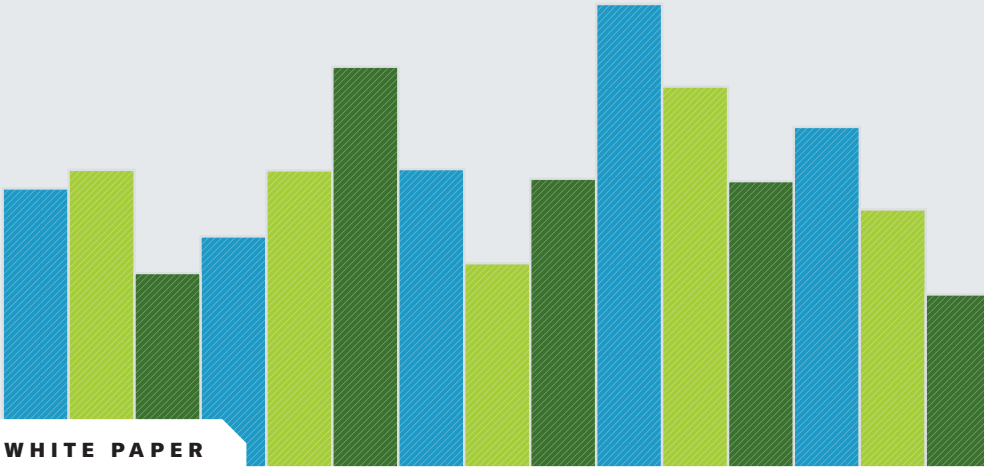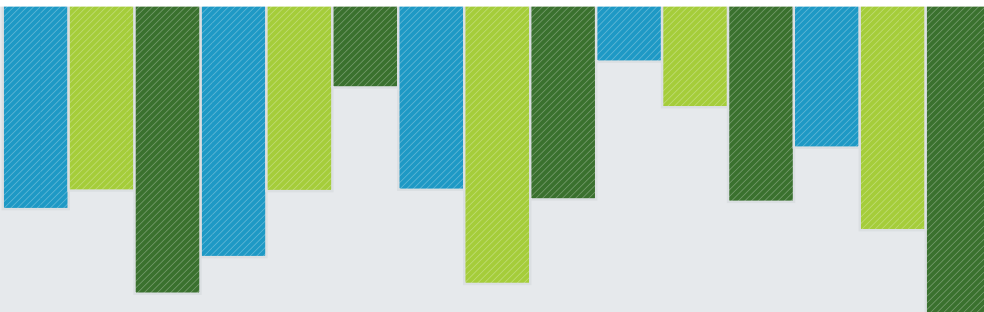**Harvard Business Review**
ANALYTIC SERVICES

Key Trends for Remote and Hybrid Customer Experience Delivery

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Teleperformance

Daniel Julien
Founder and CEO
Teleperformance

Maintaining Human Connections at Times of Crisis and Uncertainty

2020 was a year like no other. Widespread community shutdowns drove sweeping work-from-home mandates, record unemployment, industry disruptions, and social upheaval.

This past year has marked one of the most grave and profound chapters of my career. I've long believed that adversity is the true test of one's character, and many were put to the test.

Companies needed a lifeline to stay connected to customers. Governments implemented strict safety mandates. Health care agencies struggled to meet exploding patient support needs. Nonessential businesses were forced to close.

No matter who we are, 2020 reminded us that we're all human. Regardless of nationality, religion, profession, or gender, Covid-19 doesn't discriminate. So, with responsibility for the safety of over 330,000 employees globally, and clients relying on Teleperformance in 80 countries around the world, we needed to find ways to safely continue our operations.

In just two months, we moved an enormous number of employees to work-from-home. With only 10,000 remote workers before the crisis, we quickly expanded that to 220,000 by May. An unprecedented feat! But we knew that failure was never an option.

Teleperformance has always focused on helping people. It's in our DNA, and core to our culture. We (of course) believe in constant innovation and technological advancement—but only as tools to help preserve and improve human connections. We strive for a constant balance between high tech and high touch.

