so this trend will continue well into 2021."

JEANNIE WALTERS, CEO OF EXPERIENCE INVESTIGATORS

This injection of empathy will also affect our employee experiences. Younger consumers already base purchasing decisions on *how* a company does business, not just on the product or service it provides. "They will continue to look at companies and ask, 'How is this business serving my community?'"

TREND #2

The Great Contact Center Diaspora

They say it takes 21 days to 'form' a habit and 90 days to make it a permanent lifestyle change. We would argue that 90 days isn't long enough. But 300-odd days surely is.

By the time the Western world comes out of lockdown fully, it'll be mid-2021. That's enough time for a total paradigm shift.



60–80% of agents moved to work at home during 'shelter in place,' and ~30% will continue to stay home once there is a vaccine."

—SHEILA MCGEE-SMITH, CONTACT CENTER ANALYST

Going Remote was a Structural Change

They said it would take years. Then they did it in days.

Many contact centers that had pushed back for years on their tech upgrades and moving to the cloud found that they could do so very quickly because it was a matter of survival.

“Organizations that had planned on years of eventual transformation were able to dedicate resources to do so in weeks. Suddenly, the obstacles were opportunities to serve customers better.”

— Jeannie Walters

Even in the mid-pandemic madness, companies were quickly learning how to get it right and seeing benefits from it. **Talkdesk found** in a small survey of their customers that only **93% of leaders believed their contact centers would be hybrid or fully remote post-COVID.**

“

COVID-19 has forced innovation like no other factor in recent memory. Whether a law firm pivoting to equip and manage a virtual workforce or an airline hatching a promotion for flights to nowhere (that, literally, take off and land from the same place), businesses are having to adapt as if corporate life depends on it — because it does.”

STEVE CURTIN, AUTHOR OF ‘DELIGHT YOUR CUSTOMERS’

The rapid and radical upgrades that most contact centers went through won't just disappear. The trials and errors, and the technological developments that solved them, will become ingrained in 'how things are done,' if they haven't already.

THE EXPERTS ON GOING REMOTE



The biggest trend in 2021 will be doing WFH better. Remote training, QM, and making sure WFM is secure as you can be. The other trend I see is gamification taking a big step forward. With reps not being able to be in the call center in a brick-and-mortar setting, having fun will need to happen in different ways. Gamification is one of those methods.”

– [THOMAS LAIRD](#), CEO OF [EXPIVIA](#)



The other big trend that will continue in 2021 is the rise of cloud contact centers to support remote agents. One of the biggest benefits of remote agents is the ability to hire the best agents, not just those who are local and live within commuting distance of a call center.”

– [BLAIR PLEASANT](#), INDUSTRY ANALYST



Sometimes, external factors force us to challenge the status quo of how we’ve delivered CX and run operations. These optimizations will continue long after the epidemic subsides. Offering employees the flexibility to work remotely long-term, as well as providing a safe environment for employees who wish to return to an office setting will be a critical step for upper management next year.”

– [MATT BEATTY](#), EVP OF SALES & MARKETING AT [BRIGHTMETRICS™](#)



Many companies have been able to greatly streamline and optimize service calls through virtual methods that greatly reduce customer service costs and improve time to resolution, leading to better customer experiences.”

– [FLAVIO MARTINS](#), AUTHOR OF [WIN THE CUSTOMER](#)

Remote Work is Here to Stay

Many companies have already found opportunities in the shift to a virtualized delivery model. And they'll continue to find more of them.

"The talent pool will geographically widen, and the smartest brands will take advantage of that to gain the upper hand."

— Kristyn Emenecker, Executive Leader

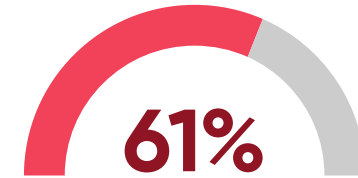
The same goes for the millions of people finding little ways to adjust and improve their lifestyle in the new conditions. Contact center agents have tasted the benefits of working from home. And it's unlikely they're going to forget about them soon.

Further waves of COVID-19 will likely chase us well into 2021.

That prolonged need, coupled with the increasing empathy in society, will entrench remote working in the contact center.

"The Age of Virtual Contact Centers is here. The call center outsourcing market is booming with more and more agents being able to work from home."

— Wes Burger, Marketing Director, CloudTask



Of contact centers said that **productivity wasn't an issue** with remote working.

Entrepreneurs are pouring billions of dollars and hours into making remote work better for everyone. For contact centers, that investment will focus primarily on increasing data security, analytics, workforce management, and remote monitoring technology.

"The biggest trend will be the move to remote work and a better quality of life for contact center workers will be a big trend. When contact center employees can effectively and happily work from home, customers will reap those benefits."

