

2020 Call Centre Trends

The future of Contact Centres in the light of tech advances and changes in society.

RingCentral[®]

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a black headset with a microphone, is shown in profile from the chest up. She is looking out a window with a blurred background of warm, glowing lights, suggesting an office or call center environment. She is wearing a white and black striped shirt.

Chapter 1 Call & Contact Centre Agents & Information	5
What Are Call or Contact Centres & What Do They Do?	5
The Call Centre Sector	8
The Human Voice of Call Centres	9
Training cannot be underestimated	9
Tech Developments & The Role of Agents	10
Contact Centres – A People Business at the Cutting-Edge of Technology	11
Chapter 2 Inbound Vs Outbound Calls	12
Inbound & Outbound Calls	12
The Balance of Inbound Vs. Outbound in 2020	13
The Future of Inbound Vs. Outbound Calling	14
Anyone for proactive outbound calling?	15
Inbound Vs. Outbound – The Evolving Balance of Call Centre Telephony	16
Chapter 3 Technology & Investment	17
Primary Tech Trends for Contact Centres	17
Robotic Process Automation (RPA)	17
Data Analytics	18
Systems, Software & Integration	19
Chatbots & Other Real-Time AI	20
Cloud-Based Solutions	21
Improved Hardware	21
Tech & The Contact Centre – Revolution or Evolution?	22
Chapter 4 Cloud Contact Centres	23
On-Premises, Cloud & Hybrid – What Does it All Mean?	23
On-Premises Contact Centres	23
Cloud-Based Contact Centres	24
Hybrid Contact Centres	24
Bonus Definition – Managed or Hosted Contact Centres	24
How Are Most Centres Aligned & Are Things Changing?	25
Have On-Premises Solutions Had Their Day?	26
Cheaper Cost and Flexibility	26
Not Everyone Sold on The Cloud – Yet	27
The Future of Contact Centres – On Cloud Nine?	28
Chapter 5 Omnichannel Support	29
Multichannel Vs. Omnichannel – A Primer	29
Which Channels Comprise Omnichannel Support Systems?	31

Social Media: The New Player in Town	31
What Are the Principal Hurdles to Omnichannel Support?	31
Looking Ahead – New Channels & Trends	33
Omnichannel has Arrived but it's Still Developing	34
Chapter 6 Customer Experience	35
What is Customer Experience & Why Does it Matter to Contact Centres?	35
Monitoring Quality to Improve Customer Experience	36
Methods & Systems	37
Essential Metrics	39
Quality Monitoring Software to Automate Processes	41
Contact Centres – The Frontline in the Fight for Better Customer Experience	41
Chapter 7 Call Centre Trends: Call Scripts	43
What is Call Scripting & What Benefits Does it Offer Contact Centres?	43
How Prevalent is Call Scripting in the Modern Contact Centre?	44
What do Consumers Think About Call Scripting?	45
How Are Contact Centres Responding?	46
Call Scripting & Contact Centres – An Evolving Relationship	47
Chapter 8 Forecasting & Workforce Management	48
What is Forecasting in the Context of Contact Centres?	48
Demand & Supply – The Relationship Between Forecasting & WFM	48
Techniques Contact Centres Use for Forecasting & WFM	50
Triple Exponential Smoothing	51
ARIMA	51
Neural Networks	51
KPIs & Metrics Crucial to Forecasting & WFM	52
Unforeseeable Circumstances – Coronavirus & Forecasting	53
Forecasting With Accuracy – A Key Challenge for Contact Centres	54
Chapter 9 Sales & Marketing	55
The Contact Centre Market	55
How Are Companies in the Niche Seeking to Grow?	56
Sales & Marketing in a Service-Focussed Field	59
Chapter 10 Staff Retention	60
How Bad is Staff Turnover at Contact Centres & Why?	60
What are Contact Centres Doing to Boost Staff Retention?	61
Homeworking	62
Culture & Engagement	63
Recognition & Advancement	64

Linking Hiring to Retention	65
Protecting a Contact Centre’s Most Precious Resource	65
Chapter 11 Team Building & Employee Satisfaction	66
Importance of Tracking Employee Satisfaction	66
How do Contact Centres Assess Employee Satisfaction?	67
Periodic Surveys	67
Net Promoter Scores (NPS)	67
Employee Engagement as a Business Function	68
Employee Satisfaction & Team Building	68
Onboarding	69
Making Agents Feel Valued	69
Socialisation at Work	70
Happy & Engaged Agents are the Key to Superior Customer Experience	70
Chapter 12 Staff Training for Omnichannel Support	72
Training Contact Centre Teams	72
Knowledge & Expertise	73
Human & Communication Skills	73
Company Culture & Specific Systems	74
FM Outsource – A Case Study	74
New Training Challenges in an Evolving Niche	74
Handling More Channels	75
Integration & Other Aspects Related to Omnichannel	76
A Different Perspective on Tech & Staff Training	76
Staff Training – How Contact Centres Keep Agents at the Cutting-Edge	77
Chapter 13 The Future of Call Centres	78
Calls to Contacts	78
Omnichannel Rather Than Multichannel	78
Cloud-Based Solutions & Homeworking	79
Complex Tech to Support Rather Than Replace Agents	81
Proactive Customer Service	82
Contact Centres 2025	83
Chapter 14 Final Thoughts	84
A People Business	84
Complex, Interconnected Processes	85
Ever-Evolving Tech	86

Chapter 1 | Call & Contact Centre Agents & Information

At RingCentral, we're passionate about communication. We specialise in solutions that connect people and [allow them to collaborate](#). And the call and contact centre industry is one that's built on communication. But it's also a sector that often gets misunderstood. That's why we've decided to write this eBook.

We're going to start this eBook by looking at what call centres are, how they work, and who they serve. We'll also look at the future of the sector in the light of tech advances and changes in society.

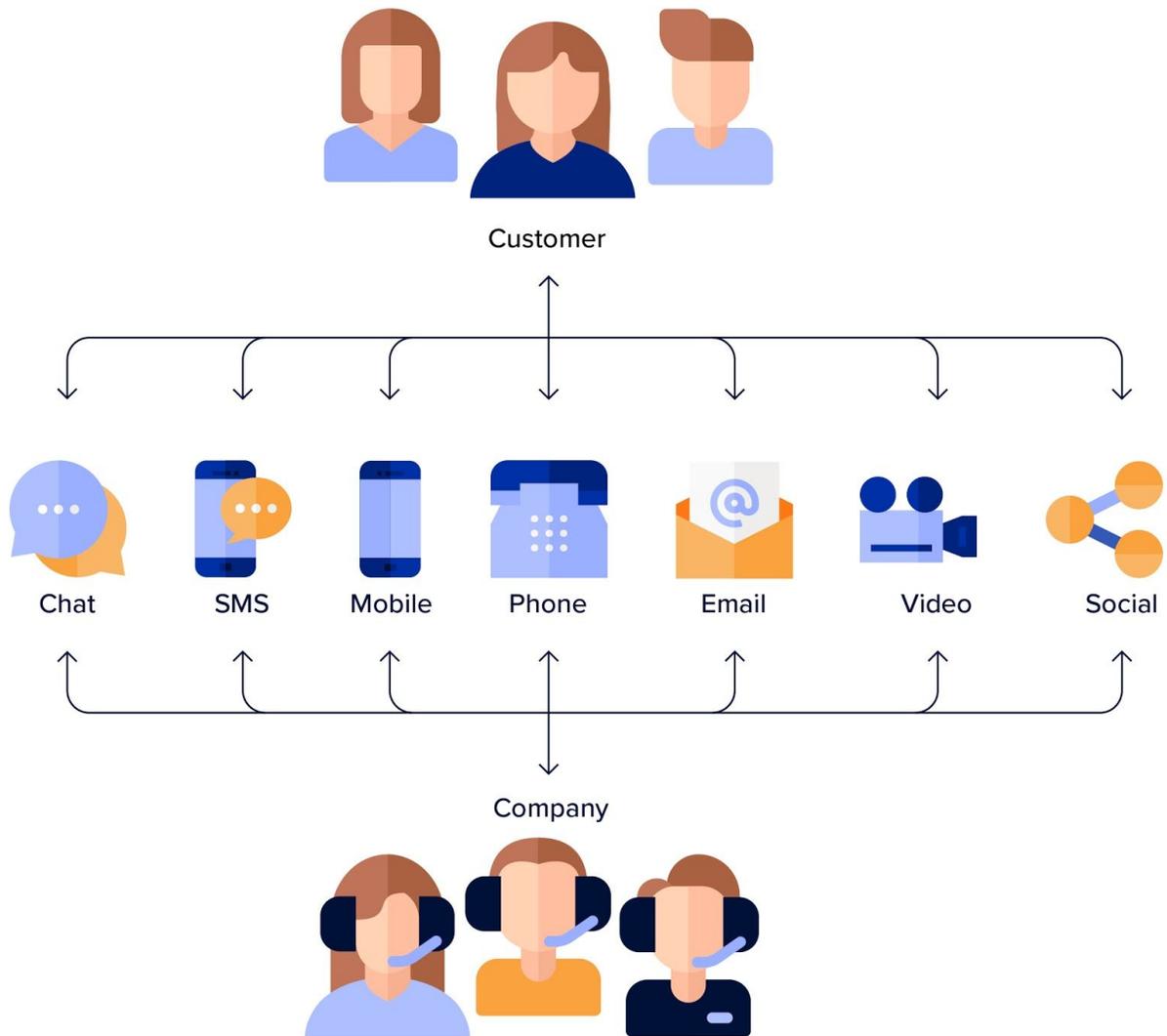
To make this eBook as insightful as possible, we've reached out to industry experts to input into this project:

- **FM Outsource** – a complete communications outsource agency. The firm handles inbound and outbound contacts across all channels. They serve a wide array of brands.
- **Cymphony** – Established in 2000, it primarily offers a telephone answering service for UK-based SMEs.
- **Poly AI** – Born out of a Cambridge research group, the company develops tech for the contact centre niche.

The knowhow of these experts provided us additional insights into the contact centre world. However, before we delve too deep, it makes sense to start with the foundations. This initial chapter will provide an overview of the call centre industry. We're going to look at how the sector stands in 2020, before discussing the vital resource shared by all contact centres; people.

What Are Call or Contact Centres & What Do They Do?

Call and contact centres are ingredients of a service that many firms offer to a customer. They provide a dedicated pool of representatives to handle queries or complaints. That includes fielding inbound calls and making outbound ones.



Agents and advisors communicate via an increasing range of communication channels. Many firms let customers get in touch via webchat, email, messaging services, and more. That’s why the label “contact centre” is perhaps more apt today than that of “call centre”.

Most companies don’t run their own dedicated contact centres because of the costs in infrastructure and human resources. Instead, they outsource tasks of customer support to specialists. In each contact centre, agents could be working on multiple campaigns. That means the communications for a variety of firms may get handled under one roof. Advisors, too, may lend their expertise to more than one company on any given day.

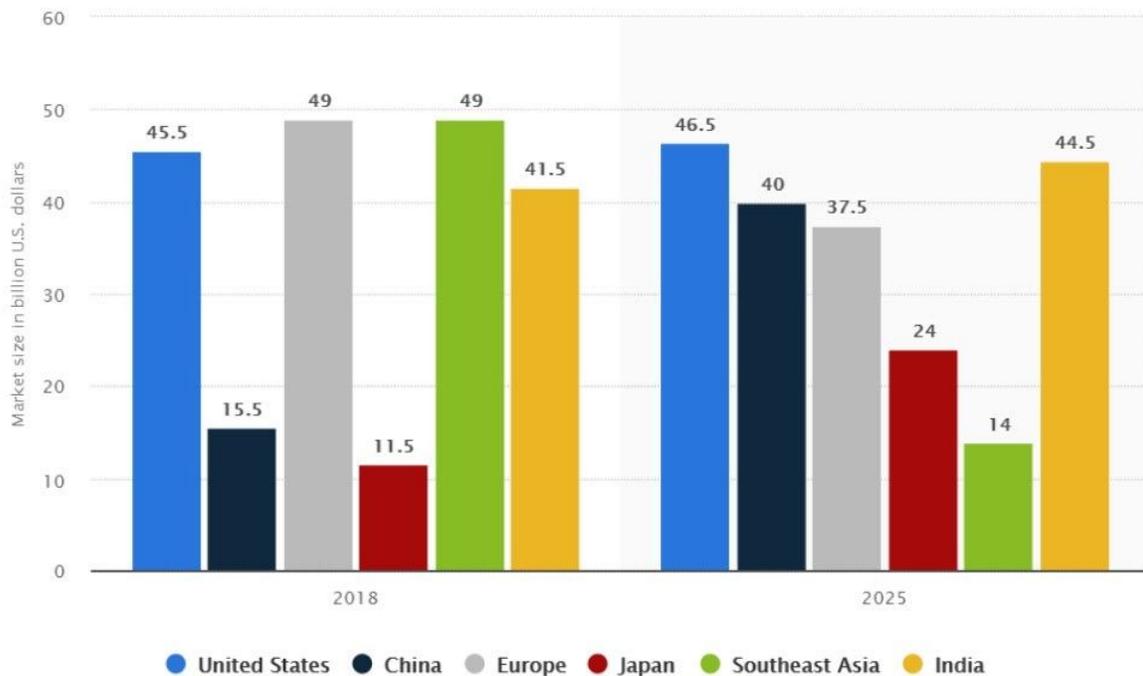
Like all sectors, the call centre niche has its own lexicon. There are a variety of terms that are worthwhile defining before we dive into this series. Feel free to skim over this list if you wish. You can always return to it if you encounter a term that you’re not familiar with, including in latter chapters.

- **Agent** – The most common term for a call centre worker. Agents answer or make calls and handle many other communication channels. In some circumstances, they may also get called representatives or advisors.
- **Agent Group** – A collection of agents who work on the same campaign or share a set of skills. The workforce at a contact centre will often get split into several agent groups.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** – A catch-all phrase for tech solutions that simulate human intelligence. Algorithms and AI-driven software are having a profound impact on modern call centres.
- **Automatic Call Distributor (ACD)** – A system that queues and distributes calls to the correct agents. Contact centres can tailor ACD systems to meet the needs of individual clients.
- **Call Blending** – The process of combining inbound and outbound calls. Blended agents are those who handle both types of contacts. A contact centre's systems must be able to adapt to the nature of each request as it arises.
- **Call Routing** – The process of directing inbound calls to the correct agent or agent group.
- **Chatbots** – AI-powered software solutions that “chat” online with customers. They're also sometimes known as “virtual assistants”.
- **Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System** – Software that companies use to track and handle customer interactions. Such systems often get integrated with the primary contact systems used by call centres.
- **Home Working** – An arrangement whereby agents can log in to a call centre's system and [work remotely](#) (i.e., at home).
- **Interactive Voice Response (IVR)** – A telephony system that lets callers make choices to determine how a call gets routed. They might press a keypad button or deliver a voice command to explain the nature of their call.
- **Multi-Channel** – A contact centre or customer support system that has many means of communication. Common channels include telephony, live chat, email, etc.
- **Omni-Channel** – Similar to multi-channel in that it involves many means of contact. Omni-channel support, though, is the process of making any customer service journey seamless. The premise is that it shouldn't matter by which channel a customer reaches a contact centre.
- **Post-Call Processing** – The work an agent does immediately after contact with a customer. This may mean entering data, changing details in other systems, or other processes.
- **Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN)** – The traditional telephony network that uses infrastructure such as phone lines.
- **Quantitative Forecasting** – Using data to predict future call volumes, spikes in demand, and other events.
- **Unified Communications Platforms** – [Software platforms](#) that integrate many channels and make switching between them easier.
- **Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP)** – Internet-based telephony. The audio of a call gets packaged as data and transmitted over an internet connection. It's increasingly replacing PSTN.

- **Workforce Management (WFM)** – How contact centres arrange and distribute agents to meet demand. WFM and forecasting are closely linked.

The Call Centre Sector

The contact centre industry is a genuinely global one. According to [2017 statistics](#), the European call centre market generated \$49 billion. On the other side of the Atlantic, the US sector was worth \$45.5 billion across the same 12 months.



Source: [Statista](#)

There's also a considerable offshore call centre market. By that, we mean when firms outsource support to countries such as India and the Philippines. It's predicted that the outsourced market could soon be worth \$82.6 billion.

Due to the universal need for customer service, all kinds of firms get served by the call centre sector. Specialist agencies within the industry work with companies of all shapes and sizes. FM Outsource, for instance, works with startups of one or two staff and multinationals alike.

Furthermore, [industry research from 2019](#) showed a total of 931 UK businesses in the contact centre niche. Combined, those firms accounted for a total revenue of £2 billion - a figure that grew 0.5% in the past five years. And over 60,000 people worked in the sector in 2019. It's those people who represent the most vital resource for contact centres.

The Human Voice of Call Centres

Talk to any pros in the contact centre niche and one message sings through, loud and clear. That message is that the call centre industry is a “people business”. Without their agents, the service that firms in the niche can offer clients is severely limited. You can give customers all the communication channels you like, but you still need staff to man them.

A call centre workforce can be transitory and changeable. Businesses in the niche often have a foundation of permanent agents. They may then take on extra staff as forecasting and demands dictate. Those centres that work with retailers will usually take on more agents during peak times. For retail, this is generally October to January. For pensions and finance firms, it often aligns with the end of the financial year.

Agents in a contact centre must manage high volumes of queries. At Cymphony, agents can sometimes take 30 calls per hour. In many cases, too, they will have to deal with a wide variety of different queries. Questions or requests an agent may encounter will be client-specific. Every customer is also different and presents a range of unique needs.

To best serve changeable demands, contact centre advisors must have sufficient training. All the experts we spoke to agreed on the importance of agents being well prepared. It’s for that reason that contact centre training is often intensive.