So, as we all enter the next phase of this unprecedented journey, we must look to what we've learned and apply those lessons to improving our collective future as global citizens.

At Teleperformance, we've amassed extensive learnings, best practices, and process refinements throughout our massive transition to work-from-home that will help us better serve our clients and their customers going forward. Many of our clients experienced performance improvements and saw the advantages of remote work firsthand during the pandemic. We're also helping companies that previously managed their customer experiences in-house but learned during the crisis that they lacked the technology and resources to migrate to a remote environment on their own—applying our expertise and know-how as tools for change and transformation.

Either way, regardless of who we are, one thing has become clear. Cloud-based, work-from-home solutions are here to stay. In fact, a large number of Teleperformance clients have already chosen to permanently adopt a remote model and are now choosing to optimize operations with an agile, next-generation solution like our advanced Cloud Campus model to ensure they successfully navigate this disruption, and weather the next.

Key Trends for Remote and Hybrid Customer Experience Delivery

The sweeping disruption caused by the Covid-19 crisis caught many organizations unprepared, and the economic effects of the crisis are still unfolding. Captive and third-party customer care, contact, and call center staff suddenly faced work-from-home (WFH) orders, which led to some difficulties delivering effective customer experience (CX) at a time when many customer support calls were escalating.

The one-two punch of a rapid and unprecedented shift to remote work and dramatic fluctuations in customer support demand left many organizations reeling. In some cases, wait and resolution time has increased from about 18 seconds to more than 20 minutes, according to a 2020 ISG report. In other cases, contact centers asked customers to call back another day. "There was a different set of challenges for those with in-sourced contact centers and those working with partners. However, no one had a pandemic scenario in their business continuity plans in which the whole globe would shut down," says Shirley Hung, a vice president with Everest Group. "The biggest challenge was organizations being able to move fast enough."

Bancolombia, for example, saw its usual 180,000 interactions a day balloon to 550,000, and four million calls a month more than double to nine million at the height of the pandemic. Over the course of a month, the financial provider—with the help of its CX partners—shifted 85% of its agents to working from home and increased its outsourced customer support workforce from 2,500 to nearly 6,500. "It's been a crazy time for contact centers," says Sergio Molina, who manages Bancolombia's contact centers and business process outsourcing.

HIGHLIGHTS

Covid-19 led to a **massive and abrupt shift to working from home for both captive and third-party customer care, contact, and call-center staff** around the globe, leading to customer experience (CX) shortfalls for many.

Organizations that were working with partners to explore and invest in **new tools and processes for optimizing remote CX delivery were able to adapt more quickly** than those organizations with in-house operations.

CX decision makers are still developing their long-term strategies, but **best practices are emerging for building more robust, resilient, and remote or hybrid** customer support models for the future.

The future of remote work and customer support has arrived—sooner rather than later. Those organizations like Bancolombia that were working with business process outsourcing (BPO) partners already exploring and investing in new tools and processes for optimizing remote CX delivery were one step ahead. "One of the key success factors in making this work was whether there was a governance model in place that allowed for rapid decision making. Overall, the outsourced model tended to respond better than in-house models did," says Hung. "The trust and partnerships they had developed were strong enough to withstand these unprecedented circumstances."

Some benchmarks for how to respond quickly to maintain effective CX amid a crisis have now been established, thanks to organizations rallying once the pandemic hit, and best practices are still being developed. However, there are some early lessons learned that can be applied going forward. Over the past few months, contact centers have gone from crisis response mode to reassessing their CX models for the future. Many leading contact center operators are discovering the benefits of a remote or hybrid contact center approach and laying the groundwork for more robust and resilient operations. At the same time, some organizations that had provided customer support in-house are now considering alternative sourcing models for the future, and the uptake of cloud-based contact center solutions is increasing. In the report ahead, CX standards rooted in the response to the crisis will be examined, as will the ways that contact center paradigms could evolve going forward.

A Test of Traditional Business Continuity Plans

The swift and involuntary shift to WFH models was a shock to systems across industries. Even the most well-designed business continuity plans had not considered a scenario in which all sites were unworkable.