— Evan Kirstel, B2B Tech Consultant

TREND #3

Better Data Security & Analysis

The biggest challenge for contact center executives in 2021 is data security in the remote environment. But these issues are not new, and the technology to solve them is improving all the time.

We're expecting to see massive investment in all things data in the coming year, as contact centers who delayed investments in data play catch up, and those that are realizing the benefits double-down.



For those businesses that have the basics down, the major focus areas into the near future must be on data, data quality, data access, data analytics, and systems integration."

— ANNETTE FRANZ, CEO OF CXJOURNEY

We Need More Secure, Useful Data

In our [State of the Contact Center report](#), we saw that contact center executives are investing heavily in data security and compliance in the coming years. It's the one area that almost all contact centers we spoke to said was a priority.

"If there is one constant in the contact center, it is that we cannot compromise information management and security. Enterprise contact center decision-makers will maintain a keen focus on investing in data security in 2021."

— Peter Ryan, Snr. Analyst at [Ryan Strategic Advisory](#)

Unlike many other industries, when demand for software technology is high it tends to decrease costs. And almost everyone is asking how they can improve their contact center's security.

This focus on data goes beyond ensuring their operations remain secure from outside attacks. Ensuring compliance with the ever-growing privacy legislation is another major priority for contact center executives in the years ahead.



Most contact centers are not technically architected to accommodate work-from-home operations, so shelter-in-place rules raise data protection risks. Organizations can create processes to reduce this risk – such as requiring use of secure VPNs – but automating processes and using alternate channels will reduce the data protection risks and prepare the business for next-gen contact centers."

JILL REBER, GM, DATA PRIVACY AT LOGIC 20/20

TREND #4

AI Finds its True Role

Next year will see more investment in AI software that helps contact center managers understand and make better use of their data.

Most contact center managers are looking to AI to help them understand their data and optimize their processes. But let's be clear, that doesn't mean fobbing customers off with clunky bots.



AI is bridging the gap in efficiency, keep everyone connected remotely, and providing real-time support for customer service agents and the managers who monitor and evaluate call quality data."

– [RANA GUJRAL](#), CEO OF [BEHAVIORAL SIGNALS](#)

AI is for Analysis and Insight

The move to remote has forced managers to search for optimizers and buffers; anything that will give their contact center agents some breathing room.

Robotic process automation has a role in the call center. But it should be clear by now that AI technology cannot replace human interaction. It can, however, enhance it.

We can — and should — be using AI for certain things:

- Understanding our data so we can be more proactive in solving customer issues
- Optimizing our back-end operations to remove friction and improve accessibility
- Providing customers with smarter self-service
- Facilitating better service by providing agents with better data during conversations

Let's make sure 'customer empowerment' doesn't mean 'fobbing customers off with clunky bots.' AI technology must be used to help customers solve simple queries themselves and contact the right person when they need to — not create a barrier to contact.

Businesses at the top of their game will use AI to anticipate a customer's needs before they do. And then perhaps offer to have an agent reach out to them.

Later, AI will be there behind the scenes, equipping the support agent with the information they need to help that customer as much as possible during the interaction.

As AI gets better at predicting and optimizing our processes, the role of the contact center manager will change to, revolving more around HR and people-management skills.

THE EXPERTS ON AI



Contact centers must understand that the omnichannel experience is important and AI is a part of the equation. But businesses that believe they are fooling customers with AI are kidding themselves. It is the quality of the entire service experience, not just the technology, that will define a customer's perception of an organization.

The overused buzzword for this is, of course, omnichannel, but businesses need to simplify it into making sure that everything works together through integration and communication."

– [TONY JOHNSON, FOUNDER, IGNITE YOUR SERVICE](#)



AI-powered applications help contact center staff work more efficiently by auto-transcribing and analyzing conversations to serve up contextual answers to help agents resolve a customer's request faster will be a growing trend.

The lasting impact is going to be a new bar of customer service that surpasses pre-COVID benchmarks, which is great news for customers!"

– [AMIT UNADKAT, MANAGER, LOGIC 20/20](#)



I believe some of the significant trends in contact centers will be a ramp up in chat with AI capabilities. This will allow for quick answers to questions and timely resolutions on common problems for customers.

I also see virtual conferencing chat whereby the human emotional experience can not only be heard but seen from both ends of the conversation. This can make for an improved customer service experience."

– [DAVID BEAUMONT, FOUNDER, CUSTOMER SERVICE IS REAL](#)

TREND #5

The Voice Channel Strikes Back

For many years, it seemed like technology companies were waging war on the voice channel. This year, we found out just how crucial the voice channel is in a digital world.