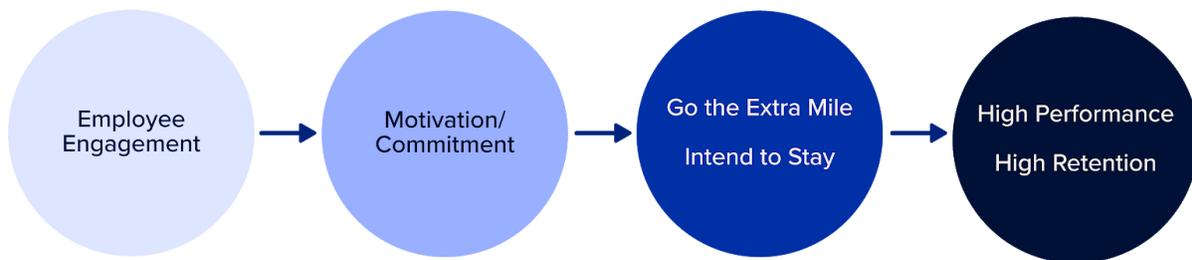
Training cannot be underestimated

FM Outsource provides a prime example. New agents there go through an extensive, well-designed training and onboarding process. The firm’s ‘advisor training’ starts with a classroom element. There’s then a period of more practical learning and development.

The aim of the training is to impart company values and expectations. Jack Barmby, founder of FM Outsource expects agents to focus on product knowledge, efficiency, and quality. They also, however, want workers to ‘feel like they’re being invested in’. That’s why the final stage of training introduces agents to the contact centre in a controlled, supported fashion.

What’s more, new advisors at FM have their own area of the office. That’s where they handle their first customer contacts. A trainer is permanently on hand in that area to support new staff when needed. The new workers only move to different agent groups once they’re ready.

Contact Centre Engagement



Company culture and [employee engagement](#) are fundamental to Cymphony’s approach to its staff. The firm now has a dedicated company trainer. And that executive-level employee has the specialist job of agent development. This is vital not only to helping workers do the best job possible, but also to staff retention. That’s something we’re going to look at in more detail in a later chapter.

Something else that will get specific attention later is the impact of tech on call centres. While we’re thinking of agents, though, it would be remiss not to look at the effect that AI and other tech may have on those workers.

Tech Developments & The Role of Agents

There’s been lots of discussion in recent years about the future of contact centres. Much of the conversation revolves around new tech and what it may mean for agents. There’s a school of thought that automation, and the self-service support it allows for, may usurp traditional call centres.

Jack Barmb, the founder of FM Outsource, used an analogy of call centres being an “ever-shrinking iceberg” to describe this belief. But neither he nor the other experts, however, subscribe to this school of thought. Jack was definitive: “There’s always been self-service, and tech has always changed the game...What stays the same is that people want that human touch.”

Tech, then, is not about to make 60,000 in the UK redundant as [some alarmists have claimed](#). Instead, the greater potential of technology may be to make agents’ jobs easier. That’s certainly the aim of Poly AI’s solutions, according to their founder, Nikola Mrksic: “The technology that we are building is mostly focussed on creating opportunities for call centre agents to concentrate on high-value tasks.”

By handling what would be time or labour-intensive tasks, tech can take pressure off agents. They can then be free for more actual customer interactions or functions that need genuine human intelligence.

But just how technology will shape the future of contact centres still deserves more discussion. That’s why a later chapter in this eBook will tackle the issue head-on. When it comes to the workers on the call centre frontline, though, new tech definitely shouldn’t be seen as a threat.

Contact Centres – A People Business at the Cutting-Edge of Technology

Hopefully, this first chapter has whetted your appetite. It should certainly have demonstrated that the sector is a nuanced and important one. Many thousands of people, after all, rely on the industry for their livelihood. From frontline agents to executives and managers, workers are the primary resource for contact centres. Hiring and retaining the right people is critical to a centre's success.

Positioning those individuals to be best able to serve customers is equally vital. Developing company culture, training them well, and supporting them with tech are three paths that firms take. In the later chapters of this eBook, we'll look at all those areas and more. The next chapter, though, will focus on the calls that contact centres handle. Specifically, it looks at the balance of inbound and outbound calls and how that might change.

Chapter 2 | Inbound Vs Outbound Calls

Today's contact centres use several [channels of communication](#). Agents speak with customers via live chat, email, social media, and more. But often it is still telephony that forms the bulk of a call centre employee's workload. The calls that agents deal with fall into two primary categories. They can be either inbound or outbound calls.

In this chapter, we're going to explain the nature and challenges of each type of call. We're also going to look at how the calls that centres typically handle are split between the two varieties. Finally, we'll cast an eye to the future. We'll consider whether the balance of inbound and outbound will change over time.

Inbound & Outbound Calls

The principle difference between inbound and outbound calls is self-explanatory. Inbound calls get made by customers to a call centre. Outbound calls get made by agents at the contact centre to customers. That fundamental difference has a significant impact on the nature of each type of call.

Inbound calls are primarily associated with customer service. When a customer gets in touch with a call centre, they're looking for answers or solutions to problems. In the case of inbound calls, therefore, agents must play a range of roles.

For many inbound contacts, agents provide tech support, solving issues related to orders, accounts, and other admin. They're there to deal with customer inquiries. They must also be able to overcome particular problems.

Outbound calls, on the other hand, are often related to sales. Most outbound agents work through a database of contacts, trying to sell a product or service to the leads. In many ways, outbound calls are a lot simpler and more repetitive than the inbound variety. In an outbound contact centre, agents are often very target focused. Their success gets judged on the number or value of sales.

Types of call centers



Outbound calls don't have to be sales-related, though. There is room for outbound calling in customer service. Phoning customers to help them with issues is a way to make customer service more proactive. It's an avenue that experts believe call centres may explore more over time. As a concept, it fits with the idea of focusing more on [customer experience](#) than customer support.

We're going to take a closer look at the idea of proactive outbound calling a little later. That's as part of our look ahead at how inbound vs. outbound calling may change in the centres of the future. For now, though, let's examine the situation as it is in 2020.

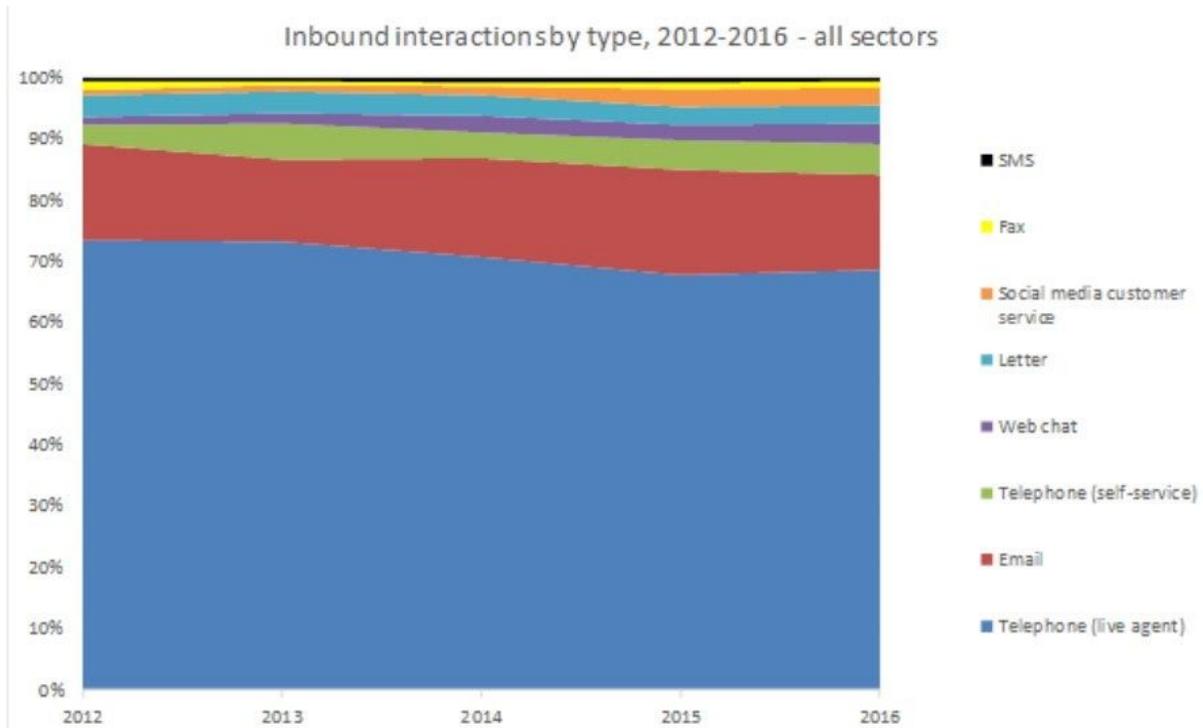
The Balance of Inbound Vs. Outbound in 2020

[A 2017 report](#) into UK call centres shared some insights into inbound and outbound calls.

According to the study, outbound calling activity across the sector stands at 21.4%. That represents a drop of more than 12% over the 13 years since 2004. The research also states that despite the fall, more service focussed outbound calls are getting made.

Those findings line up with what we learned when we spoke to industry experts. Both Cymphony and FM Outsource reported that they primarily provide inbound services. Jack Barmby, Founder of FM Outsource estimated that as much as 90% of their current activities were on the inbound side. The reason for this skew is down to client demand. The experts from both contact centre operators stated that it was inbound which the majority of their clients were focussed on.

As well as inbound calls, contact centres also deal with contacts from many more channels. Email, live chat, and social media are amongst the most common. The report cited above suggests that around 15% of inbound interactions to centres are via email.



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

For Cymphony, the balance is a little different. Voice calls currently still account for 92% of their revenue. There's no doubt, though, that [omni-channel support](#) is a developing trend in the industry. We're going to look at that trend in more detail in a later post. What's worth examining here is how new channels may impact both inbound and outbound calling.

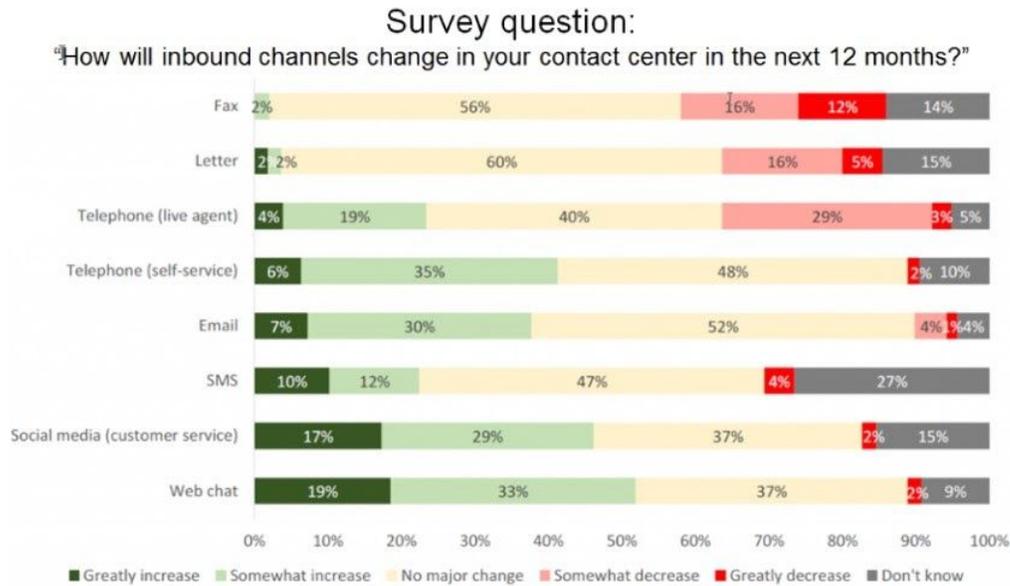
The Future of Inbound Vs. Outbound Calling

In the past, a customer's only option for support was to pick up the phone and call a service agent. Those times are gone. Today, most businesses offer email, live chat, and other channels to consumers.

One visible effect that this has is to reduce the volume of inbound calls to a contact centre. There are other ways, though, that multi-channel support impacts telephony in call centres.

According to the experts we talked to at FM Outsource, inbound activities are evolving. They're increasingly getting driven by the channels which customers wish to use. That's as opposed to those which clients or centres themselves may prefer.

Telephony is now an inbound channel that's used in concert with many others. That makes integration of those channels vital to [customer experience](#). We'll talk more about that, though, when we focus on omni-channel support.



Source: Contact Babel, US Call Center Decision Maker's Guide, 2015

Source: [Fonolo](#)

Jack Barmby from FM Outsource also predicts that the greater variety of inbound channels may impact outbound calling. Specifically, they believe that there may be an upturn in service-related outbound calls. That's especially phone calls to customers using other channels.

Anyone for proactive outbound calling?

Take, for instance, a customer interacting with a company via a messenger chat or email. If an exchange isn't going as that customer hopes, they may become frustrated or angry. Receiving one more unsatisfactory message might push them over the edge. They could choose to abandon the entire support process.

If an agent anticipates a problem, they can pick up the phone and call the customer. It's far easier for an advisor to show sympathy with someone on the other end of the phone than in a text conversation. Moreover, a phone call can resolve an issue faster than an email exchange might.

Some live chat channels do, of course, also give customers the option to escalate to a voice call. A link or button lets them choose to contact an agent if they get frustrated. Many customers, though, are more likely to abandon the process entirely once they reach peak frustration. The beauty of an outbound call is that it can pre-empt that scenario.

You're also able to exchange more information faster on a call than via email or chat - that aids better understanding of an issue and a speedier resolution. What's more, the act of calling a customer shows them that the agent - and the brand they represent - cares. Consumers who feel that way about a business are more likely to [stay as a customer](#) of that business.

FM Outsource are excited about the prospect of proactive outbound calling. They're promoting the use of such tactics as a further way to deliver a quality-led service. What's more, they also feel that they're not alone.

One of the experts we talked to sees an industry-wide will to move toward more proactive outbound contacts. He believes that in the long-term, the rewards greatly outweigh the drawbacks. Calling a customer does take longer than sending an email. Resolving an issue in one call, though, means a customer won't need to keep reaching out.

Inbound Vs. Outbound – The Evolving Balance of Call Centre Telephony

Inbound and outbound calls are vital elements in the operation of any contact centre. But the two strands of call centre telephony are often seen as distinct and separate. Inbound is about customer service, while outbound regards sales. Inbound, too, is the type of call more prevalent in a traditional call centre.

However, as with many things in business, the situation is actually fluid. In the future, calls look set to become better integrated within omni-channel platforms. That could see proactive, outbound customer service calls rise in prominence. Taking the lead and calling customers who use other channels is a win-win for contact centres. It aids [customer satisfaction](#) and helps resolve issues more efficiently.

A shifting balance between inbound and outbound calls is only one way that call centres are evolving. One of the most significant drivers of that evolution is the emergence of new technology. That's the focus of the chapter of this book.

Chapter 3 | Technology & Investment

Disruption from new technology is being felt across all industries and sectors. Advances in areas such as software, AI, and more are having a profound impact on [how we do business](#). Contact centres are at the forefront when it comes to tech development. Many emerging technologies have found their initial uses in the industry.

We're now going to look at the different tech that is taking hold. We'll explore the areas where centres are investing in new solutions and innovations. We're also going to consider how those technologies may affect the contact centre niche.

Primary Tech Trends for Contact Centres

The call centre industry is a rapidly evolving one. How centres manage their staff and how they interact with customers is changing. Those changes are in part due to new demands from customers. People now expect the ability to contact companies across a range of channels.

What drives the evolution of contact centres is the emergence of new technology. What follows are six tech trends that have made a significant impact. They're also the emergent technologies that look set to reshape the niche in the coming years.

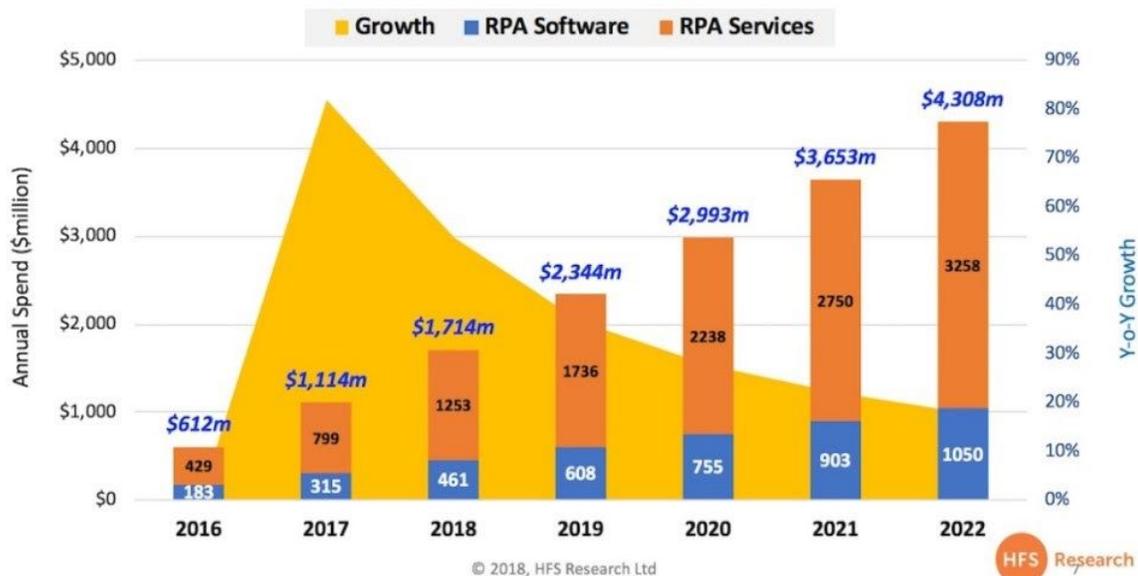
- Robotic process automation (RPA)
- Data analytics
- Systems, software & integration
- Chatbots & other real-time AI
- Cloud-based solutions
- Improved hardware

Robotic Process Automation (RPA)

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) is a tech trend that's taking hold in many industries. In layman's terms, RPA refers to the handling of basic, repetitive tasks by software or 'bots'. RPA solutions are powered by AI and machine learning. They're able to perform time-consuming processes and jobs in a fraction of the time of a human.