"Most business continuity plans called for shifting traffic to unaffected locations," says Colin Taylor, CEO of contact center consultancy Taylor Reach Group, "but there was not an unaffected location to shift to."

Just 13% of U.S. customer support agents worked remotely on a permanent basis prior to the pandemic, according to research conducted by ContactBabel, an analysis firm, in September 2019. By mid-April 2020, 71% of U.S. customer support agents (and 87% of those in large organizations) were working remotely, according to a subsequent ContactBabel survey. **FIGURE 1** As of June 2020, 87% of call center operators said they had deployed WFH agents, according to a survey conducted by the Taylor Reach Group. Half of the survey respondents said all their employees were working from home.
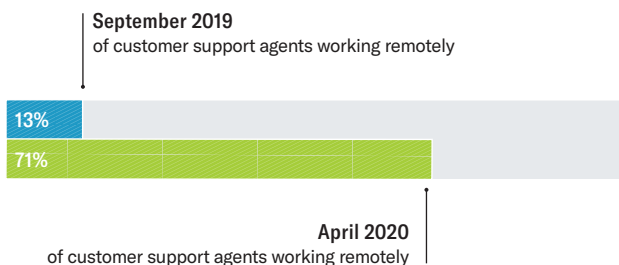
The trend of contact centers incorporating remote working had already been underway, but the crisis sped up the shift. It has also accelerated the adoption of cloud-based solutions and artificial intelligence (AI) and automation tools.

The Abu Dhabi government's contact center organization was created to enable a single point of contact with some 50 government entities. The organization had already been working with private CX partners to make sure the city's approach was in line with industry best practices and global standards. Abu Dhabi had piloted a two-year project that enabled United Arab Emirates women living outside the city to work for the contact center from home. "But we had never experienced anything like this before," says Mona Abdulla al Marzouqi, section manager for the Abu Dhabi contact center. "Our partner was crucial in ensuring that

FIGURE 1

The Rapid Rise of Remote CX

By mid-April 2020, the number of customer support agents working from home rose at least 70%.

September 2019
of customer support agents working remotely

13%

71%

April 2020
of customer support agents working remotely

Source: ContactBabel Surveys, 2019-2020

> The swift and involuntary shift to WFH models was a shock to systems across industries. Even the most well-designed business continuity plans had not considered a scenario in which all sites were unworkable.

we had the technology available to support work-at-home requirements." Thanks to that collaboration, the Abu Dhabi contact center was able to shift 100% of its operations to remote one week before a local lockdown was instated.

The Race to Respond

The initial transition to virtual workplaces was difficult for many and exposed critical shortcomings for some. Contact centers that had resisted WFH arrangements in the past were unprepared when the crisis hit.

"While for some it's gone smoothly, in multiple other cases I've seen organizations that lacked the technological know-how and infrastructure to successfully switch to a large number of agents working from home. In these cases, it has indeed been a nightmare for their customers and for their employees," says Micah Solomon, CX consultant and author of *Ignore Your Customers (and They'll Go Away)*. In the absence of policies and processes, contact centers faced multiple challenges. "Leading brands were forced to write down credit card information again, taking us back 25 years," says Taylor of Taylor Reach Group. "It was a little scary [because of] the compliance issues that some organizations had to cut corners on initially."

Some industries saw call volumes spike. More than half of customer support organizations (54%) reported an increase in contact volumes, with 37% noting a significant increase, according to the Taylor Reach Group survey. **FIGURE 2** Some

centers in the financial services sector saw call volumes climb 300% in the earliest days and rise over 800% from normal levels in later stages, according to Pindrop.

