



Tomorrow's Call Center Will Be Neither: Not Call Focused, Nor Centralized

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Unprecedented concurrent events, including a global pandemic, lockdowns, hypermobility, and economic uncertainty, are triggering industry-wide disruptions for call centers. Yet the call centers that evolve and leverage today's emerging technologies will sit atop tomorrow's food chain.

How would you rate your last customer support call experience? Whether dubbed a contact center, technical support center, or customer service center, today's call centers and their call agents are the hubs for nearly all post-sales customer interactions. Beneath the call agents, a web of applications keeps calls

and information flowing and produces a torrent of metrics. From first contact resolution to call abandonment rates and average hold time to customer satisfaction statistics,¹ call centers precisely measure the customer experience in a quest to become better than the competition.

A typical inbound call center guides customers through a hierarchy of information extraction levels to solve their requests with the least time and interaction possible. The initial triage layer passes customers through an interactive voice response (IVR) system to determine their language, identity, and general need while reminding customers to listen carefully as menu options may have changed. Next is the hold period, where customers wait until a front-

line agent answers, informs them that they are being recorded for quality assurance, and meets their needs using expertly crafted scripts. Sometimes, the frontline agent cannot immediately solve the customer's request, resulting in the magic words, "Can I speak to your manager?" The backline agent soon picks up, calms the customer, and re-asks questions until, voila, everything is fixed.

However, recent technical advances and the impact of a global pandemic are rapidly changing the script.



TODAY'S CALL CENTER EVOLUTION

Unprecedented concurrent events, including a global pandemic, lockdowns, hypermobility, and economic uncertainty, are triggering a Cambrian explosion in call center innovation.¹ Today's call centers are undergoing industry-wide mutation, evolution, and natural selection in five fundamentally interrelated ways.

Remote workforce

As the worldwide pandemic spread in early 2020, lockdowns soon followed, requiring call centers to transition to a decentralized workforce supporting remote call agents in thousands of guest bedroom data centers. For the most part, the industry adapted in a matter of weeks through the Herculean efforts of creative engineers, resourceful operators, and a significant amount of digital duct tape.

Unexpectedly, this diaspora provided the perfect laboratory to test several axiomatic beliefs underpinning call center best practices. Until recently, the conventional wisdom held that call agents should be housed in centralized bullpens under close management supervision. The idea of releasing call agents to their own devices (literally) would undoubtedly tank call handling metrics. Almost without exception, however, call centers have experienced the exact reverse. Several studies, such as the Stanford/Ctrip and Airtasker studies, have found remote call center workers work 1.4 more days a month and handle 13.5% more calls, and employee attrition has decreased by 50%.²

One direct consequence of a productive remote workforce is the obviation of expensive commercial real estate. Besides the immediate facilities cost savings, companies have been freed from replacing traditionally high employee attrition from a specific metro area and can now draw from a national

or global talent pool. It is highly unlikely that call centers will revert to the old normal. "The transition to a remote workforce worked great—we won't go back," explains Charles Boicey, the chief innovation officer at a health-care call center leader, ClearSense.³

Cloud migration

Today, most call centers run on infrastructure and apps housed within owned or colocated data centers. The recent explosion of cloud-based call center apps, however, provides an attractive alternative. With a central data center, a remote worker must connect back to the mothership to access apps and infrastructure, whereas cloud-based apps allow access via a network of cloud points of presence (PoPs). Call centers that have migrated to cloud-hosted apps find the restricted bandwidth of remote workers' home Internet better suited to link up via local cloud PoPs rather than backhauling to the data center.

In one dramatic example, the contact center as a service provider Edify decentralized into 35 distributed PoPs to better serve remote workers. "If the call agents are decentralized, then the call center platform must be equally distributed," says Cameron Weeks, the co-founder and CEO of Edify.⁴ Cloud-based apps allow call agents to seamlessly bounce between connectivity points in the office, home, or "on the road."

Omnichannel

Conventional wisdom has determined that call center interactions are the most expensive and least satisfactory customer interactions and therefore a last resort. Today's tech-savvy companies steer customers to websites, chatbots, text, instant messaging, FAQs, in-app messaging, email, and even social media to intercept and resolve requests without needing call center interaction. This multichannel approach is a more economical and

efficient customer issue resolution for the service provider.

However, emerging solutions are transforming today's service provider-focused serial multichannel approach into a parallel omnichannel network that makes the customer the nexus of the interaction, choosing from an array of simultaneous channels to interact with the call center.⁵ For example, in today's multichannel stack, a customer attempting to install a new smart TV might check the website, do a Google search in user forums, watch a YouTube video, and then call the toll-free number. In an omnichannel environment, customers could choose to simultaneously start a video call with the manufacturer, WhatsApp the technician a picture of their cable connection, and Zoom bridge their son who set up their sound system last Christmas.