A good example is the processing of an invoice. Imagine a customer emails an invoice to a company. Via RPA, a bot can automatically pull an invoice attachment from an email. It can then transpose it into an Excel sheet, from which the data can get entered into all relevant systems. [According to Deloitte](#), such automation can see the whole process completed 15x faster.

RPA Services and Software Market 2016-2022



Source: [Horse for Sources](#)

According to [HFS Research](#), the RPA market is a significant one that is growing apace. The global market reached a size of \$1.7 billion towards the end of 2018. Projections by HFS based on that figure suggest that by 2022 total RPA revenue may be as much as \$4.3 billion.

Contact centres were some of the earliest adopters of RPA technology. They're environments where the benefits of RPA are numerous. Call centre agents traditionally manage many tasks aside from actual customer interactions. They include things like updating systems, inputting data, or performing post-call processing. It's precisely these tasks that RPA can manage.

Handing off simple, transactional jobs to tech helps agents work more efficiently. They can focus on tasks that need "substantial cognitive power or emotional capacity", as Nikola Mrksic from Poly AI puts it. They're the kind of activities that only a human can handle.

FM Outsource is also excited about the potential of tech-driven automation. Jack Barmby, the Founder of FM Outsource, shared his view:

'Let the tech do the legwork. The agent should be focussed on managing the customer...If it's a repetitive task, an agent shouldn't be doing it.'

Data Analytics

Data analytics in and of itself isn't new in the call centre niche. Contact centres have long used the data generated via customer interactions [to guide and direct operations](#). Data on call volumes and the like get used for forecasting and workforce management. Tracking metrics like on-call time is a well-practiced way of judging agent efficiency.

But the intelligence and scope of data analytics available to centres are what's grown in recent years. The development of AI and especially machine learning, has been vital in this regard. AI-driven solutions can swiftly process and analyse vast volumes of data. Thanks to machine learning, they can identify patterns in that data and draw out useful insights.

Such AI-powered handling of data is known as 'predictive analytics'. Predictive analytics is already being employed by some contact centres, but its uptake is likely to grow. The tech can deliver some notable practical benefits to contact centres. They include things like:

- **Predicting future outcomes** – Estimating the potential for sales to close or pointing out customers who may be about to abandon a brand.
- **Identifying trends & their impacts** – Finding patterns that suggest the reason for changes in customer demand or activity. For instance, analytics may find a cause of periods of higher call volume or longer call times. Centres can then predict when these things will happen again in the future.

It's becoming more critical for firms to develop a data-driven customer experience. Utilising such adata allows firms to deliver the swift, personalised service consumers now expect. That's why smarter, tech-driven analytics is set to remain an area of particular interest to contact centres.

Systems, Software & Integration

Aside from AI, call centres also employ many other cutting-edge solutions. Yes, firms in the niche use an array of contact systems, platforms, and other software. Developing these kinds of solutions is another area of interest for contact centres. As is finding the best way to [integrate the diverse, disparate systems](#) the centres use.

Contact centres are increasingly investing in more complex contact systems. Such systems incorporate elements like smart desktops, automated routing, softphones, and more. The idea of such solutions is to allow agents to help customers as efficiently as possible. Precisely what that means differs from one business and their customer base to the next.

Not all contact centre businesses custom build their own contact systems. Investment in software and means of integrating software platforms is high industry-wide, however. Cymphony, for example, needs a software solution that can work across more than 50 different CRM platforms. Having a solution that can work across systems is an understandable priority.



Chatbots & Other Real-Time AI

In the first chapter of this book, we explained how the term “contact centre” is often more apt than “call centre”. For you see, agents interact with customers via many diverse channels these days. And speaking on the phone is only one of them. The introduction of [chatbots](#) as a new channel is another tech trend in the contact centre niche.

Many businesses have introduced chatbots as a new method of customer support. The software solutions, powered by conversational AI, can simulate human interaction. Take the ‘live chat’ or ‘web chat’ options offered by many websites. A customer can often hold a text chat with a ‘bot’ rather than a human to get answers to simple questions. Thanks to machine learning, those bots can ‘understand’ queries and deliver the relevant replies.

They're also useful solutions for straightforward support processes, like resetting passwords. Nikola at Poly AI feels chatbots used in that way can often give a better experience than an agent.

The extent to which chatbots could impact the contact centre niche is hotly debated. In 2011, Gartner predicted that by 2020, [85% of customer service interactions](#) would get powered by AI bots. That hasn't proved correct. Such bots do get widely used to support human agents, though, as do other real-time AI solutions.

Now, real-time language analysis is one of the most exciting of those types of solutions. It's an area of AI in its infancy but could prove invaluable to call centres. The tech works by "listening" to conversations between an agent and caller. AI then enables the solution to assist the agent. That may be by accessing relevant info. It could even extend to helping the agent recognise when a caller gets frustrated or angry.

Cloud-Based Solutions

Migrating to the cloud is another trend in tech investment in the contact centre niche. A recent [State of Customer Experience study](#) found that 39% of centres are already cloud-based. Meanwhile, 53% of businesses surveyed planned to make a [move to the cloud](#) in the next three years.



Source: [West UC](#)

There are a range of reasons why many centres are switching to cloud-based solutions. Some of the most notable are as follows:

- **Deployment & Flexibility** – It's quicker both to establish and to grow or adapt a cloud-based call centre system. The on-premises alternatives have a lot of physical infrastructure. With a cloud-based solution, centres can scale and change with ease. Cloud-based solutions, too, are vital for allowing home working. That's something we'll look at in more detail later in this series.
- **Reliability** – On-premises systems are less resilient to disasters. If there's a power failure, a centre reliant on such a system will suffer a period of downtime. A system hosted in the cloud can get accessed from anywhere. Agents can log on and work from home or elsewhere, to overcome any issues.
- **Return on Investment (ROI)** – A final reason contact centres invest in cloud-based solutions is because the expense pays off. Ongoing costs for on-premises solutions are often higher than cloud-hosted alternatives. Hardware and infrastructure have to get

replaced and maintained. Scaling or changing physical systems is also trickier and more expensive.

Improved Hardware

With all the talk of AI and other smart software solutions, it's easy to forget good old hardware. Upgrading the equipment that agents use can have a real impact on the efficiency of a contact centre. Many firms in the niche invest a lot in kit like wireless and noise cancelling headsets or superior computers to run the many necessary software solutions.

David Rolf at Cymphony explained to us that noise cancelling headsets were one of the firm's most significant tech investments in 2019. Such headsets shut out the ambient noise of the contact centre and make it easier for agents to concentrate on their callers.

Cutting-edge headsets also boast improved range as well as noise cancelling capabilities. Those features keep agents mobile in the contact centre without compromising call quality. Mobile advisors can find any documentation they may need or get help from colleagues.

Such capabilities may seem of minimal importance. In practice, though, they can raise productivity considerably. Agents handle the more complex enquiries for which automation isn't suitable. Those enquiries often need input from many sources – both informational and human. Hardware that makes it easier to get that input can make a real difference.

Tech & The Contact Centre – Revolution or Evolution?

The contact centre niche and technological advancement are inextricably linked. Centres forever search for new tech to improve both agent and customer experience. Some have wondered if automation and AI may change the face of call centres irreversibly. Others have predicted that the new tech might [replace human agents altogether](#).

Those who work in the industry disagree. The experts we spoke to see modern tech as a way of supporting, not replacing, agents. Nikola Mrksic at Poly AI explained why he believes that's going to remain the case: "In a world where we're more service-oriented, and the products we use are more and more complicated, we need more customer service, not less."

That the focus of contact centres is on offering quality service supports that view of emerging tech. When the primary concern is for customer experience, real human service is irreplaceable. The impact of tech on contact centres, then, is better viewed as evolutionary, not revolutionary.

Chapter 4 | Cloud Contact Centres

The contact centre industry is at the vanguard of [digital transformation](#). Previous chapters looked at the tech trends that are reshaping the sector. One of the trends we mentioned was a move toward cloud-based call centres.

It's an evolution of the industry that looks set to continue as we move deeper into the 2020s. A shift en masse from on-premises infrastructure to cloud-based would be a significant change in the niche. That's why the topic of cloud contact centres and their growth deserves closer examination.

In this chapter, we're going to explain the ins and outs of cloud-based contact centres; as well as their two main alternatives. We'll also explore industry statistics to get an idea of where the niche currently stands. Finally, we'll look closer at the prevailing trend in the industry toward the cloud, and what is driving it.

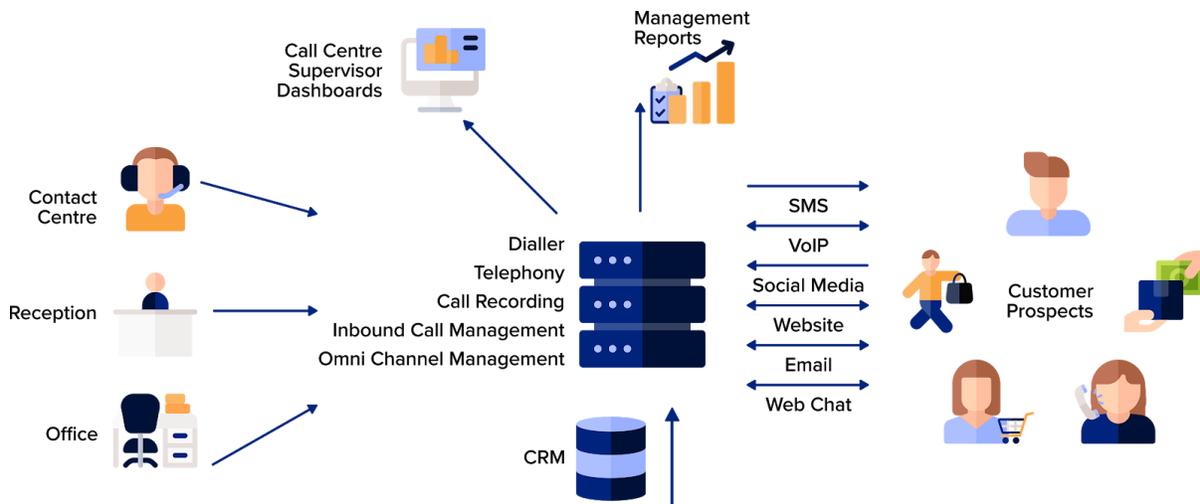
On-Premises, Cloud & Hybrid – What Does it All Mean?

Unless you've been on another planet for the past decade, you've probably heard of [the cloud](#). It's a phrase that's infiltrated most areas of business and day-to-day life. Precisely what "the cloud" or "cloud-based" means depends on the niche or process on which you're focussed.

In the world of contact centres, "cloud-based deployment" is one of three types of systems. The others are the traditional "on-premises" alternative, and a "hybrid" version. Before we get into where most contact centres are aligned, it's vital to know what each one of the three descriptors means:

On-Premises Contact Centres

On-premises deployment of contact centre systems is the most traditional kind. An on-premises centre is one where all hardware and software get installed and run on-site. The equipment needed to operate all features of a system is present at the contact centre itself.



That hardware includes the data centres onto which necessary software gets installed. Typically, the centre operator will buy that software from a third-party vendor. They may, however, develop unique software solutions themselves.

Cloud-Based Contact Centres

When a contact centre is cloud-based, most of the infrastructure gets hosted online. Software, routing, networking architecture, and other critical elements get transferred to the cloud. That dramatically decreases the amount of hardware needed at the contact centre.

A cloud-based call centre doesn't need data centres onto which to install any software. All the software gets accessed from external physical or even virtual servers. That's whether the software is from a third party or is a proprietary solution owned by the centre operator. The centre itself may need little more than computers and headsets or desk phones for its agents.

Hybrid Contact Centres

As you may have guessed from the name, a hybrid centre is one that combines elements of the other two. Such centres blend aspects of cloud-hosting with features of an on-premises solution. For example, a hybrid centre may run cloud-based call reporting or recording functions. The centre's main telephone PBX, though, may remain as an on-premises system.

Hybrid setups often get adopted by contact centres as a stepping-stone. They're a half-way house towards transitioning from on-premise to the cloud.

Bonus Definition – Managed or Hosted Contact Centres

Another well-used term in this area is that of “managed or hosted” contact centres. This phrase often gets mistaken as meaning the same as “cloud-based”. It doesn't. A managed or hosted solution is one provided or [operated by a third party](#).

That third party leases or sells equipment or software to a centre for their operation. A managed contact centre, then, can be either on-premises or cloud-based. In the case of the former, the

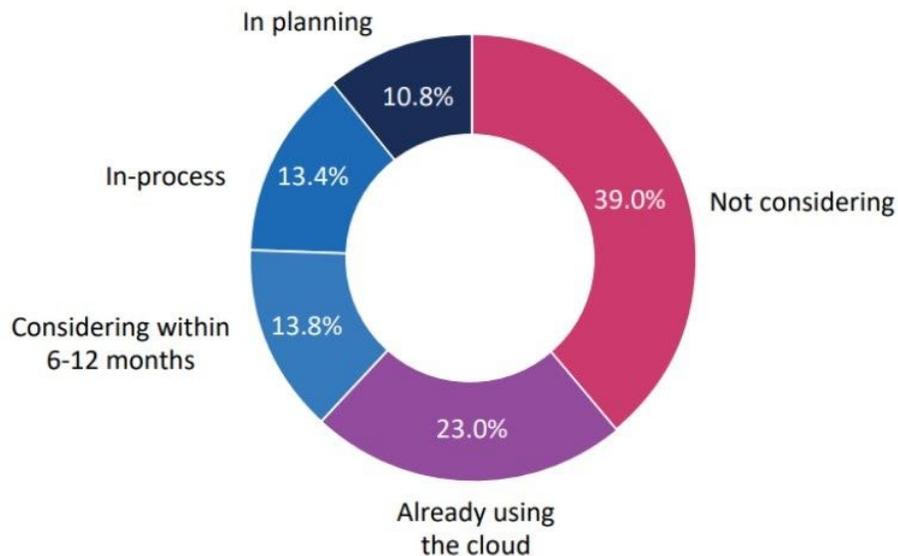
centre would lease all hardware installed at the centre. In the latter situation, all the software and solutions get hosted on the third party's servers.

How Are Most Centres Aligned & Are Things Changing?

Go back ten years or more, and all contact centres would have been the on-premises variety. Today, things are very different. Cloud-based contact centres represent a significant proportion of the industry. They are not, however, in the majority.

In fact, the exact balance of cloud-based, hybrid, and on-premises centres isn't easy to pin down. Different studies and research reveal varying figures. A recent [State of Customer Experience Study](#) found that 39% of centres asked had migrated to the cloud. A separate [industry survey](#) discovered that 23% of centres surveyed were cloud-based.

How Would You Best Describe Your Plans for Moving to a Cloud Contact Centre?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

What both significant pieces of research agreed upon was the direction in which the niche is trending. You see, 53% of respondents to the first survey claimed they planned to move to the cloud in the next three years. Close to half of those in the second study (38% from 77%) who weren't cloud-based, planned to move that way. That meant only 39% of those surveyed had no such plans.

A sensible look at that and other data reveals a significant trend in the contact centre niche. Centres are increasingly turning to cloud-based rather than on-premise solutions. What's more, many operators in the niche see the move as one they need to make sooner rather than later.

A vast majority of respondents to both studies planned to make the move within three years at the latest. What, then, explains this industry-wide migration away from traditional on-premises systems?

Have On-Premises Solutions Had Their Day?

As with most decisions, there are many factors behind the trend for contact centres to move to the cloud. A blend of the following [benefits of cloud-based solutions](#) push firms toward that type of system:

- Speed of implementation & upgrade
- Multiple site deployment
- Cost-efficiency
- Homeworking
- Disaster recovery

You see, cloud-based systems are quicker and more straightforward to implement than on-premise counterparts. A contact centre can install and configure software swiftly to meet their needs or those of a new client. The [State of Customer Experience study](#) we talked about above, showed that 65% of cloud centres see the speed of deployment as the key benefit.

The ease with which centre operators can connect separate sites is also paramount. With a cloud-based solution, info and data are more readily sharable. Operators can manage interconnected centres wherever they are in the world. This cross-site connection was the most significant benefit of cloud centres as reported in [Call Centre Helper's survey](#).

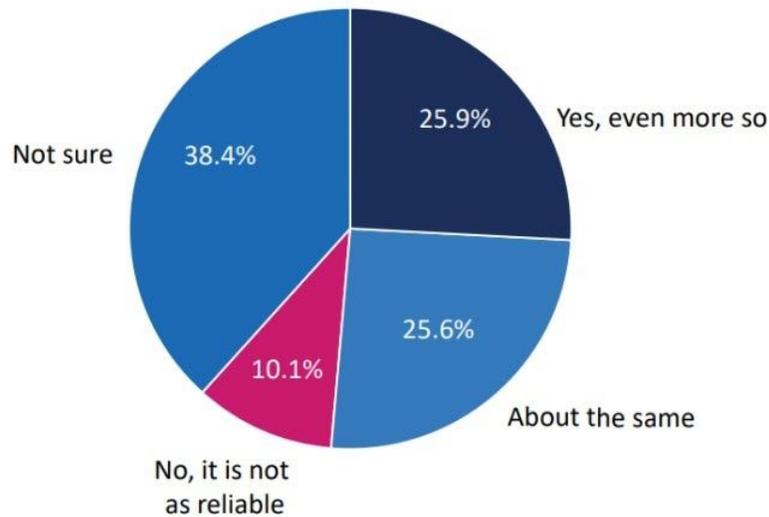
Cheaper Cost and Flexibility

What's more, many centre operators are choosing cloud-based systems to save money. There are often fewer maintenance costs associated with such a setup. Call centres don't have to maintain or repair their own data centres, for example. Flexible licensing models from third-party providers can also drive costs down.

Crucially, it's only with cloud-based solutions, too, that contact centres can offer home working, which is increasingly popular with the modern workforce. It fits better with their ideas of work-life balance. Cymphony and FM Outsource explained to us that home working was a vital part of their operations. We're going to look at that particular trend in a later chapter.