One trend we're expecting in 2021 is more audio technology as a whole: audio-based social media, more voice-to-text solutions, more voice support agents, and more voice-enabled technology.



Omnichannel options are cool, I like them, but voice dominates. Call centers are certainly becoming more digital, but the present and future is voice."

– TREY BRIGGS, FOUNDER, [BRIGGS CONSULTING INTERNATIONAL](#)

Voice is the Human Connection People Crave

Automated-response bots, live chat, social media, and email are all cheaper channels than voice. It makes sense to include them in our repertoire. But, as we saw this year, it's dangerous to use them to cut out all human interaction.

"Consumers feel isolated as it is. Demand for empathetic human connections is increasing, not decreasing."

— Kristyn Emenecker, Executive Leader

In an increasingly digital world, people will continue to seek out ways to make a human connection. The companies that foster that will grow faster and longer than those that don't.

Omnichannel workstation deployment appears to have marginally overtaken voice-only deployments, to mitigate the prolonged high contact volume we saw this year. But it's important to remember that at least 50% are still voice-only workstations.

There's no substitute for a human when you have a complex problem. Sometimes, you just need to speak to a person. Audio is more comfortable to consume when you're on the move or doing something else. Phone calls are also less obtrusive than a video call. And they're cheaper.

We often think of Gen-Z as 'socially-conscious' introverts with their nose glued to a smartphone screen.

So, it may surprise you that recent research suggests that Gen-Z like **going into their banks** more than any other generation – even baby boomers.

The younger generations seek human interaction even more than the previous generations. Even their time online is in search of human connection, not an escape from it.

People want connection. Let's stop trying to find ways to avoid human interaction and use technology to foster it instead.

The voice-channel is the most effective way to do that.

THE EXPERTS ON THE VOICE CHANNEL



There's so much conversation around technology and current and future innovation in the world of customer service. But we must not forget that there will still be customers who want to communicate with a live, flesh and blood human being.

Customer service professionals, this is our time to shine. Be your authentic self when you interact with customers and they will love you and the company you represent all the more."

– [JEREMY WATKIN](#), CX DIRECTOR & INFLUENCER



Social media brand engagement jumped with more and more consumers reverting to other means of communication for their issues. Furthermore, we saw spikes in digital channel traffic during the Pandemic.

But don't be too alarmed, voice is still alive and well and remains preferential for complex sales and customer support issues."

– [WES BURGER](#), MARKETING DIRECTOR, [CLOUDTASK](#)



If 2020 has taught us anything it's that people need human connection and clear communication.

To achieve that within a remote or hybrid work environment, we're going to see more contact centers reach for cloud-based technology that drives camaraderie, increases visibility, allows supervisors to coach from anywhere, and enables agents to self-manage.

The world has changed and so should your technology. Get out there and explore."

– [PAUL LILJENQUIST](#), PRESIDENT OF [CLEARVIEW](#)



Expect to see more focus on digital and self-service, less brick and mortar, more efficiency-builders for company and customer, and an increased call for the return of voice to handle the challenging stuff.

– [KRISTYN EMENECKER](#), EXECUTIVE LEADER

TREND #6

Building Resiliency

There will be a huge focus – in all industries – on creating more resilient businesses. That will be particularly evident in contact centers.

2021 is the year to find and invest in the technology that will ensure you survive the next unprecedented global event.



**Bad companies are destroyed by crisis.
Good companies survive them.
Great companies are improved by them.”**

– ANDY GROVE, EX-PRESIDENT, INTEL CORP.

What Does 'Building Resiliency' Mean?

Building a more resilient contact center means three things:

1. **More flexible, better integrated technology**
2. **Superior workforce management processes**
3. **Agents with broader skills and knowledge**

Omnichannel deployment makes sense because your phone lines aren't always full. Why not have agents respond to email or chat requests? And the better integrated your platforms are, the more efficiently you can resolve tickets.

Multiskilling your employees so they are omnichannel can also improve the customer experience. With the right technology, agents can move across channels to continue to serve (or call-back) a customer as needed. They're fully empowered to help the customer and can take pride in seeing a ticket through to resolution.

Using AI, you could even create programming so that a customer only ever deals with one or two support reps, allowing them to create real, long-term relationships.

89%

of contact center leaders agreed the COVID-19 crisis had **changed the contact center industry forever.**

TALKDESK

That kind of relationship benefits both agents and customers. And this 'personal' touch is already one way that new brands differentiate themselves and get a toehold into crowded marketplaces.

THE EXPERTS ON RESILIENCY



The pandemic will have lots of lasting impacts. If I had to pick one it would have to be “immediacy” – the need to be available to engage at whatever time and in whichever channel the customer chooses. This applies to both CX engineering / management and CX measurement, and digital is the key enabler of this for both bot and person-to-person interactions.”