Netflix, for example, saw surges in not only the usage of its streaming service but also in customer inquiries. "It took a few days for us to move all our frontline agents to work from home," says Dekyi Boorsma, director of Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) customer service for Netflix. "Because of the type of company we are, we were both having to move

FIGURE 2

Pandemic CX Demands Surge

More than half of organizations (54%) saw customer contact volumes increase amid Covid-19.
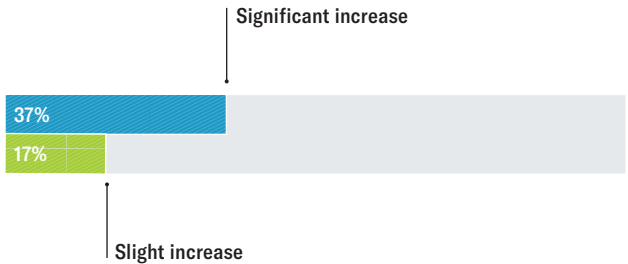
Source: Taylor Reach Group, May 2020

> "One of the key challenges of work-from-home environments is the reduced level of physical and information security controls that are purpose-built for delivery centers," says Jan Erik Aase, principal analyst with global technology research and advisory firm ISG.

our teams and also manage a massive increase in contact volumes, which would have been difficult to manage even under normal circumstances."

To accommodate that increase, they consolidated support in English for certain countries, offered more options for self-service, and hired an additional 3,500 agents globally over the span of two months, all of whom had to complete virtual training. "We continued to be reachable for our subscribers through this transition and were up and running in a few days," says Boorsma. "Within a few weeks, we got our response times back to the normal levels [of a minute or less]."

Navigating Uncharted Territory

Among the biggest challenges companies faced in the early days of the crisis were connectivity and internet bandwidth, telephony, network and systems, security, and hardware, according to the Taylor Reach Group survey. **FIGURE 3**

Media and technology conglomerate Comcast had established a virtual care agent model and was evaluating plans to expand it prior to the pandemic. After the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, though, the company accelerated the shift, migrating the vast majority of the frontline customer support workforce—more than 1,000 agents per day—to WFH. "Our number one priority was the safety and well-being of our employees and customers. We had to move everyone to WFH really quickly, and on such a large scale," says Brian Duffy, Comcast's senior vice president of care operations. "Ensuring everyone had what they needed to take care of

customers effectively and safely was a huge operational lift." One of the biggest challenges for Comcast was getting the right equipment into people's homes and setting up the secure infrastructure to be able to do so quickly.

The government of Abu Dhabi and Netflix EMEA had similar connectivity issues to work through. "Quality of voice was a concern when it depended on the connectivity of the agent's home environment," says the Abu Dhabi call center's al Marzouqi. "We worked closely with our partners on transferring calls over IP [internet protocol] or through mobile to ensure quality." Netflix was used to working within the confines of its contact center hubs with limited points of failure. "When everyone is working from home, it's completely different," explains Netflix's Boorsma. "How do you make sure thousands of agents are always online and able to take that customer contact?"

While most organizations had upgrades such as cloud telephony on their roadmaps, some 90% of global organizations were using an on-premises solution for their contact centers when the pandemic began, according to Gartner. That commitment left them ill-equipped to manage the sudden scaling of digitization and remote work.

"One of the key challenges of work-from-home environments is the reduced level of physical and information security controls that are purpose-built for delivery centers," says Jan Erik Aase, principal analyst with global technology research and advisory firm ISG. In some cases, security and compliance were diminished or eliminated entirely, adds Taylor.
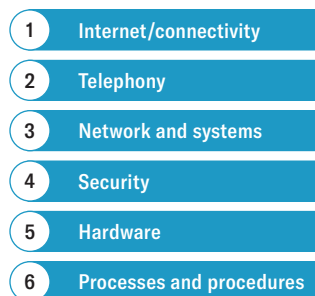
Early on, agents were facing challenges such as significant background noise negatively impacting the customer experience. "In some cases, companies had to suspend activities like call monitoring for training and quality purposes for a time. Processes in place for hiring, training, and coaching were all brick-and-mortar-centric," says Taylor. "So, organizations had to figure out how to do all of that remotely."

All those concerns had initially kept organizations like Netflix EMEA from fully embracing WFH contact center operations in the past. "We'd looked into it, [and] we weren't ready to make that jump," says Boorsma. "There were the security concerns. We have a high-touch culture and close coaching that we weren't sure how to replicate in the virtual environment."