But for now, the final area to consider as regards the call centre industry trend toward the cloud is that of disaster recovery. This is a particularly interesting aspect of the broader picture. In theory, cloud-based solutions significantly outstrip on-premises alternatives in this area.

Is the Cloud as Reliable as Having the Solution on Premise?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

It's far easier to keep a cloud-based centre running in the event of a significant problem. Imagine if an operator's main premises suffers a power failure, for instance. With a cloud-based system, agents can log in from elsewhere and work as usual. This flexibility in the face of disaster was the reason cited by FM Outsource as to why they prefer a cloud-based solution.

Not Everyone Sold on The Cloud – Yet

As shown by the above graphic, [Call Centre Helper's study](#) found that 25.9% of respondents agreed. They stated the belief that cloud-based solutions are even more reliable than on-site alternatives. The same research, though, displayed some fascinating contradictions.

Over 10% of those surveyed thought that cloud-based solutions were less reliable. Around a quarter reported the belief that reliability was about even. By far the most popular response (38.4%) was that respondents weren't sure.

This uncertainty about the reliability of cloud-based systems is intriguing. Concerns over data security and other related worries are what fuel the doubt. That's understandable given the relative novelty of cloud-based systems.

It also helps explain why centres adopt hybrid solutions as a stepping-stone. Implementing such systems helps operators overcome their uncertainties. They can make a small initial step as part of the move toward a fully cloud-hosted setup. That move, though, seems almost inevitable for any centre that wishes to keep up with its rivals.

The Future of Contact Centres – On Cloud Nine?

Modern contact centres are a far cry from those of little more than a decade ago. Advancements in tech are reshaping how centres work and how customers prefer to use them. One of the biggest drivers of change in the niche is the development of cloud-based solutions.

A significant number of modern contact centres are already cloud-based. But it's not yet the majority. The trend in the industry, though, is moving away from traditional on-premises systems. Industry studies show that most centres are planning and preparing to make the leap.

There is a range of factors driving the [trend toward cloud-based systems](#). Centre operators want the flexibility, speed of deployment, and cost-efficiency of the cloud. However, a degree of uncertainty is currently slowing the shift to full cloud-hosted systems. There's little doubt, though, that the future of the contact centre niche is primarily in the cloud.

Chapter 5 | Omnichannel Support

As part of this series dedicated to call centres, we're trying to drill down into the sector trends. We've already taken a look at broad tech developments and the shift to cloud-based contact systems. In this fifth chapter, we're going to focus on the emergence and importance of [omnichannel support](#).

The concept of omnichannel contact centres has become increasingly important in recent years. It's something that businesses are heavily investing in. It's also something that consumers demand.

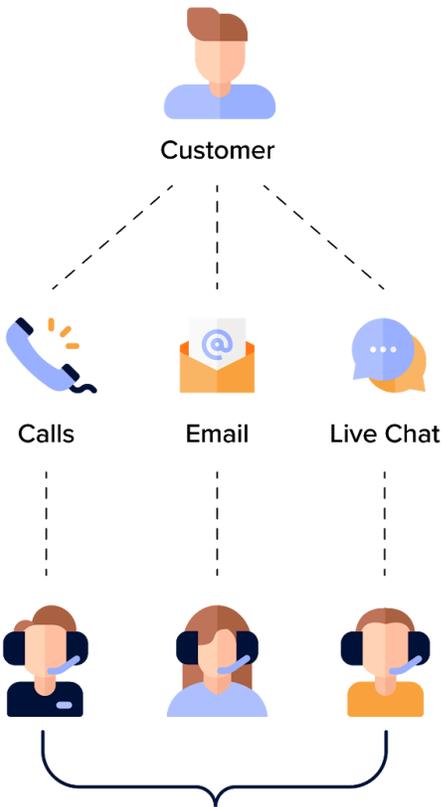
In this chapter, we're going to discuss the trend toward omnichannel. We'll consider the channels that most contact centres now cater to. Finally, we'll discuss why omnichannel centres are still developing, and what more changes may be afoot.

Multichannel Vs. Omnichannel – A Primer

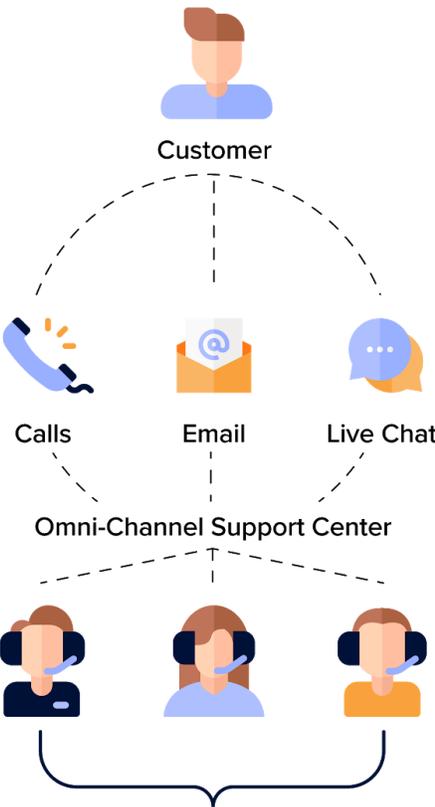
The very first call centres were worthy of that name. They were locations staffed by agents who were there to speak to customers over the phone. Making a phone call was a consumer’s only option when they needed to contact customer service.

As technology developed, things changed. Over the decades, businesses introduced more options for customers to reach out. Email support followed traditional telephony. Those channels were then supplemented by live chat, social media, and more.

A firm that lets people seek help via many channels offers a multichannel solution. By extension, that’s also how to describe a contact centre that facilitates the firm’s customer service. Providing omnichannel support means taking things a step further.



Channels are kept separate. Context and customer history are not shared between reps.



The entire customer service team has access to the same contextual data.

The central premise of omnichannel support is that the customer service someone gets is [seamless](#). It shouldn't matter by which channel they reach out to a firm; support should always be consistent. In theory, all avenues of support get fully and efficiently integrated.

An omnichannel contact centre is one that customers can reach in a variety of ways. More than that, it's one where all channels get incorporated into a unified system. That lets agents jump between channels with ease. They can retrieve historical conversations from any channel as they do so. Customers don't need to restate support requests each time they change channels.

That customers want to use different channels for support is evident. There's also a significant demand for omnichannel support from consumers. [Salesforce research](#) found that 70% of customers see connected processes as vital to winning their custom.

It's for this reason that contact centres are so keen on the idea of broadening the range of channels they use. Only 19% of call centre advisors support a single channel, according to [UKCCF research](#).

Which Channels Comprise Omnichannel Support Systems?

There is a plethora of choice when it comes to the channels that firms and contact centres can offer to consumers. Telephony is still the predominant channel industry-wide. Annual [Call Centre Helper surveys](#) always rate calls as the most popular channel. The experts we spoke to at Cymphony and FM Outsource agreed.

At Cymphony, 92% of revenue gets accounted for by voice calls. The representatives from FM Outsource additionally rated calling as the top channel. That was both in terms of volume and the importance placed upon the channel by the company's clients.

Our industry insiders also agreed on the most valuable channels. They all flagged up the popularity of webchat and social media. For the latter, especially instant and private messaging via social networks. In fact, Jack Barmby, founder of FM Outsource, shared some fascinating insights about messaging channels.

Social Media: The New Player in Town

At FM Outsource, social media – and particularly Facebook Messenger – is on the rise as a support channel. For the fast fashion niche, private messaging via Facebook Messenger is one of the highest volume channels. Such IM features of social networks are also becoming more popular across the board.

Interestingly, neither Cymphony nor FM Outsource mentioned email as a vital channel. Email support is still provided for by many contact centres. A [State of Customer Experience Study](#) found that almost half of centres do cater to the channel.

Call Centre Helper's research, though, does suggest that [live chat channels are taking traffic from email](#). The reason is likely because those channels offer more immediate resolution than email.

It's also more convenient than a phone call. This final point is vital to the millennial generation, especially. That sector of society strongly prefers [online to offline communication](#).

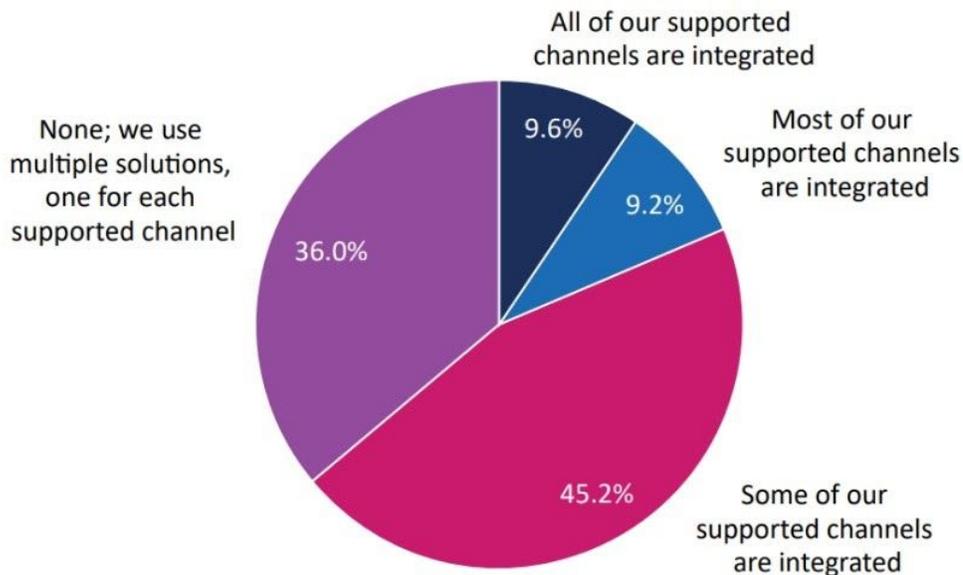
What does all this information reveal? It tells us that contact centres are alive to the demand for multiple support channels. It's also clear that industry pros see web chat or IM channels as the most useful of the newer options around. As we mentioned earlier, though, adding new channels isn't all there is to omnichannel support.

What Are the Principal Hurdles to Omnichannel Support?

A genuine omnichannel contact centre is one that provides seamless support. Customers can reach agents via many different channels. Those channels each offer the same level of service. Beyond that, advisors can also view data from any channel when they converse with a customer.

For seamless [customer experience](#), a contact centre must integrate its channels. All means of communicating with agents need to exist on a unified platform. Surprisingly, that's not the case with the vast majority of contact centres as they're currently constructed.

How Many of Your Contact Centre Channels Are Integrated?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

As the above graphic from [Call Centre Helper](#) shows, very few centres achieve full integration. What's far more common is a muddled situation where some channels are unified, and others aren't. This difficulty in integration is often cited as the principal hurdle to omnichannel.

David Rolfe, at Cymphony, agreed. He revealed that the firm plans to adopt a [unified communications platform](#). And the primary reason is to provide an environment for omnichannel.

He described the current situation as disjointed: “People come in very different channels. At the moment, we’ve got no way of connecting the dots.” A UC platform would give them that means. The very premise of such solutions is to integrate communication channels and accounts in one interface.

At FM Outsource, the situation’s a little different, all their channels are fully integrated. They see the integration of first and third-party systems as the most significant hurdle to omnichannel and believe that it’s challenging to find a “coherent pathway for data” through those systems.

Without such a pathway, utilisation of the data isn’t as efficient as it might be. For instance, a coherent avenue for data can make post-call processing much more straightforward. An agent would be able to update an address or other details in the contact system. The changes would then get automatically replicated elsewhere. That would include CRM, delivery tracking, and other related platforms.

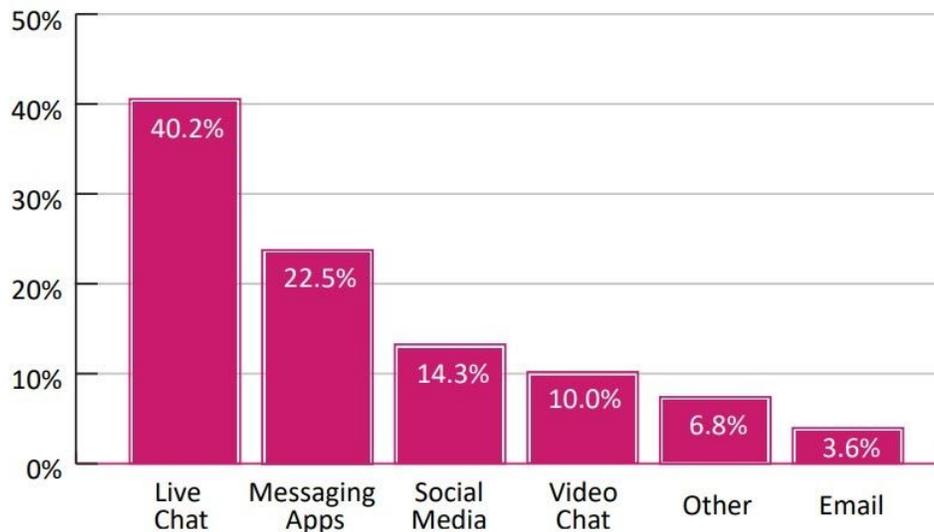
The key to omnichannel support is to have a unified, joined-up system. That means the proper integration of channels and other software, platforms, and solutions. Contact centres are sure to strive towards that kind of unification in the coming years. What other changes and trends, though, might be on the horizon?

Looking Ahead – New Channels & Trends

Contact centres are always adding new channels for customer support. Doing so is necessary to keep up with consumer demands and preferences. We asked both Cymphony and FM Outsource which new channels they were going to introduce next. Once again, our pros agreed.

WhatsApp for Business, [Apple Business Chat](#), and IM channels, in general, are the paths that both firms plan to explore. That chimes with Call Centre Helper’s industry research. Their recent survey showed live chat and messaging apps as the most popular new channels:

What Is the Next Channel That You Will Add to Your Contact Centre?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

Jack from FM Outsource made an important distinction between those two options. They feel that messaging apps and IM channels linked to social networks may be the better option. There were two main reasons they gave as to why those channels may gain more popularity than webchat:

- They're less of a live environment
- They're more familiar as modes of communication

A web chat function offered by a company has a certain immediacy. It's a channel specifically designed for customer support. A consumer who uses it has decided to concentrate on solving whatever problem they have. Messaging apps are a bit different.

Customers tend to treat those apps more like email when it comes to seeking support. They expect brands to respond as swiftly as possible. They aren't, though, keyed into solving their issue straight away. They may read a response or reply to it at a later time or date at their convenience.

Using messaging apps in that way is more in line with how people converse in their day-to-day lives. It's how they use IM to communicate with friends and loved ones. That familiarity is a further reason why IM channels may get more popular as a customer support channel. As is the fact that the apps often offer a smoother experience on mobile than dedicated webchat functions.

Omnichannel has Arrived but it's Still Developing

The days of single-channel contact centres are long gone. Consumers demand to be able to reach out to brands whenever and however suits them best. It's why you'll struggle to find a thriving contact centre that doesn't handle at least a few separate channels. In many cases, though, it is still the case that those channels are separate.

There's consensus across the contact centre niche that omnichannel support is something for which to aim. The benefits of fully unified and integrated systems are too vast to get ignored. A centre that achieves a path for data through all channels and systems is more likely to succeed.

At present, though, the theory of omnichannel support hasn't yet been broadly made reality. Difficulties integrating diverse platforms and encouraging data sharing between them remain. Those hurdles must be overcome for omnichannel to become the norm. With the industry trending toward such systems, though, it may merely be a matter of time.

Chapter 6 | Customer Experience

So far, this eBook dedicated to call centres has maintained a narrow focus. We've examined the contact centre niche and some of the principal trends within it. We've looked at automation, omnichannel support, and cloud-based solutions, amongst others. The contact centre industry, though, isn't an island. It's subject to broader trends in the commercial world.

One such trend is towards [customer experience \(CX\)](#). Across niches and in many areas of business CX has become a hot button issue. Brands – and consumers - are increasingly seeing CX as a vital differentiator. And that broader trend has had a profound impact on the contact centre field.

In this chapter, we're going to look at precisely what CX is and why it matters. We'll also examine how a focus on CX has altered the way contact centres track their performance. Finally, we'll get into what methods and systems modern centres use to monitor quality.

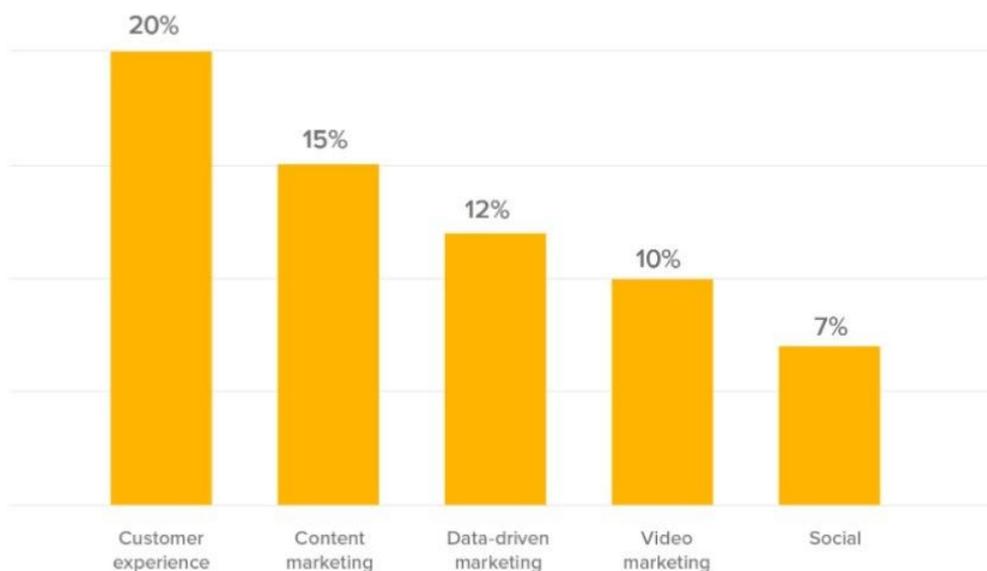
What is Customer Experience & Why Does it Matter to Contact Centres?