Many companies are now retreading their call center posture from today's sequential multichannel approach to the seamless omnichannel customer experience to decrease the handle time and increase the first contact resolution rates and customer satisfaction, all while saving money.⁶

Real-time analytics

"Voice is the last offline data set," quips Doc O'Connell, the chief sales officer and chief revenue officer at Dialpad.⁷ That is quickly changing, as companies like Dialpad extract real-time omnichannel metrics to give the call center management instant visibility of the performance metrics at the enterprise, call center, product, and call agent levels. This allows companies to instantly detect and act on a dip in the overall service level as well as spot and correct a longer-term trend. Coaching can be directed to struggling call agents, and overachievers can be highlighted. Call center analytics can also surface issues with the underlying infrastructure and application stack (for example, network

bottlenecks, computational capacity depletion, and transaction interrupts).

The shift to the cloud has unlocked new call center capabilities, including real-time analytics and agent guidance. Apps like Gridspace Sift guide call center agents and operators with granular metrics and in-call suggestions. The real-time nature of these apps can change call outcomes by providing agents with the next-best actions and alerting operators to systemic problems.⁸ Sentiment analysis is growing in importance as call centers aim to spot fluctuations in customer emotions at a point in time in an on-going call, across an entire conversation, across all of the customer's previous calls, and across all customer calls.

Intelligent automation

Automation is affecting all facets of enterprise IT, including call centers. Knowledge, process, and task mining products like Celonis, FortressIQ, Kryon, and Cursive.io can monitor app logs and keyboard and mouse clicks to discover how processes are executed in reality—not how they are documented in procedures. These processes can then be automated with robotic process automation tools like UiPath, Automation Anywhere, and Blue Prism. Every automation of a routine task streamlines the call agent's workload, increasing efficiency and reducing costs.⁹

TOMORROW'S CALL CENTER

In this Cambrian-like era, tomorrow's call centers will undoubtedly experience a similar mass extinction where some will perish while others evolve and thrive. The call centers that can leverage today's changes will stand the best chance of survival, but sadly, this may not be enough. The call center at the top of tomorrow's food chain must embrace three additional emerging technologies: virtual call agents, video first, and business-to-business (B2B) unified communication platforms.

Virtual call agents

Today, virtual frontline call agents like Gridspace Grace are practically

indistinguishable from their human counterparts. These cyberagents are being deployed at an increasing rate and replacing legacy IVR, chatbot, and user authentication systems.⁸

In the coming years, virtual agents will not only handle the entire user authentication, workflow detection, and routing stages; they will also troubleshoot and resolve routine issues. A frontline with no hold times, menus, mother's maiden names, or redundant questions will provide a superior customer experience at a fraction of the cost. However, it's currently hard to imagine virtual agents replacing all call agents. Specialized backline experts will remain on hand to handle edge and spurious issues.

A virtual frontline does raise some interesting questions: Does this open the opportunity for certified "gig" backline agents who grab calls from a variety of service provider call queues as their time and interests dictate? Could backline agents handle multiple customer calls at once? Would this more economical digital labor pool create a competitive market where "hot" backline agents are in constant demand and earn salaries several times larger than today? What new security solutions will be required to protect the new attack surfaces that a virtual frontline presents?

Video first

Omnichannel has paved the way for adding video to the customer experience. The video-first generation will simply not accept a voice-only experience. While video may appear to be just another layer in the omnichannel stack, it introduces several potential consequences.

Adding video to a virtual frontline will require that cyberagents sound and look human.¹⁰ While early versions of "digital humans" now deployed by companies like Uneeq and Soul Machines are still a little jagged and jerky, they are impressive and will only improve over time. Like their voice-only forefathers, they will soon become indistinguishable from... well, us.

In addition, introducing video into the customer experience creates the opportunity for augmented and mixed reality experiences. For instance, a video could be overlaid to show the customer how to resolve an issue or complete a task.

B2B unified communications platforms

Many complex customer issues involve several companies and agencies. Imagine a patient contesting a health insurance claim denial for lab work. Resolving this transaction involves not only the patient and the health insurance company but also the prescribing physician or clinic and the lab facility. Today, most of this B2B work is handled manually offline behind the scenes, requiring multiple calls, call backs, email, and probably a fax machine.

We are seeing the emergence of new technologies, like Infinitus Systems, that are deploying automated transaction agents to process B2B interactions. We will see this mature into a unified communication platform between industry participants, where transactions are handled by surrogate agents in real time. We have already seen this type of transaction hub implemented in the financial sector, where trades and transactions are all processed and recorded electronically without human intervention. In this unified platform, our example lab claim would be arbitrated live while we were on the first call.

These developments will uncover tricky issues in privacy, ethics, security, regulatory compliance, and possible job transition. I have intentionally steered clear of outbound call centers (which could be an article in itself). However, the evolutionary explosion underway will continue and be accelerated by emerging technologies. Call centers will continue to evolve. Providers will deliver better service. Customer experience will continue to improve. But tomorrow's call center will be neither call focused nor centralized. Please stay on the line for a quick customer survey... 

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