FIGURE 3

Top Issues Deploying Work-from-Home Environments

Technical hurdles top the challenges organizations face as work locales have changed

Source: Taylor Reach Group, May 2020

1. Internet/connectivity
2. Telephony
3. Network and systems
4. Security
5. Hardware
6. Processes and procedures

When there was no other option, however, the organization was able to overcome those perceived obstacles, moving its internal teams in a matter of days and working with partners, some of whom themselves shifted more than 100,000 agents to at-home work in a matter of weeks. "It was pretty incredible," says Boorsma.

The Value of CX Partners

Indeed, the value of experienced CX partners quickly became clear during the early days and months of the pandemic. "Without them, we couldn't have served our clients," says Molina of Bancolombia, noting that hiring and training new agents in financial services can take two to three months. "It would have been impossible for us to handle all those calls."

Companies working with partners that had some experience providing customer support with remote resources prior to Covid-19 were able to move to a fully remote or a hybrid remote/on-site model in record time—some in a matter of days. "They could shift additional traffic to the service provider, which had better WFH capability, capacity, and structure than an in-house call center would have had," says Taylor. "Organizations who had that [outsourcing] relationship could move more quickly and get guidance and counsel from their partner."

For the Abu Dhabi government contact center, partners put in place processes to provide agents with on-call IT expertise to troubleshoot tech issues and new security guidelines for the WFH environment.

"Enterprises that outsourced were in a much better position than those with captives," says ISG's Aase. "They could rely on the service provider's expertise, scale, and technology to enable a seamless shift. Service providers went the extra mile and had the necessary technologies, partnerships, and scale to make the shift happen."

In early 2020, insurance conglomerate Seguros SURA Colombia was focused on creating a seamless omnichannel experience for its customers, which include not only 12 million policyholders but also hospitals, clinics, and diagnostic centers as well as enterprise customers of its risk management and consulting services. The company was working with trusted partners on those efforts when the pandemic hit, and its call volumes surged.

"We worked with our allies to bring us the technology and create the strategies to help us react quickly to the increased demand in services," says Ana Catalina Castaño, Seguros SURA Colombia's marketing leader. The company was able to manage a jump in health- and Covid-19- related inquiries from 2,000 to 35,000 a day and a decision to go 100% remote while staying true to its brand. "What was important was [having] partners to help us respond with speed to clients who trust our companies," Castaño said. "They provided

"What was important was [having] partners to help us to respond with speed to clients who trust our companies. They provided the platform and the security necessary to meet our privacy and data needs," says Ana Catalina Castaño, Seguros SURA Colombia's marketing leader.

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Working with partners who shared its values and were willing to collaborate at a strategic level paid dividends during this crisis. "We had these relationships in place, so we were ready," says Castaño. "It was much easier to have conversations about challenges and get to work on implementations to respond to the pandemic."

Comcast, too, had been working with strategic CX partners on its digital transformation efforts before the pandemic, and they stepped up in managing the response to Covid-19. "Partners help provide insight and best practices during an unprecedented time," says Joy Park, Comcast's vice president of customer experience and operations. "They have experience with other clients and industries and know what works when it comes to work-from-home." Adds Comcast's Duffy: "They shared best practices around recruiting, onboarding, training, and coaching."

Optimizing Remote CX

The CX environment is already increasingly complex given the introduction of new, sophisticated technologies including AI, machine learning, and advanced workforce management tools, so the crisis has prompted many companies that previously provided customer support in-house to consider alternative sourcing models as they plan for the future.

Thanks to increasingly prevalent cloud-based consumption models, the line between insourcing and outsourcing had already been blurred. As a result, companies that may have been reluctant to work with external service providers are now seeing the value of working with CX partners whose core competencies are to deliver efficient and effective customer

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care using integrated and optimized tools, technologies, and processes.

In fact, some BPO providers shifted hundreds of thousands of employees to WFH in a matter of weeks. While initial efforts were centered on getting WFH models up and running, the focus for all contact centers is shifting to optimizing WFH by revising processes, policies, and procedures to improve effectiveness and efficiency. "They are investing time, effort, and money into doing it well as opposed to just doing it," says Taylor.