Customer experience (CX) is a phrase that's come to define an attitude in the business world. CX describes the view a customer has of a business as a result of their interactions with that firm. So CX is the sum total of all the touchpoints that make up the customer journey.

The best CX results from a collection of positive, satisfying interactions. Poor CX can come from any single interaction proving unsuccessful or frustrating. But let's remember that consumers have been interacting with businesses for as long as businesses have existed. The bare bones of what makes up CX, then, isn't new. What's new is the primacy given to it by both brands and customers.

Modern customers have more purchase options today than ever before. In all industries, there's more choice, and it's easier to switch between brands. Consumers are increasingly viewing the experience given by firms as a vital way to choose between them. For instance, [Salesforce research](#) found that 80% of consumers say CX is as important as products.

Most exciting business opportunity



Source: [Super Office](#)

Today, businesses have latched on to this change in consumer priorities. Across industries, firms now see CX as a way to get a leg up on their rivals. Instead of trying to compete on price or product, brands now battle to provide the best CX. Customer service and support is an essential part of the overall CX any brand offers. That's why CX – and the greater focus upon it – matters hugely to the contact centre niche.

Indeed, [32% of customers would abandon a brand they love](#) after just one bad experience. That means a weak customer interaction has a one in three chance of losing a firm business. And as we know, the contact centre niche comprises nothing but customer interactions. Centres exist to offer channels by which customers can contact companies.

Therefore, contact centres must keep the quality of interactions as high as possible. The broader trend for a greater focus on CX has made this even more evident. Modern call centres are devoted to tracking and [improving the quality and value of the experience](#) they give.

Monitoring Quality to Improve Customer Experience

Of course, call centres have always assessed their agents and the quality of work they do. It's the only way that such organisations can improve processes or identify workers who need more training. However, what centres track, and how they do it, is changing.

Traditional call centres often focussed on efficiency. Yes, when they tracked [agent performance](#), they were most concerned with speed or cost-saving. Metrics such as call time, number of calls per hour, or adherence were the most essential. But the need to improve and maintain CX has changed things.

You see, contact centres are now more interested in quality and value of service. And that fact rang through loud and clear when we spoke with Cymphony and FM Outsource. The people we spoke to at both firms made it clear that the quality of agent interactions was paramount.

What, then, does quality monitoring at a modern contact centre look like? Well, there is a range of methods, systems, and metrics at play. Let's take a look at them and how they combine.

Methods & Systems

Precisely how the quality of CX offered by a centre gets tracked depends on the centre in question. There are a few processes and systems, though, that persist throughout the niche. The following is a brief rundown of some of the most ubiquitous:

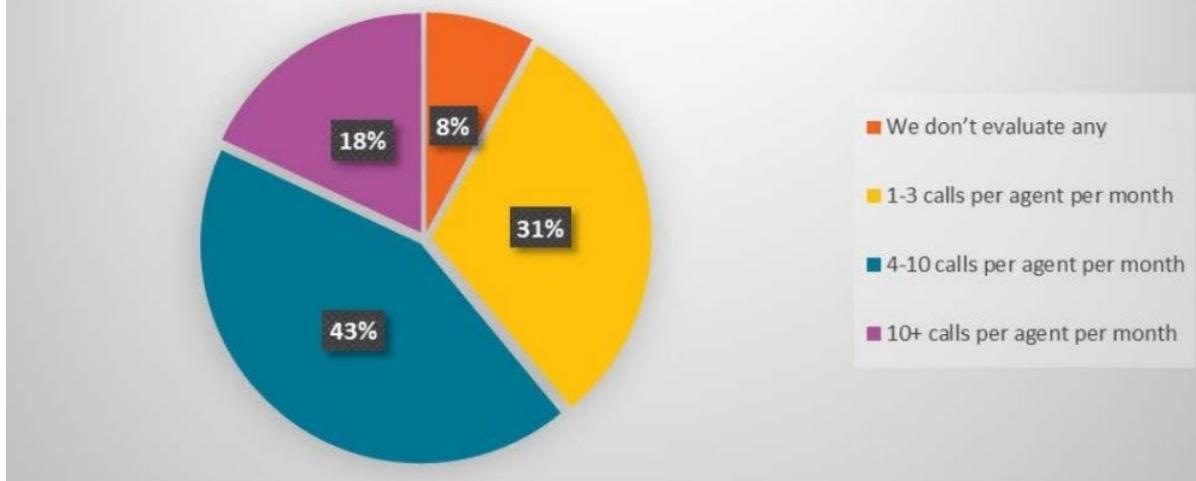
- Post-contact surveys
- Call evaluation
- Tracking third-party reviews
- Quality monitoring scorecards
- Speech, language, or sentiment analytics

As you might expect, no one knows the CX provided by a call centre better than the customers it serves. That's why many centres use post-contact surveys as a central plank of quality monitoring. Both FM Outsource and Cymphony invite contacts to complete post-contact surveys or reviews.

Furthermore, precisely what questions get included in a survey are tailored to each contact centre. The queries provide centres with the data needed for some of the vital CX metrics we'll discuss a little later.

Even though most contact centres now have many channels, voice calls are still vital. While inbound calls remain the most popular channel for most centres. For that reason, call evaluation remains one of the most widely used means of quality monitoring.

How many agent calls do you play back and evaluate per month?



Source: [Business Systems UK](#)

A significant [Business Systems UK study](#) found 92% of centres recorded and evaluated agent calls each month. The majority of those centres (69%) select the evaluated calls at random. Close to three quarters (74%) reported two main reasons for evaluation. They were either “to develop agents” or “to provide a better level of service to customers”. Both justifications reflect the broader drive to boost CX.

In an ever more digital world, new methods for quality monitoring are forever arising. At FM Outsource, one method they use to track CX by examining third-party review channels, such as Trustpilot.

In fact, the people we spoke to revealed that such channels are useful for garnering qualitative feedback. By reading good and poor reviews, they can identify areas of strength or weakness in their service. Agents who get namechecked, meanwhile, can get held accountable. That’s whether they’ve delivered a superior or substandard performance.

Social listening can also deliver similar insights. By tracking brand mentions via social media, a contact centre can also see less official reviews. More customers, after all, may complain or wax lyrical about a customer service experience on a social network than a dedicated review site.

Another way contact centres measure performance and CX is via quality monitoring scorecards. These are checklists or templates that contact centre managers can generate. They can be as simple as an Excel sheet on which to collect vital metrics and data. And they bring together the critical elements of a superior call or interaction.

Contact centres build scorecards around the essential elements of their own operation. They include the metrics and measures that can get used to determine service quality. Once you have a scorecard, you can more easily compare and track changes in service provision.

But some more advanced [analytics](#) are starting to get employed by some contact centres, too. The [research](#) from Business Systems UK found that 6% of centres used speech analytics to support their quality monitoring.

Such analytics examines the language and sentiments present in customer interactions. It can help ID callers' needs and guide agents toward how best to fulfil them. The most advanced of these types of solutions can even deliver insights in real-time. AI-driven software will help agents recognise and fulfill customers' demands while they're on the phone.

Essential Metrics

Whatever processes contact centres use, they need to make sense of the data they gather. Many metrics can help to do precisely that. The following are four of the most essential, used across the niche:

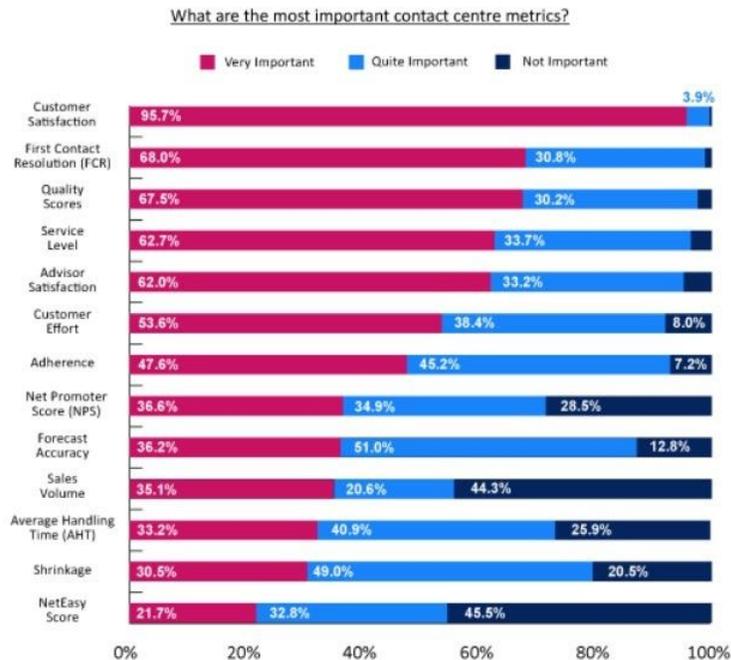
- Net Promoter Score (NPS)
- Customer Satisfaction (CSat)
- First or Best Contact Resolution (FCR/BCR)
- Customer Effort Score (CES)

Now, NPS is a metric to determine how likely people are to recommend something to friends or relatives. In the case of contact centres, the metric can get worked out via post-contact surveys. The survey would have to include a question along the lines of this:

“On a scale of 1-10, based on your recent interaction, how likely would you be to recommend our service to a friend?”

An overall NPS can then get generated by taking an average of responses. Our pros at Cymphony and FM Outsource reported using NPS. That's to track both customer and [employee satisfaction](#).

According to a recent [Call Centre Helper survey](#), contact centre professionals see CSat as a vital metric:



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

CSat is an even more straightforward metric that gets generated via surveys. All you need to ask customers is to rate on a numerical scale how satisfied they were with the service they got. Despite its simplicity, CSat is an ideal metric for judging CX.

However, FCR is a somewhat more complicated metric. The idea behind it is to judge how efficiently agents resolve issues at the first time of trying. FCR gets expressed as a percentage, and you can work it out with this formula:

$$\text{FCR} = (\text{Issues Resolved First Time} / \text{Total Issues}) \times 100$$

Unsurprisingly, it's not always easy to generate accurate FCR figures. One of the easiest ways to use the metric is to ask customers in a survey if their issue got solved at first contact. Another method is to track how many times a customer contacts you in a given period. To get the most accurate FCR, you would need to ask agents to tag each contact according to issue or subject.

A final vital metric in monitoring a contact centre's CX is that of the CES. The CES quantifies the ease – or otherwise – for customers to get the answers or solutions they need. Once again, the only way to gather the data for this metric is via post-contact surveys.

Quality Monitoring Software to Automate Processes

Tracking performance and CX across a contact centre is no simple task. To get a good grip on the quality of the service they provide, centres must handle many metrics. They'll also need to employ a variety of processes and systems for gathering data. That's why an increasing number of centres turn to quality monitoring software.



Source: [Business Systems UK](#)

[Business Systems UK](#) found that 30% of centres used quality monitoring software. Such solutions help automate the processes related to tracking performance and CX. Those processes can include selecting calls to evaluate, gathering data, and calculating metrics.

Why more centres aren't already using these kinds of solutions is likely down to entropy. Centres often stick with the more traditional methods (manual call evaluation) rather than entirely reshaping their processes. As maintaining and boosting CX becomes ever more crucial, though, it's safe to assume that uptake of this software will also rise.

Contact Centres – The Frontline in the Fight for Better Customer Experience

Businesses in all niches are looking to superior CX to help them stand out from the crowd. With more consumer choice than ever, CX is often a [better differentiator than price](#). It's for that reason that brands are trying to improve all interactions with their customers.

Contact centres are interaction hubs. They exist specifically to facilitate conversations between consumers and businesses. The rise in prominence of CX, then, has had a profound impact on the niche. Tracking the quality of service offered is even more crucial to contact centres.

Quality monitoring at contact centres is varied and diverse. Different operators take their own tacks. Some measures and systems, though, remain popular industry wide. They include things like post-contact surveys, call evaluation, and quality monitoring scorecards.

Chapter 7 | Call Centre Trends: Call Scripts

A modern contact centre is a complex place. You see, agents have many different tasks to complete. And the best practices for fulfilling their duties are ever-changing. How to best serve customers then evolves with new consumer demands and new technology.

In this call centre eBook, we looked at some of the changes taking place at modern hubs. Furthermore, we examined the types of calls that centres deal with, and how they're evolving. This chapter concentrates on the telephony element of a contact centre's operation. Specifically, it looks at one aspect of the calls that contact centres make and receive. That aspect is the scripting that may or may not go into those calls.

We're going to explain what call scripting is and why contact centres may use it as a tactic. Then, we'll drill down into how prevalent call scripting is and why. Finally, we're going to examine any changes in call scripting usage. That will help predict how call scripts will be used in the coming years.

What is Call Scripting & What Benefits Does it Offer Contact Centres?

Contact centres deal with a high volume of calls on a daily basis. As well as the quality of service, how quickly calls get resolved is also a consideration. There's often pressure on agents to be as efficient as possible in working through calls. When we spoke to David Rolf at Cymphony, he explained that some agents could take as many as 30 calls per hour.

With call volumes as high as that, contact centres want to maximize efficiency. Call scripting is precisely such a tactic. As the name suggests, call scripting is when [interactions between agents and customers](#) get planned in advance. Questions agents must ask or answers they should give are predetermined.

Now, the degree to which call scripting is possible depends upon the nature of a call. Firstly, scripts are often more relevant to outbound calling. That's because an agent knows the purpose

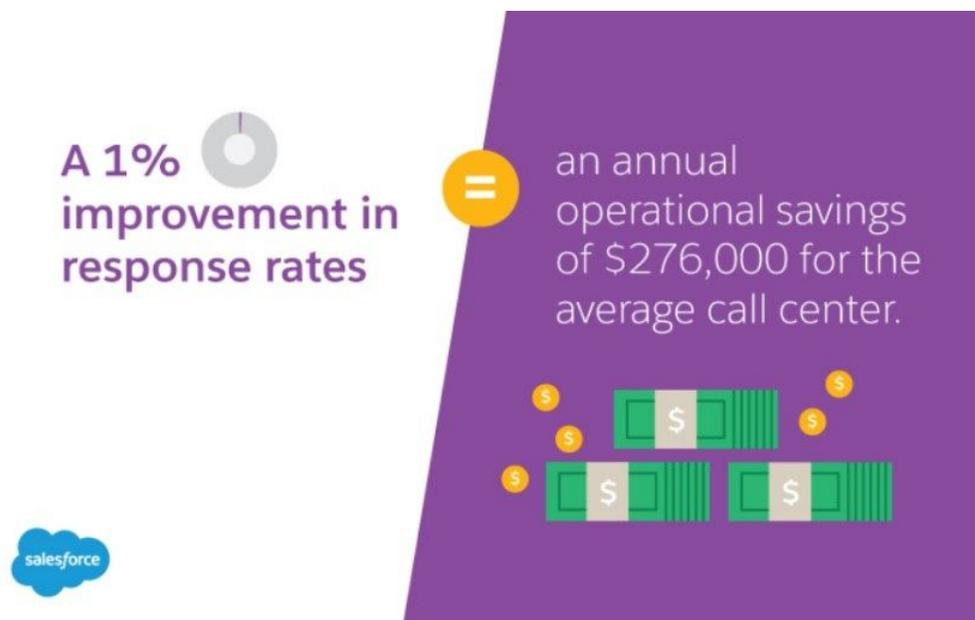
of the contact in advance. With an inbound call, it's usually only the caller who knows the topic. The responses agents should give to different queries, though, can still get scripted.

There are a range of reasons why contact centres do use call scripting:

- To aid consistency
- To boost efficiency and speed of call handling
- To make call evaluation simpler
- To reduce training time and complexity
- For centre-wide compliance

With set scripts in place, a contact centre can be sure that callers are getting a consistent service. By defining the answers agents give, operators know that each caller gets told the same thing. Crucially, customers won't get frustrated at getting conflicting information if they call the centre more than once.

As mentioned above, call scripting can also help speed up call handling. A script, or prompts, are a ready source of information for an agent. With the right information available to them, operators can answer callers' questions faster. Indeed, they won't have to waste time searching for solutions or information to give to each customer.



Source: [Salesforce](#)

If your agents' responses are scripted, analysing and comparing calls is also simpler. Scripts give the conversations carried out by agents more structure. That makes it more straightforward to utilise audio as data and assess processes.

But let's face it, the turnover of staff in contact centres is often high. We'll look into this and how centres try to aid staff retention in a later chapter. However, with high turnover, new [agents have to get hired](#) and onboarded frequently. And call scripting speeds up the training element of

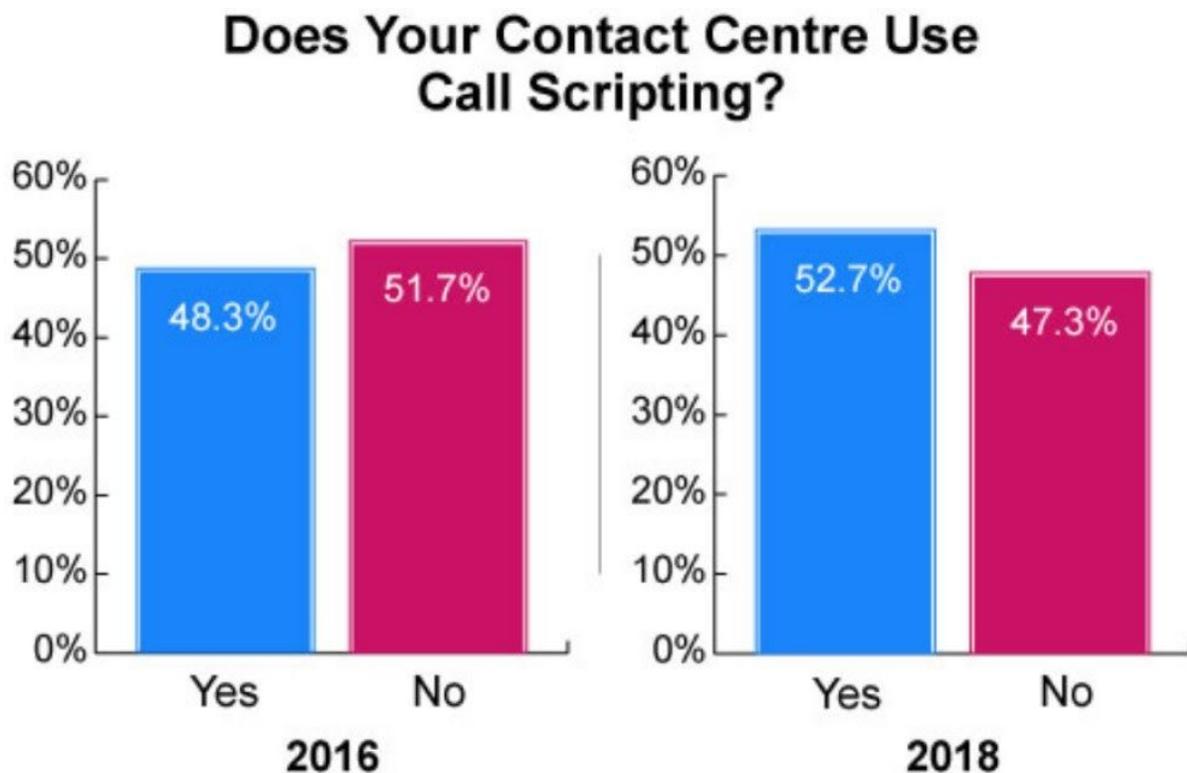
onboarding. An agent who uses scripted responses doesn't need an encyclopedic knowledge of products or processes.