– PETER LAVERS,
CX CONSULTANT AT THINKCX



The lasting impact of COVID-19 will be a shift towards embracing technology solutions that remove friction (i.e., waiting in queue, customer authentication, interaction history availability) in a customer’s journey over hiring additional agents.

Self-service channels, augmented by bio-authentication and automation software will take routine requests away from human agents and let them focus on the customer’s issue.”

– AMIT UNADKAT,
MANAGER AT LOGIC 20/20



Businesses showed amazing resilience in pivoting to a distributed model. They increased their reliance on data to stay situationally aware and effectively manage their CX. In 2021, leaders must continue to find better ways to manage and coach their distributed teams, which will require reliable, real-time analytics.”

– MATT BEATTY, EVP OF SALES & MARKETING,
BRIGHTMETRICS™

Conclusion

The ongoing reality of the pandemic has — we hope — made people a little more empathetic. We need to use this crisis to tighten our ties to what matters — the customer and the human connection.

One threat we need to be aware of is a growing tech hubris that comes with repercussions few could have foreseen. Who would have thought that a website for college students would turn into a platform with such power that it can skew elections? Or worse, proliferate propaganda that instigates atrocities, like the massacres in Myanmar. It's easy to picture a future that looks like 'Star Trek,' but the current reality is more likely to end in 'Blade Runner.'

Too many companies want all eggs with no responsibility to the chickens. Critics of Uber say it has created an underclass of marginalized and powerless bot-workers — who Uber will, ultimately, replace. But conversations are not taxis.

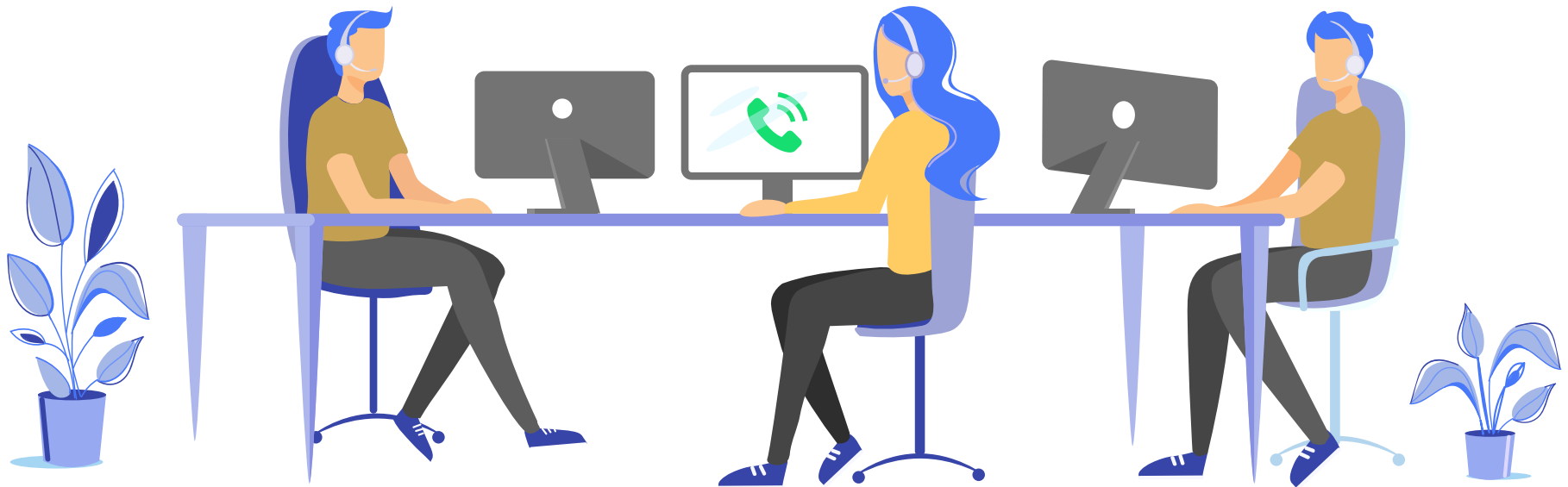
The best customer support agents empathize, and problem solve, and learn all the time. So, instead of looking for ways to remove humans from the contact center, we need to look for ways to put them at the heart of it.

In an increasingly virtual world, we need to work harder to foster that human connection in our contact centers.

Technology can help us facilitate a human interaction; that's why the internet was created. To remove the friction and create opportunities for real connection.

AI can also help us do that, but it can't replace us altogether. It can't fully replace a human ear because you can't make an empathetic machine.

The best technology or product you can invest in right now is the one that best serves your people — your employees and your customers.



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