In addition to the increased attractiveness of working with an experienced partner, there has been learning on a number of fronts. In the rush to WFH, some corners may have been cut, and organizations are working to close those gaps and also create a foundation for the future. "The rapid emergence of the current crisis has all smart companies reevaluating what could be improved in order to continue to serve, in the best manner possible, via the WFH model for as long as that is needed; considering whether WFH is a viable model even post-crisis; and working through any and all technological, organizational, managerial, and infrastructure weaknesses that have been revealed," says Solomon, the CX consultant.

Outsourcing has always been a lever for greater efficiency. Now there's a different kind of value to be gained. "Outsourcing will help enterprises tap into talent, the right skill sets, technology, scale, diversity," says Aase. "[CX partners] have done a good job enabling remote workforces in short order and are experiencing [decreased] attrition. They also are technology driven, with a considerable head

start in finding business value with artificial intelligence, automation, and emerging technologies. Since providers have already mastered the art of applying best practices across clients and industries, they know how to leverage their investments in centers of excellence, digital capabilities, governance, and tools."

In the first weeks, it was difficult to maintain service levels in the areas of wait times, says Seguros SURA Colombia's Castaño. "But we have been continuing to make changes and adjust our processes to improve." Seguros SURA was able to automate and train voice bots to handle some of the most common inquiries to return those service levels to normal. Netflix was able to return to something closer to its baseline—supporting all languages across all channels and regular hours of operations—within two months. "As we got back to normal, the focus became how to tailor our tooling and approach to improve our employee experience in the virtual environment," Boorsma says. That focus involved creating a virtual version of the lab space where agents performed tests on customer devices and rethought how to maintain its high-touch management culture when everyone is remote. "We had to make sure we weren't just creating a digital version of what we used to do for brick-and-mortar operations," she says. "Making the assumption that we're going to be virtual for a while, we needed to go back and create something from scratch that is tailored for the virtual environment." Case in point: the Netflix learning and development team introduced a new learning management system for supported self-learning and piloted it in September. Netflix's EMEA region

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is also moving to a centralized model for managing its CX partners to drive consistency across the network.

Comcast had been investing in the digital space for some time, so it was able to tap into that strategy as its customer conversations jumped from 60,000 to 400,000, with 82% of customers using digital channels in peak months to get support without talking to an agent. "We refocused and reprioritized our workforce, grew our digital team by 1,000%, and made 55-plus upgrades to laser focus on our [digital] assistants," Duffy says. The company paired its best agents with developers to figure out how to build human understanding into AI-enabled solutions to create a predictive and proactive digital channel that gets better over time.

Even beyond these solutions, many companies in the midst of the pandemic are investing in others, such as auditing their WFH environments and practices to identify gaps and opportunities; adopting telephony platforms to support WFH; improving security and compliance; developing and implementing WFH-focused solutions and processes, such as quality, coaching, training, etc.; implementing remote skills assessment tools; and monitoring employee well-being, mental health support, and training.

An increase in remote working is also driving an increased uptake of cloud-based contact center solutions, according to ContactBabel, particularly in medium and large contact center operations, to support remote working and business continuity. Around nine out of 10 (89%) contact centers are saying they are either likely to increase deployment of cloud software or are already fully cloud based, according to a report released in June 2020 by Calabrio, a maker of workforce optimization systems for contact centers.

The Upsides of a New Cloudshoring Delivery Model

One emerging and innovative solution for the long term is a cloudshoring approach, through which agents work from any number of locations using cloud systems and remain connected to a centralized hub of supervisors and support

Building a More Robust and Resilient CX Model

Covid-19 is a driver of reconsidering resilience and productivity. "The question is not simply, 'Should I outsource my contact centers?' but 'How do I get the most productivity and best serve my customers, and what can we do to optimize that?'" says Marc Tanowitz, partner with technology consultancy Pace Harmon. In fact, there are multiple factors for companies to consider as they move toward the future working model:

1. Creating a highly resilient business continuity plan by revisiting the current one to accommodate pandemic-like situations

2. Accelerating the digital transformation journey to address the WFH model

3. Evaluating cloudshoring options capable of activation and scale on a moment's notice

4. Scaling and activating additional agents anywhere, anytime

5. Taking a proactive approach toward automation that will help them serve a larger number of clients

6. Reskilling employees to adapt to situations quickly

7. Investing in technology to ensure WFH agents are adequately equipped

8. Securing sensitive customer data for remote work

9. Providing analytics to help employees deliver better experiences and ensure brand loyalty

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teams (either physical or virtual) with tools and processes solely dedicated to optimizing the remote work environment.