What's more, Many contact centres are subject to legislation and regulation. Depending on the fields or clients they serve, what agents say, and how they say it may get strictly monitored. With a script, operators can be confident that all agents are complying with the relevant rules. They have more control over precisely what their agents are saying.

How Prevalent is Call Scripting in the Modern Contact Centre?

Given the advantages explained above, it's little surprise that call scripting gets employed by many contact centres. An industry survey from 2018 found that [52.7% of centres used call scripting](#) technology. That same study revealed that of the 47.3% of centres that didn't, 11.7% had the tech on their "wish list". While call scripting has been around for a while, then, many centres still see it as a way to improve operations in the future. Exactly the type of scripting those centres are "wishing" for, however, may not be quite as you expect. That's something we'll discuss a little later.

Both Cymphony and FM Outsource reported that they use some form of call scripting. What's even more interesting is that usage of call scripting seems to be on the rise. When you compare the survey mentioned above to one from 2016, there's an over 4% rise in the proportion of centres that script calls:



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

That suggests that the benefits of call scripting still resonate with contact centres. Those benefits are offset, though, by a few notable drawbacks. Most notable amongst the cons of scripting is how the process is seen by consumers.

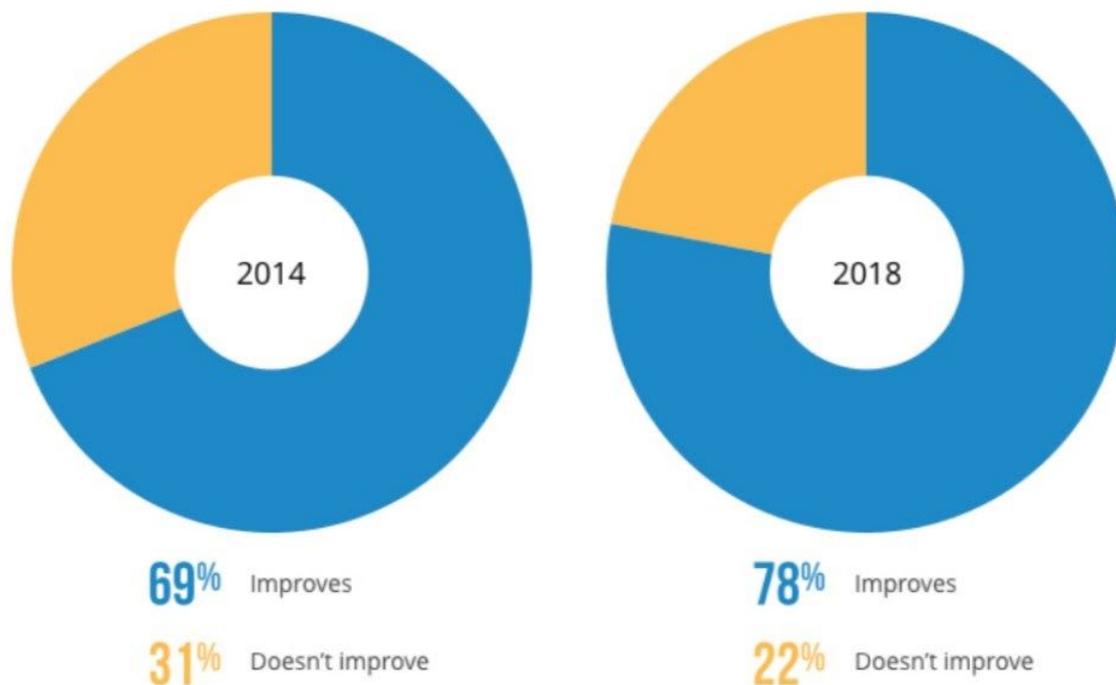
What do Consumers Think About Call Scripting?

As discussed, scripted calls aid productivity and efficiency in a contact centre. But there's an argument that they don't boost quality. From a customer's point of view, scripting can diminish the value provided by a support call, sounding "robotic" or "stiff" in tone. And as you can appreciate, robots, so far anyway, aren't that good at creating rapport.

In this way, customers come to feel that agents only say what they're being told. They don't think that the advisors listen or respond to what they're necessarily saying to them. When customers feel that way, it's easy for them to get frustrated or angry.

In fact, the Software Advice website carried out a couple of [illuminating surveys](#) on the topic. In 2014, they found that 69% of respondents thought unscripted calls improved their experience. In 2018, an updated report showed that 78% of customers had the same opinion.

Changes in customers' perception of the effectiveness of unscripted calls



Source: [Software Advice](#)

The degree to which customers feel unscripted calls improve their experience is also fascinating. In the 2018 report, 34% of those surveyed reported that experience "improves tremendously".

That's as opposed to 15% of people who gave the same response in 2014. So consumers clearly favour a more natural conversation with agents.

How, though, can those insights into consumer preferences align with the increased uptake of call scripting? The answer lies in precisely how modern centres are implementing the process.

How Are Contact Centres Responding?

You see, the phrase "call scripting" is actually a little misleading. It evokes ideas of agents reading word for word from a long, formulaic document. The truth is that no modern call centre would use such an inefficient process. When centres say they script calls, what they mean is that they use a form of scripting to [support agents](#).

Jack Barmby, Founder of FM Outsource, summed things up well. Jack told us he doesn't "particularly like the idea of proscriptive scripts for agents". From Jack's point of view, such scripts get in the way of valuable human connection and contact.

Therefore, the "scripting" FM Outsource use is more about prompts and supportive information. When an agent answers a call, they have a process to follow. There's certain information they must give and questions they should ask. But they get reminded of those by the prompts delivered via the centre's contact system.

Which prompts agents see gets dictated by the line a customer called or the interactive voice response (IVR) options they chose. Put simply, that means which number they pressed or voice command they gave when navigating the centre's call system. Such a solution, therefore, offers all the benefits of scripting. It doesn't, though, turn agents into robots who don't listen to callers.

This version of "guided scripting" is the type of solution getting traction industry-wide. Call Centre Helper's ['What are Contact Centres Doing' survey](#) supports that contention. It discovered that 42.4% of call centres used "guided scripting or visual flows".

Modern call scripting, then, is intelligent and aligns with consumer preferences. It's also a process only likely to improve over time. Yes, because [AI increasingly supports](#) software solutions that deliver guided scripting.

Machine learning and natural language processing are the areas of AI of most benefit. Those processes give software solutions the ability to understand conversations better. As such, prompts and information delivered to agents will get more relevant for each call.

Call Scripting & Contact Centres – An Evolving Relationship

So the relationship between contact centres and call scripting is a nuanced one. Call scripting has a plethora of benefits to centres. Compliance is easier to manage, agents have more support, and training doesn't have to be as extensive.

Such advantages explain why most contact centres do persist in scripting calls. Consumer attitudes to scripting, though, are mixed at best. Many customers feel that ‘robotic’, ‘stiff’ scripted calls negatively impact their service experience.

Modern call centres, as a result, are striking a balance. They must walk a tightrope between efficiency and customer experience. That’s why an increasing number of centres use guided scripting or prompt-based systems. These solutions offer the benefits of call scripting without the principal drawbacks. It’s one more example of tech and consumer demands reshaping the contact centre niche.

Chapter 8 | Forecasting & Workforce Management

A common refrain in this eBook has been that they are “people businesses”. The critical element of any centre’s operations is the interaction between agents and customers. In a very real sense, a centre’s workers are the organisation’s most precious resource.

As with all valuable resources, those workers must be [managed and handled effectively](#). There’s an entire strand of the operations of any call centre devoted to this. Forecasting and workforce management (WFM) are the two principal elements in that area.

This chapter is going to take a closer look at forecasting and WFM in the contact centre niche. Read on, and you’ll learn what forecasting is all about and how it helps centres tailor their workforce. We’ll also go on to discuss some of the most common forecasting techniques. As well as the vital KPIs and metrics associated with them.

What is Forecasting in the Context of Contact Centres?

Hear the word “forecasting”, and your first thought might be for the five minutes at the end of the nightly news. Just as a weather forecast is about making predictions, so too is forecasting in call centres. The only thing that changes is what’s getting predicted.

For contact centres, what managers and agents need to know is the volume of contacts to expect at any given time. To deliver a superior level of [service to customers](#), a contact centre has to plan ahead. Forecasted contact volumes are the building blocks of effective planning.

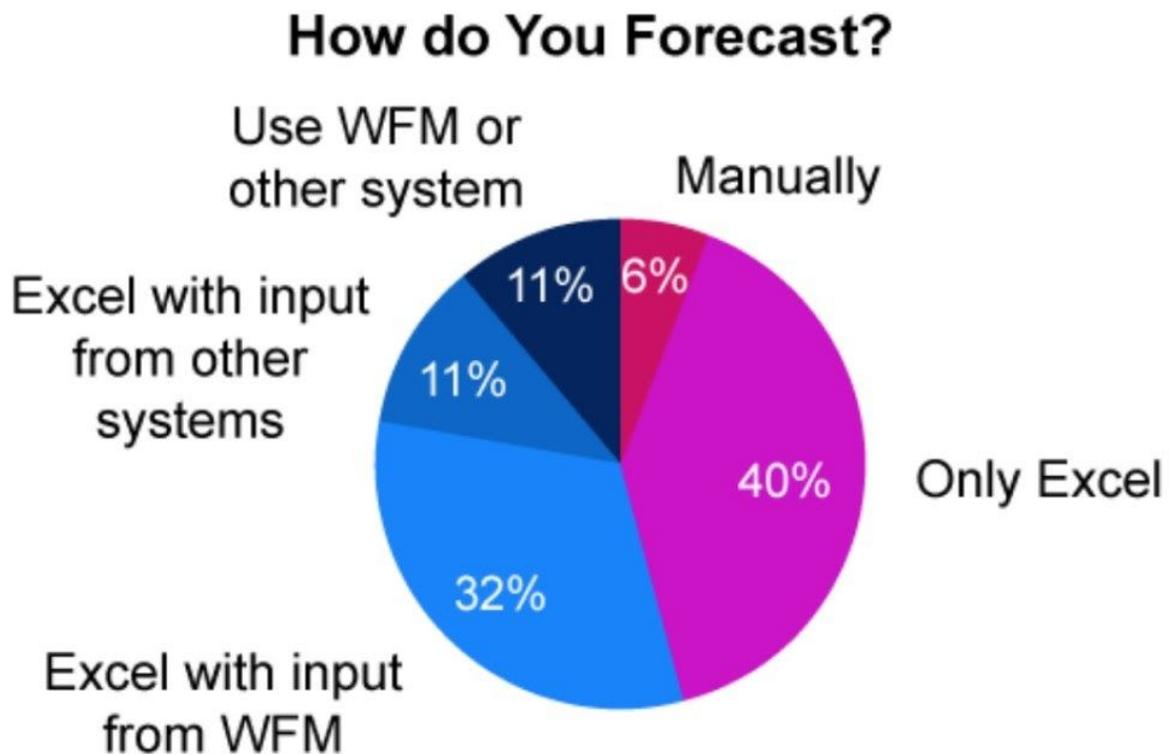
The importance of forecasting stems from how it aids a centre to balance high-quality service and cost-efficiency. How essential forecasting is in that regard is evident once you get to grips with its connection to WFM.

Demand & Supply – The Relationship Between Forecasting & WFM

In many types of business, supply and demand is an essential concept. In retail, companies must have the right amount of stock to meet consumers' needs. They must, though, avoid having too much inventory as that can raise their costs unnecessarily. Things are broadly similar in the call centre industry.

A contact centre supplies advice and solutions in the place of retail goods. They must meet customer demands for that assistance. The higher the demand, the higher the call volume the centre will receive.

Rather than increasing stock levels, a centre meets increased demand by having more working agents. Having too many advisors active, though, damages an organisation's bottom line. No business wants to be paying workers who don't have enough work to keep them busy.



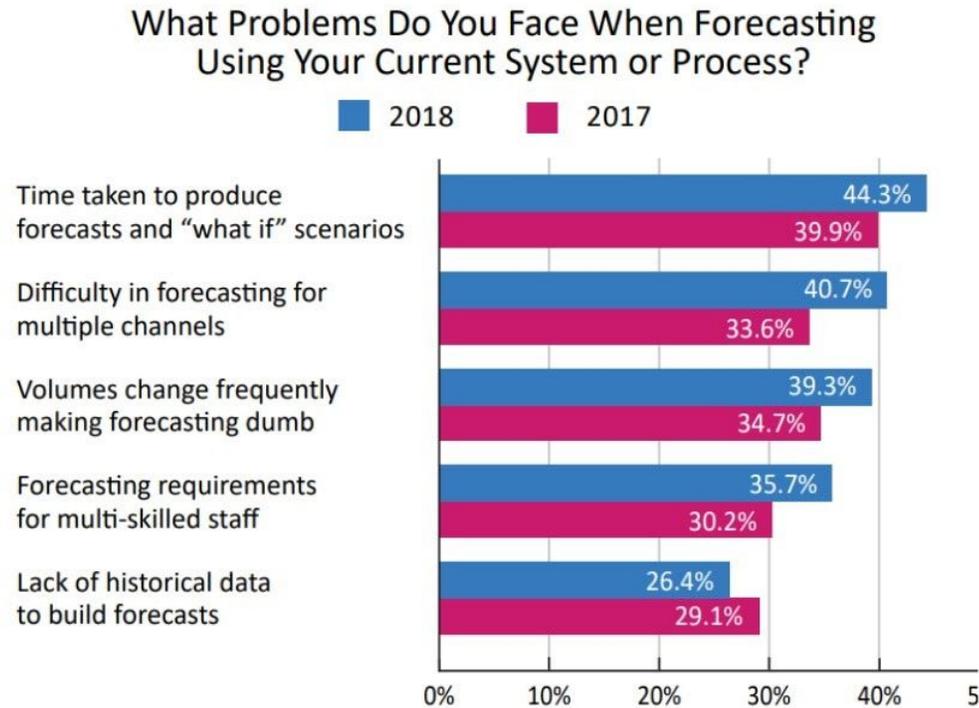
Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

FM Outsource explained how “labour flexibility” was crucial to the firm’s success. The business has both on-premises and home-based agents. They also have advisors who work core hours, but can add working time to those flexibly. Getting their forecasting right is the only way to know how to manage the workforce best.

All centres must get as good an idea as they can of the demand which their supply must satisfy. Factors that have to get considered when forecasting include:

- Historical contact volumes
- Patterns and trends of contacts over time
- Typical seasonal fluctuations
- Holidays, events, and occurrences that can impact contact volumes. These could be specific to a business, a country, or even global.

As you’ll have gathered, building accurate forecasts and robust models takes time. It’s also a process that requires a high volume of reliable data. Contact centre operators have many pulls on their time. They often struggle to give forecasting the attention it deserves. That’s at least according to a recent [Call Centre Helper survey](#):



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

More than 44% of respondents reported the time taken to forecast as a major challenge in the area. Almost as many cited difficulty forecasting for multiple channels as a problem. Those

hurdles - and many others - are why centres need to find smart solutions. It's why they look to different processes and techniques to make forecasting easier.

Techniques Contact Centres Use for Forecasting & WFM

Modern software solutions let contact centres capture a lot of data. That includes details about calls and contacts via other channels. Jack and Charlotte at FM Outsource told us that they use hourly data to forecast demand. They also revealed that their centres get more complex data from their clients every week. That data, though, is no use by itself.

Centres must find the best way to use it for forecasting. There are presently three leading techniques used across the industry:

- Triple exponential smoothing (sometimes called the Holt Winters Technique)
- Auto regressive integrated moving average (ARIMA)
- Neural networks

Triple Exponential Smoothing

Exponential smoothing is a statistical technique to reach more accurate forecasts from data. You take as many data sets from previous periods (weeks, months, years, etc.) as you desire. You then use that data to predict the next period but give greater weight to the most recent data.

Take the example of call volumes. If you have data on calls for the past three weeks, an exponential smoothing formula may look like this:

$$\text{NEXT WEEK'S VOLUME} = \frac{1}{2} \text{ OF LAST WEEK'S VOLUME} + \frac{1}{4} \text{ OF VOLUME FROM 2 WEEKS AGO} + \frac{1}{8} \text{ OF VOLUME FROM 3 WEEKS AGO}$$

That's a simple example, but shows the general idea of exponential smoothing. In contact centre forecasting, it's not only contact volumes that must get accounted for. That's where the "triple" part of triple exponential smoothing comes in.

With triple exponential forecasting, three components of the data get considered:

- Level – the pure volumes of contacts
- Trend – how volumes have increased or decreased from period to period
- Seasonality – Impact which the time of year has on volumes

All three aspects of the available data get smoothed exponentially. That helps centres get the kind of accurate forecasts they need. In general, though, this forecasting technique is better for the longer term. It's not as useful for day-by-day predictions.

ARIMA

ARIMA has gained popularity as a forecasting method in the past decade. That's since the Office for National Statistics (ONS), adopted it as their technique of choice in 2007. ARIMA is more

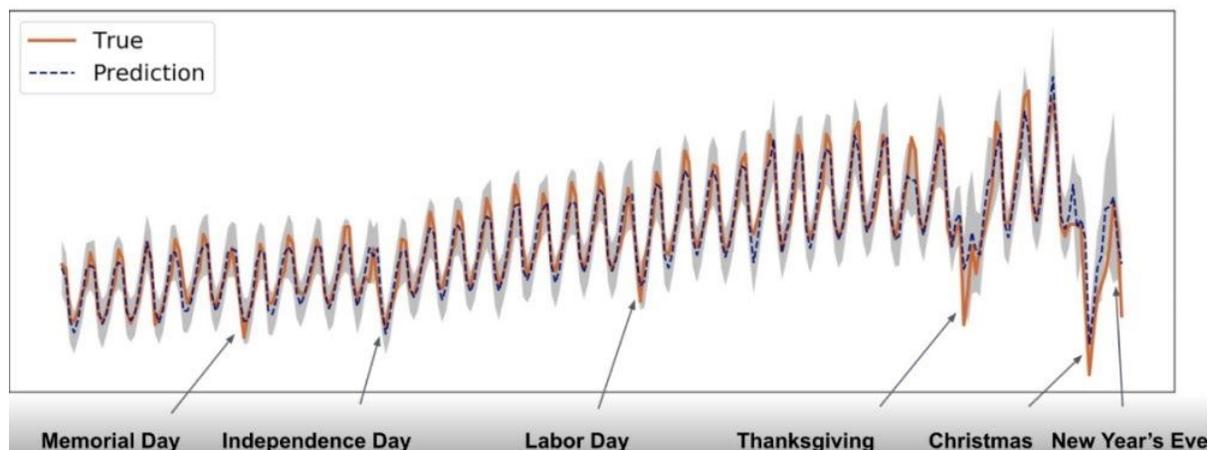
complicated than triple exponential smoothing. It's not worth getting into the nitty-gritty of the statistics here.

What's important to note about ARIMA is how it uses historical data. ARIMA models for forecasting "explain" present data sets based on past values (i.e., from a year or more ago). Comparing data with that from prior periods smooths it out to make forecasts more accurate.

Neural Networks

As you may know, [AI is having a major impact](#) on business practices. Contact centre forecasting is no exception. Neural networks are AI-powered "machines". They mimic the structure of neurons in the human brain. The kind of processing power that lets them wield makes them ideal for forecasting.

A neural network can process vast amounts of data from many inputs. The more data a network receives, the more accurately it can identify patterns and trends in that data. It can then develop accurate forecasts for the future.



Source: [Uber](#)

The intelligence of neural networks helps them to cope with the nuances of centre data. For example, they can recognise and account for the impacts of special days. They can also factor in marketing activity and other external inputs.

Call centre operators aren't statistics professors. They don't knock out some exponential smoothing over their morning coffee. Centres employ equipment to help handle their forecasting. According to a [2018 Call Centre Helper study](#), what they use isn't all that advanced.

A surprising 66.4% of centres used spreadsheets for WFM, while over 10% used a pen and paper. With that lower level of technicality, operators also must consider other factors. They need to understand key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics crucial to forecasting.

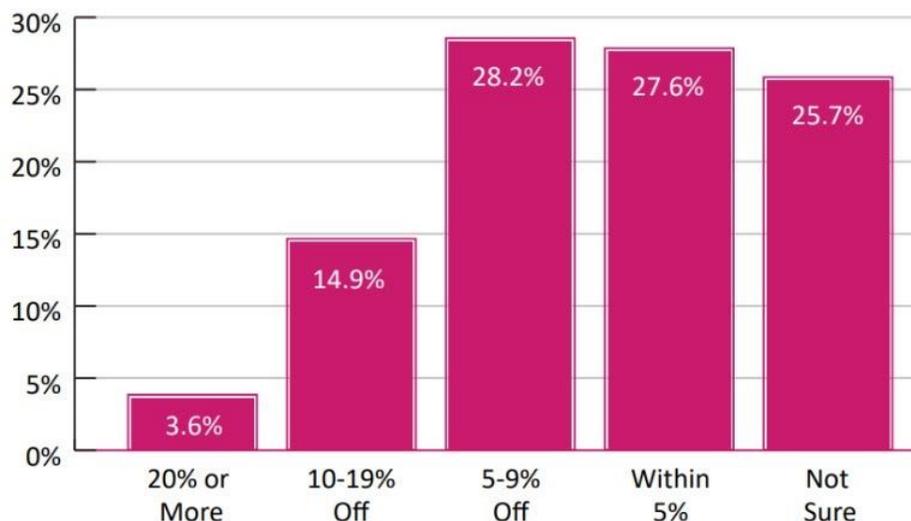
KPIs & Metrics Crucial to Forecasting & WFM

When we spoke to FM Outsource, Jack told us that the firm's forecasting combined two elements. For the best WFM, FM Outsource focuses on "efficiency" and on "quality". That's an attitude typical across the niche.

Contact centres schedule staff to deliver on [customer satisfaction](#) and be as efficient as possible. To that end, there are several critical KPIs and metrics that operators track and focus upon.

- **Service Level** – The targeted level of service any contact centre wishes to deliver. Most often, this gets defined as the number or percentage of contacts resolved with a given time.
- **Average Handling Time (AHT)** – The mean time it takes to resolve the entirety of a customer contact. AHT comprises the time it takes a customer to reach you, how long gets spent solving their problem and any post-contact processing.
- **Schedule Adherence** – The percentage of time an agent spends working out of the total time they're scheduled to do so. Lower adherence means an advisor is not as efficient or productive as they could be.
- **Cost per Contact** – How much a centre spends for each contact with a customer. Wages and operating expenses combine to account for the total cost per contact. Efficient WFM is marked out by a lower cost per contact.
- **Attrition** – The rate at which a centre loses employees. That may be through termination, resignation, or retirement. Attrition is a metric that's vital to any centre's long-term staffing. Staff lost through attrition must get replaced with new on-site or [remote agents](#).
- **Forecast Accuracy** – How close a centre's predictions of contact volumes are to reality. Forecast accuracy is crucial to monitoring and improving forecasting models. Not all centres can achieve optimal levels of forecast accuracy:

How Far Off Were Your Contact Centre Forecasts in the Past Month?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

Unforeseeable Circumstances – Coronavirus & Forecasting

So far, we've discussed forecasting in "normal" circumstances. WFM in contact centres is about making sense of data and trends within it, to predict demand. That way, operators can be as sure as possible that they can deliver the level of service they want. There are some unforeseeable circumstances, though, that blow all forecasting out of the water.

In 2020, the world is grappling with a Coronavirus crisis. The implications of the outbreak are incredibly far-reaching. Aside from the human cost and suffering, the illness will also have profound cultural and [commercial impacts](#). Many companies will close, and consumer interaction with all brands is sure to change. Precisely how it will evolve, though, is impossible to predict. When present circumstances are unprecedented, accurate forecasting is simply impossible.

Forecasting With Accuracy – A Key Challenge for Contact Centres

Contact centres are "people businesses". The core of centre operations comprises the interactions between customers and agents. The demand of customers for the support a centre provides can fluctuate. Operators must ensure their "supply" of advisors is flexible to account for fluctuations.

Scheduling and hiring agents to meet demand is called workforce management (WFM). The only way to achieve effective WFM is with accurate forecasting of contact volume. That's why such forecasting is so crucial.

Call centres use a variety of techniques for forecasting. Those techniques use varied data to make complex predictions. Contact centres focus on efficiency, quality, and other KPIs. That's how they track and manage their forecasting.

Chapter 9 | Sales & Marketing

Most of the ground we've covered so far in this eBook applies to all centres. That's both those run by single brands and outsourced contact centres that serve many firms. In this chapter, we're going to focus almost exclusively on the latter.

In the same way as any other business, contact centres [want to grow](#). That makes sales and marketing a critical element of their operations. How likely, then, is sustainable growth for contact centres in the coming years? What's more, what do centres do to attract new clients and business? They're the questions you'll find the answers to if you read on.

The Contact Centre Market

The contact centre market is one that has experienced consistent growth. Since the first call centres began in the 1950s, the sector has been a reliably successful one. Even after the recent global financial crisis, growth in the area sustained when many fields struggled. That trend was true of the worldwide market and of that in the UK.

Looking at the UK, a [significant industry report](#) in 2014 shared some fascinating insights. At that time, the sector in this country was worth £2.2 billion in revenue. That followed a five-year period in which average market growth stood at 2.5%. That's the half-decade immediately after the economic struggles that began in 2008. Such growth, then, suggests a resilient and robust sector.

That report also showed that in 2014 80% of contact centres were in-house operations. That meant that centres were often run by brands for the direct benefit of their customers. In the five years since, outsourced contact centres have gained a much higher market share. That's a trend shown by the global market statistics.



Source: [Everest Group](#)

[Research by the Everest Group](#) in 2017, placed a value of \$81-83 billion on the contact centre outsourcing (CCO) market. It also predicted growth of around 4.5% over the following two years. Further stats [from Adroit Market Research in 2018](#) suggest that those predictions were on the conservative side. Their report found the market to have already reached a revenue value of \$88.62 billion.

It's not merely the CCO market that's showing sustained growth, either. In recent years, sectors supplying the tech to contact centres have also been expanding. The conversational AI market, for instance, generated \$3.2 billion in 2018. That sector's predicted to grow at an astonishing rate to [reach a value of \\$15 billion](#) by 2024.

Such impressive statistics suggest that the contact centre niche is in rude health. To find out whether that's reflected at the coalface, we asked some industry experts. Cymphony, FM Outsource, and Poly AI are all in or around the contact centre niche. We asked representatives of the firms if they expected to grow this year. We also enquired about what sales and marketing plans they had. Their answers provide some illuminating indicators of the sector as a whole.

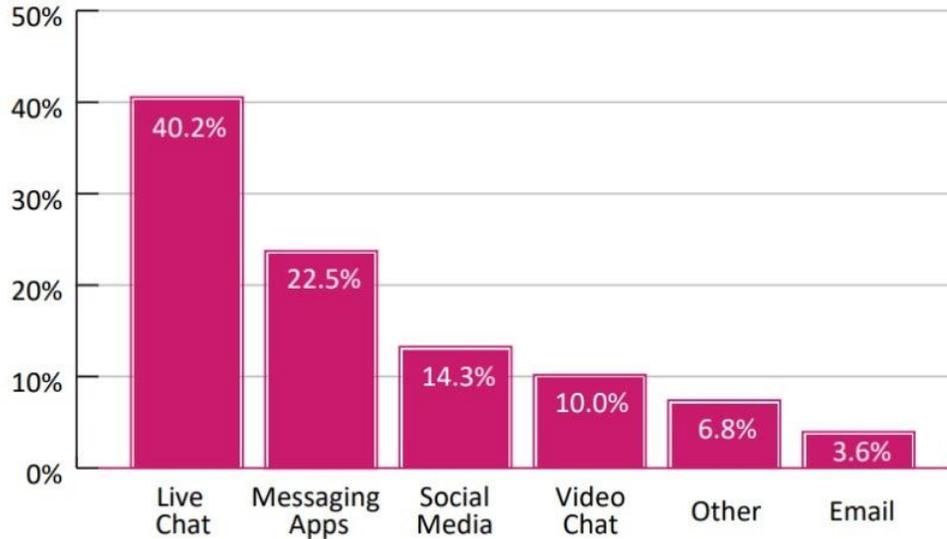
How Are Companies in the Niche Seeking to Grow?

Cymphony provides a telephone answering service for small businesses. 92% of the firm's revenue comes from voice calls, but it also uses messaging and live chat channels. The company was established in the year 2000. It's the second largest in its space, in terms of revenue and workforce. That's as per the marketing manager, David Rolfe, who was kind enough to speak to us.

When we asked David about Cymphony's plans, he was bullish. He told us that the business has "aggressive growth targets". Those targets focus on developing the firm's [presence in channels](#)

[other than voice](#). David explained that the company had ‘put quite a lot of investment in to try and achieve growth’ in those areas. The biggest concern is to develop live chat and messaging apps further. That lines up precisely with prevailing industry-wide trends:

What Is the Next Channel That You Will Add to Your Contact Centre?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

Cymphony’s primary marketing channel to increase industry presence is online search. David revealed that the firm uses Google and Bing ads, as well as SEO for organic traffic. The company also gets good results from direct mail marketing. That suggests that traditional marketing methods still have their place. That’s even in an increasingly tech-focussed niche.

FM Outsource, agreed with the importance of digital marketing. Their representative, Jack, told us that content marketing and paid digital channels were both vital to the firm’s plans for growth. They also made a point of highlighting organic search via SEO as the most crucial avenue.



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As well as those efforts, Jack Barmby – and marketing assistant Charlotte Flanagan – also flagged up the importance of inbound. They explained that FM Outsource gains significant new business from referrals. All marketing exploits at the firm are part – in common with Cymphony – of a robust plan for growth.

Jack stated that he ‘100% expects’ the business to grow, having ‘consolidated’ for the past two years. To support their marketing efforts, FM Outsource also plans to seek external funding. That will be the first time that the firm has looked to further finance beyond its initial seed funding. That’s to support a plan with expansion overseas – particularly into the USA – at its heart.

Poly AI is a company comprised primarily of technologists. That’s how founder, Nikola Mrksic, described his business. When we spoke to him of the future and his firm’s plans for growth, he was upbeat and confident:

‘There’s never been more appetite for automated customer service than there is today.’

To satisfy that appetite, Poly AI always builds ‘more complex and nuanced algorithms’. In the next few years, Nikola is managing two new enterprise-scale deployments of his business’s tech. He hopes that by 2025, the firm will serve 10-20 enterprises with its solutions.

Our case studies support the broader picture of the contact centre niche. It’s by no means an industry under threat from technology. Instead, it’s a sector enjoying consistent and continual growth. There are significant opportunities for contact centres and the firms that serve them. Those companies are exploring many avenues for growth. By doing so, they’re helping to propel the market to even greater success.

Sales & Marketing in a Service-Focussed Field

The contact centre niche is predominantly associated with [customer service](#). Centres exist to serve customers. Either those of their own parent company or of the clients with whom they work. Businesses that operate contact centres want to grow and develop like any other. That makes sales and marketing essential aspects of their day-to-day activities.

Through talking to pros in the contact centre field, we learnt a lot about growing firms in the niche. Existing in a robust and expanding market, businesses have lots of opportunities to develop. The trio of companies we spoke to intend to grasp those opportunities fully.

All our industry insiders shared exciting plans for growth in the coming years. Cymphony and FM Outsource are two out-and-out contact centre operators. They agreed that digital marketing was essential to enhancing company presence. They also shared several other channels that have helped them gain more business.

Poly AI is one of the firms responsible for the tech explosion in the contact centre field. The cutting-edge solutions the company develops are precisely what contact centres are looking for. By feeding industry demand for more sophisticated automation and AI, Poly AI also plans to expand.

Chapter 10 | Staff Retention

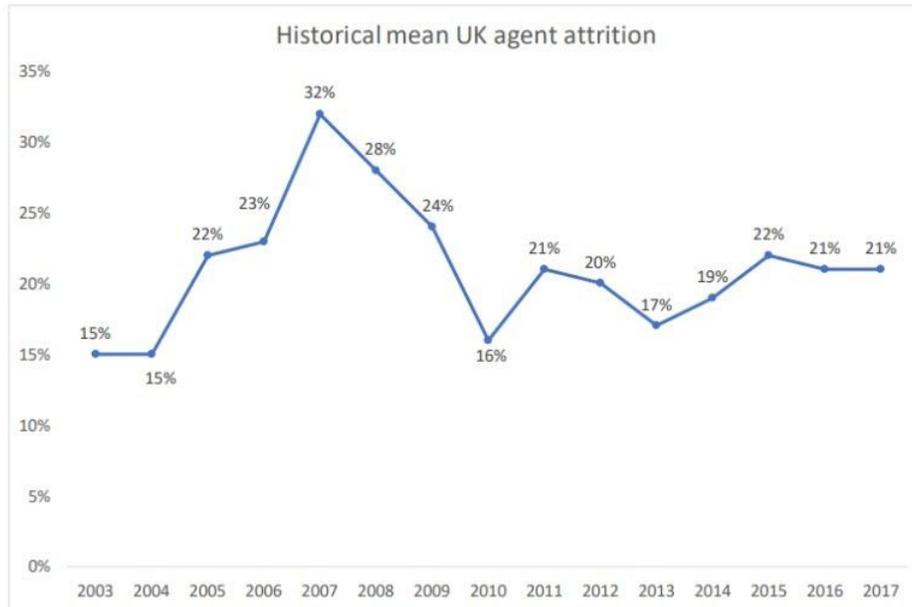
Staffing is an area in which many of contact centres' biggest hurdles emerge. Earlier in our series, we discussed the nuanced challenge of workforce management (WFM). One of the many aspects of WFM is tracking and responding to staff attrition. Attrition or turnover is the rate at which employees leave a business. That may be by quitting, getting fired, retiring, or other related processes.

Staff turnover at contact centres is often high. That makes it an issue that operators must understand and tackle to be successful. In this chapter, we're going to examine precisely how they do so. First, we'll cover how bad staff turnover is at contact centres, and why. Then, we're going to look at the latest industry thinking on staff retention. Particularly, we'll focus on how centres try to keep their best workers.

How Bad is Staff Turnover at Contact Centres & Why?

No workforce is entirely static. Whatever the industry or business, workers come and go as their circumstances change or careers develop. It's necessary, too, for every company – at least on occasion – to let staff go. In the contact centre niche, though, staff turnover is exceptionally high. It's a well-known and broadly lamented aspect of the industry.