The pandemic is causing "contact center providers to accelerate their move to cloud solutions, which enable high levels of customer service across multiple channels, including voice, SMS, email, and social media," according to the ISG report. "At the same time, many customers are turning to non-voice channels to resolve their issues, and customer expectations for an improved contact center experience and a seamless shift between voice and other channels are increasing," the report says.

Analytics, single-screen management functionalities, and AI and machine learning tools can enable contact center agents to deliver highly personalized services. Meanwhile, cloud-based solutions may include a suite of workforce management capabilities that give supervisors information about their teams, allowing them to more effectively manage agents. Other advantages of a cloud contact center include easy deployment, easy integration, scalability, and pricing flexibility, the report says, noting that the WFH contact center model is likely to be adopted over the long term.

"[This approach] is the future state of the industry," Aase says. "From recruitment to onboarding, coaching, and training, this end-to-end system will make long-term work-from-home a reality. This will help companies to pivot during challenging times and gain a competitive edge by also keeping employee safety in mind. Agility and scalability are critical factors in today's world. The cloudshoring model is correctly designed to address these two factors."

There is a cultural shift required to take advantage of this model, says Molina. Bancolombia, however, is evaluating the model for the future in the wake of the Colombian government deciding to loosen its pandemic lockdown order. "We have some cloud solutions in place today and

plan to do some piloting to see how it goes," Molina says. "We believe this is the path for the future but need to work harder over the next few months to get there."

Early adopters of these emerging remote and hybrid contact center models are experiencing rewards that go beyond typical WFH improvements. Among the broader benefits of this approach are access to a deeper and more talented workforce, increased flexibility to meet changing demands, greater resilience and business continuity, and improved sustainability and diversity.

When contact center agents can work from anywhere, the talent pool deepens dramatically. Remote work "provides greater access to highly skilled or niche talent that is hard to find when you are physically constrained to an office," says Hung of Everest Group. "It also gives you the ability to deal with volume fluctuations more easily."

Comcast has seen productivity and agent performance stay consistent or even improve in the remote environment. "Since our care agents have moved to work virtually earlier this year, we have maintained our customer care quality metrics and accelerated our digital engagement satisfaction scores. In fact, 82% of customers who used an Xfinity digital channel successfully got the support they need without talking to an agent over the phone," Park adds.

Call to Action: The Post-Covid-19 Future

The future remains uncertain, and it's not clear what the ideal mix of remote and on-site contact center agents may be going forward. It likely will vary by company, industry, and geography. What is evident is that contact center operations will not entirely return to their pre-pandemic models—and they will be better for that.

The vast majority of CX managers (87%) say that they believe the pandemic has placed greater weight on the contact center as a factor in and a measure of overall company success, according to the Calabrio survey.

The shift toward a WFH model had been inching along in the industry for more than a decade. "The pandemic accelerated the trend and shot us 10 years into the future within just one month," Taylor says. When asked what percentage of their current WFH deployment organizations expected to still have in place 12 months from now, 91% expect to retain an average of 50% of today's WFH-agent level, and around one in 10 thinks they will have even more agents deployed remotely, according to Taylor Reach Group. In addition, one in five organizations predicts that they will still have 80% to 100% of their agents working from home next year. **FIGURE 4**

Meanwhile, some organizations with captive contact centers are reconsidering an outsourcing model to leverage and benefit from BPO know-how around managing remote

One emerging and innovative solution for the long term is a cloudshoring approach, through which agents work from any number of locations using cloud systems and remain connected to a centralized hub of supervisors and support teams (either physical or virtual) with tools and processes solely dedicated to optimizing the remote work environment.

CX environments efficiently and effectively. And cloud-based CX strategies—particularly those cloudshoring models designed to optimize processes and resources for remote CX delivery—will become more prominent as organizations adapt to a long-term work-from-home or hybrid reality. "We certainly see our clients interested in enabling a cloudshoring model across not just call centers but all operations," says Marc Tanowitz, partner with technology consultancy Pace Harmon. "The success of these models comes down to quality of service and productivity. The current thinking is that increased work-from-home is not only possible but sustainable."

There's little doubt that it required Herculean efforts to overcome the challenges of the first half of 2020, says Boorsma. "But we were able to do it more quickly than we anticipated. It goes to show that the obstacles sometimes aren't as great as we think." Among the key enablers for Netflix were working with partners' ready labor and equipment sourcing, having a centralized workforce management system and team for planning and scheduling, and the ability to create a remote learning curriculum it could roll out globally.

FIGURE 4

CX Remote Models Here to Stay

Almost all organizations will deliver customer experiences from agents working at home in 2021.

91%
Expect to retain at least 50% of current work-from-home levels next year

20
Expect to retain between 80%–100% of current work-from-home levels next year

9
Expect to increase their work-from-home levels next year

Source: Taylor Reach Group, May 2020

At Comcast, the pandemic accelerated digital plans. "Obviously there was a great desire from people to engage digitally with every brand—Comcast included," says Park. "But we've been able to continue to service our customers and expedite our digital strategy. If customers want to self-serve, engage with us digitally, chat, or call us—it's all available. It's not just about how to do this while working from home; it's about making sure we can deliver the best customer experience anytime." Covid-19 has increased digital engagement, adds Duffy.

Conclusion

The pandemic shined a light on the strategic importance of contact centers when it comes to customer experience, and it has given CX leaders the opportunity to invest in capabilities that senior business leaders hadn't committed to before. "When the pandemic happened, the contact center became so important that the bank realized it has to pay more attention to it," says Molina. "There has been greater willingness to offer services through the contact center that may have been deemed too risky in the past. We're solving new problems and doing it really well."

Likewise, al Marzouqi is focusing on creating a more resilient contact center for Abu Dhabi. "This experience has helped us to think about the future of the contact center in terms of having a strategy that considers multiple approaches to disaster recovery planning," he says. "You need to consider people, technology, and process. If you focus on those three elements, you can find a way to be successful in any crisis or any situation."

There will be continued soul searching in the industry as contact center operators determine the optimal models going forward. "Everyone is trying to reflect on how to build a more resilient and robust model going forward in case this happens again," says Hung. "That's manifested in increased openness by service providers and buyers to reconsider how they normally do things. Even the most regulated industries are thinking about how they can adopt work-from-home on a permanent basis." For those organizations, cloudshoring may become increasingly attractive.
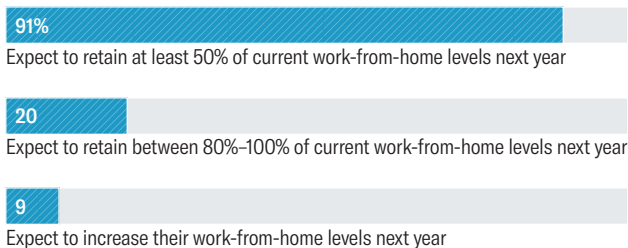
The pandemic shined a light on the strategic importance of contact centers when it comes to customer experience, and it has given CX leaders the opportunity to invest in capabilities that senior business leaders hadn't committed to before.

Innovation and rapid implementation were critical to responding to the pandemic, says Castaño, and they will continue to be important in the months ahead. The company is taking a look at all the processes it's implemented thus far to determine what's working and what needs adjusting and to integrate lessons learned.

"Having a partner that understands the way you work and is able to scale people and processes quickly is critical. They are able to bring you best practices from the industry," Castaño says. "They help you respond and grow while always keeping true to your strategy and your customers."

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