Many people who get jobs in contact centres see them precisely that way. They view them as jobs rather than careers. Workers often pass through and don't stick around. [Research carried out by Contact Babel](#) shows how perennial the issue is in the industry. Mean agent attrition rates in the UK have remained stubbornly above 20% each year since 2005:



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

Further [research from the Global Call Centre Research Network](#) is even more illuminating. It shows that high attrition is a global trait of the contact centre field. Their study suggests that on the other side of the Atlantic, turnover is even higher. In outsourced contact centres it stands at an extraordinary 36%. Let's put that into some context. It means that on average, around one in three centre workers will leave in the course of a year.

That's not the end of the story, either. Attrition rates are even higher in certain types of contact centre. A US-based study suggests that in the largest centres, the rate can stand at [as much as 44%](#). Workforces in the call centre industry, therefore, are far more transitory than most.

All that evidence of high attrition in the niche begs a specific question. That is the question of why workers leave their positions so often. There's no one definitive answer. Instead, there are a range of factors. They all contribute to the feeling from workers that contact centre work is a stopgap:

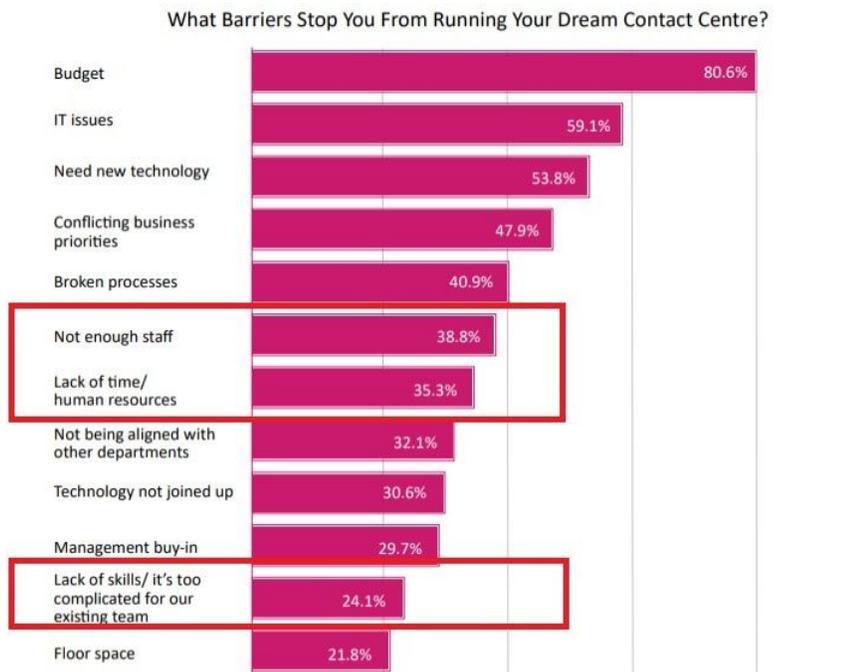
- The [job of an agent](#) is demanding and isn't a good fit for everybody
- Paths for promotion and career development can be limited
- Work is often repetitive
- Pay at the entry-level is comparatively low
- Seasonality of demand necessitates a large amount of temporary staff
- There's lots of competition in the industry, and opportunity for workers to move to other centres

- Abusive or unpleasant customer interactions drive some agents out of the industry

In the face of those challenges, it's essential for operators to focus on staff retention. If a contact centre is to survive, it must keep hold of as many talented workers as possible. What, then, do these businesses do to tackle high attrition rates?

What are Contact Centres Doing to Boost Staff Retention?

As we've learnt, high attrition rates are a hallmark of the contact centre niche. That doesn't mean that operators can ignore them. Having too few staff or losing talented agents is a significant issue. It stops centres from providing the level of [customer experience](#) they desire. A recent industry report listed the barriers operators feel stop them from running their "dream centre":



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

As the graphic shows, three of the most cited barriers relate to human resources. 38.8% of contact centres stated outright that they didn't have enough staff. Almost as many reported a lack of time or human resources, which equates to much the same issue. Close to a quarter (24.1%) complained that their staff lacked the skills to achieve their aims.

The breadth and impact of the problem of high attrition are significant. As such, staff retention is an essential concern for contact centres. There are several ways that forward-thinking organisations are looking to boost retention:

- Introducing and expanding homeworking
- Improving company culture and employee engagement
- Enhancing worker recognition and paths for advancement

- Linking retention to hiring processes

Homeworking

As mentioned above, the job of a call centre agent can be a demanding one. There are often high expectations placed upon advisors. When we spoke to David Rolfe at Cymphony, he told us that some agents could field 30 calls per hour. One way that centres seek to boost retention, as a result, is by making roles more attractive to modern workers.

Increasingly, the modern workforce is concerned with [work-life balance](#). People want a job that fits better with their personal life. The contentment that can offer gets prized as highly as greater monetary reward. Contact centres can meet that desire for flexibility by introducing homeworking.

Across the niche, centres are allowing more and more agents to work remotely. A [UK Contact Centre Forum survey from 2016](#) found that 58% of centres employed homeworkers. 69% of those firms reported that doing so created happier and more productive workers.

[Contact Babel's comprehensive whitepaper](#) also displayed the industry trend toward homeworking. Excepting a blip in 2016, their stats show a growing proportion of home-based agents each year:

Year	% respondents using homeworkers	Mean % of agents that are homeworkers industry-wide
2008	12%	n/a
2009	13%	n/a
2010	15%	1.9%
2011	18%	2.5%
2012	23%	3.6%
2013	22%	4.1%
2014	21%	4.6%
2015	23%	5.1%
2016	17%	2.4%
2017	23%	3.4%

Source: [Contact Babel](#)

The pros we spoke to at Cymphony and FM Outsource gave us more useful insight. They further supported the idea of a significant trend toward homeworking. At Cymphony, around 20% of agents are now based entirely at home. The company began by offering remote working to the staff at centres they took over and then closed. Today, Cymphony actively hires home-based staff.

At FM Outsource, the move toward remote working is even more marked. Marketing assistant, Charlotte Flanagan, detailed the situation at the firm. She revealed that for some of the operator's

clients, as many as 70% of agents work from home. Company-wide, she estimated that the agent split was approximately 60/40. That's in favour of remote workers.

The move toward higher volumes of home-based agents is only going to accelerate. As well as aiding retention, homeworking also benefits contact centres in other ways. It gives them the kind of labour flexibility that's essential to day-by-day WFM. What's more, the industry shift toward cloud-based solutions also makes homeworking easier to put in place.

Culture & Engagement

Another weapon in a contact centre's staff retention arsenal is a robust company culture. Having a culture that chimes with the principles of workers helps keep them engaged. Employees who are engaged and care about the business they work for are less likely to leave.

The power of a healthy company culture was something else on which our industry pros agreed. David Rolfe from Cymphony told us that the firm had undertaken a recent culture overhaul. They've looked at the business as a whole, with a focus on enhancing [employee engagement](#).

Jack and Charlotte from FM Outsource laid out how a family-oriented culture has always been central to their business. When the company got founded in 2012, it only had five employees. Even through eight years of growth, the firm has sought to maintain a similar close-knit ethos. To support this kind of culture, FM Outsource set out serving agent happiness as a core value.

Recognition & Advancement

When any worker feels unappreciated, they're more likely to look for a new position. This is an issue that's felt even more strongly in the contact centre niche. Contact centres are often large organisations. Agents can feel like an insignificant cog in a vast machine. They may feel that nobody would care – or even notice – if they left.

Why do professionals leave their jobs?



Source: LinkedIn survey, Why & How People Change Jobs, (Mar 2015). Showing global average.
"Which of the following contributed to your decision to leave your previous employer?"

Source: [LinkedIn](#)

That's why [recognising agent achievement](#) is another element vital to staff retention. There are many straightforward ways that contact centres can do so. They include introducing rewards for outstanding performance. It can also mean highlighting superior work in front of the whole team. Offering paths for advancement is a more significant aspect of employee recognition.

When we spoke to Jack and Charlotte at FM Outsource, they raised this very point. They explained that offering new positions and greater responsibility was a way that the firm rewards the best employees. Our experts also flagged up the importance of the career history of the company's leadership team. Most people in senior positions have worked previously on the contact centre "frontline". That simple fact shows agents that advancement is possible.

Linking Hiring to Retention

So far, we've looked at three of the most prevalent tactics call centres use for staff retention. This final point is a little different. Rather than a tactic, per se, the idea of linking hiring to retention is more of a change of attitude. It's a way that contact centres look to mitigate the impact of natural staff turnover.

As we've learnt, labour flexibility is essential to contact centres. Via forecasting and WFM, centres continually reshape their workforce. That can be on a daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonal basis. That means changeable demand will necessitate some staff turnover. One way that FM Outsource accounts for that is by tailoring its hiring accordingly.

The FM Outsource representatives explained how the company needs most staff between October and January. That means they must hire some staff on a temporary basis. For that reason, the firm focuses on taking on university students.

Those students are looking for short-term work during term-time holidays. As such, the temporary nature of hiring is mutually beneficial. A core of permanent staff that the business needs to keep, then, won't be subject to that seasonality of demand.

Protecting a Contact Centre's Most Precious Resource

For any contact centre operator, their workforce is their most precious resource. Without agents, customer calls aren't answered, and [other communication channels](#) lay dormant. Unfortunately, it has long been a challenge for centres to retain their vital staff. Turnover and attrition in the niche are typically extremely high.

To meet the challenge of high staff turnover, contact centres adopt a range of tactics. Culture and employee engagement are becoming ever more critical to operators. By thinking about the ethos and philosophy of your company, you can make it a more pleasant place to work. Recognising agent achievement and allowing paths for advancement are also vital.

A route many contact centres are exploring is that of homeworking. New cloud-based solutions make it easier for agents to log on and work from anywhere. That gives them the flexibility and work-life balance that they crave. It also helps centres develop camaraderie and a sense of team, which aids staff retention. We're going to take a closer look at team building in contact centres in the next chapter.

Chapter 11 | Team Building & Employee Satisfaction

In the previous chapter, we tackled the issue of staff retention. Staff turnover is often high in contact centres. We looked at some of the tactics operators use to combat that.

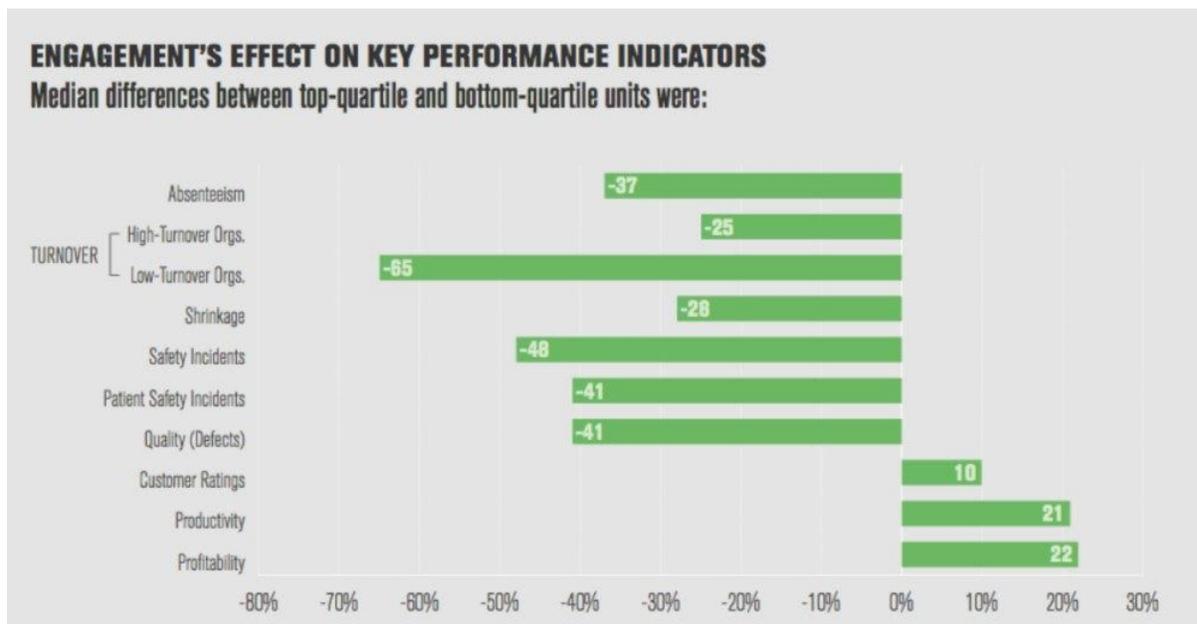
One of the vital aspects of staff retention is the idea of promoting company culture. The benefit of that as a tactic is that it helps better engage agents and employees in the contact centre. That leads us nicely onto the topics of employee satisfaction and team building.

Contact centre managers must get the most out of their staff. Providing the right equipment and training are aspects of that process. Tracking and improving employee satisfaction are other vital elements. We're going to look at why assessing agent satisfaction is so crucial. We'll also examine how contact centres do it. Finally, we'll discuss what those centres do to boost satisfaction if they find it to be lacking.

Importance of Tracking Employee Satisfaction

Having content and [engaged employees](#) with superior morale isn't a luxury for firms. Studies have repeatedly shown that engaged employees are more productive than their disengaged counterparts. According to Gallup, the uptick in productivity can be [as much as 17%](#).

The difference between a happy and an unsatisfied contact centre agent can be even more marked. Their working environment is often stressful and demanding. The best agents are those who can cope, and go the extra mile for customers, even under that pressure. Unengaged advisors with low morale won't deliver in that way.



Source: [Get Lighthouse](#)

Maintaining employee satisfaction goes hand in hand with boosting staff retention. Employees who are happy are less likely to change jobs. That's especially important for the contact centre niche. As an industry, it suffers from high staff turnover. Workers often see contact centre jobs as a stopgap while they find something else.

The benefit of tracking agent satisfaction for a contact centre, then, is twofold. It will help them retain the staff they need to serve customers. Beyond that, it will also ensure they get a better standard of work from those employees. It's no surprise that contact centres take employee satisfaction seriously. Let's take a look at some of the ways businesses in the niche assess agent satisfaction.

How do Contact Centres Assess Employee Satisfaction?

Contact centre operators have plenty to keep track of. A large part of their operation involves [collecting and analysing data](#). Such analytics drives workforce management (WFM). It's also

central to other vital aspects of a centre's day-to-day tasks. Furthermore, it can play a part in tracking agent satisfaction.

Many centres use a blend of data analytics and qualitative assessment of satisfaction. These are three of the most common methods for tracking happiness and engagement:

- Issuing & analysing employee surveys
- Developing net promoter scores (NPS)
- Making engagement a dedicated business function

Periodic Surveys

Surveying employees is the most common method of tracking agent satisfaction. Many contact centres give regular surveys to staff to complete and return anonymously. It depends on the business as to how often the questionnaires get circulated. They may go out every month, quarter, or year.

The idea of the surveys isn't for individual agents to report dissatisfaction. That wouldn't work, given that the reviews are anonymous. Instead, what they do is give an overall impression of morale and engagement. The surveys show operators where the average level of satisfaction is amongst workers.

Surveys, too, help highlight the issues or problems shared by many employees. That points managers to the steps they can take to boost satisfaction across the board. Repeated surveying at regular intervals also helps to identify patterns and trends. Thus, you can track the success of measures you introduce to [help with morale](#) and engagement.

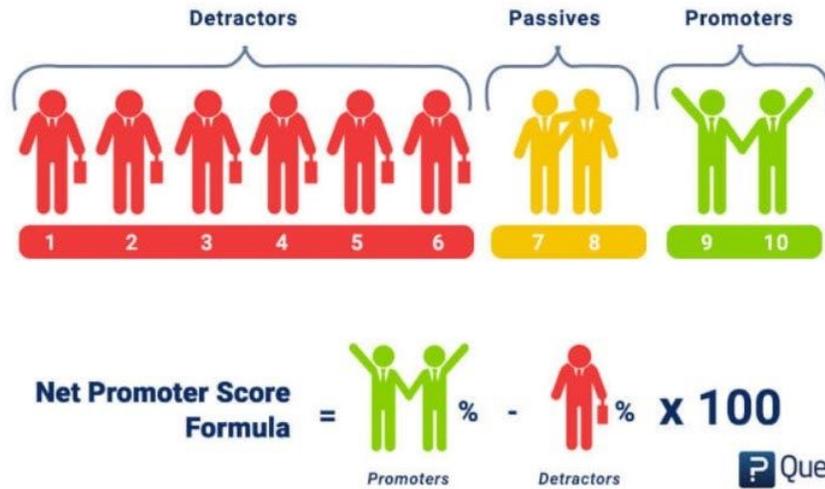
Both Cymphony and FM Outsource's teams use surveys to track agent satisfaction. David Rolfe at Cymphony told us that the company was rolling out satisfaction surveys to all staff. FM Outsource also highlighted how the business surveys its workforce. They explained that the principal focus of the surveys were to ensure agents were happy and felt valued.

Net Promoter Scores (NPS)

We've covered NPS before. It's a metric that contact centres use to measure and improve customer experience. Many, too, use the same tactic for tracking employee satisfaction.

To recap, an NPS is a measure of how likely someone is to recommend a brand or business. What does that mean in the case of employee satisfaction? It reveals whether an agent would encourage a friend to work at their centre.

EMPLOYEE NPS



Once again, NPS are best collected anonymously. You ask agents to rate, on a scale of 1-10, how likely they would be to recommend the company to a friend. Collated scores then give a sense of morale and contentment at the contact centre.

Employee Engagement as a Business Function

Not all measures of satisfaction or engagement are quantitative. It's also vital for managers to allow agents to feedback on their happiness individually. At many contact centres, such feedback is sought by supervisors or line managers. That can, though, cause some agents to be cautious about how they report their feelings.

Some contact centres go one step further. They make employee engagement and satisfaction a separate business function. FM Outsource, for instance, has recently introduced an Engagement Officer. That's an executive position within the firm, dedicated to agent wellbeing. The officer runs 'drop-in days'. These are days when agents can report issues or talk about their overall satisfaction.

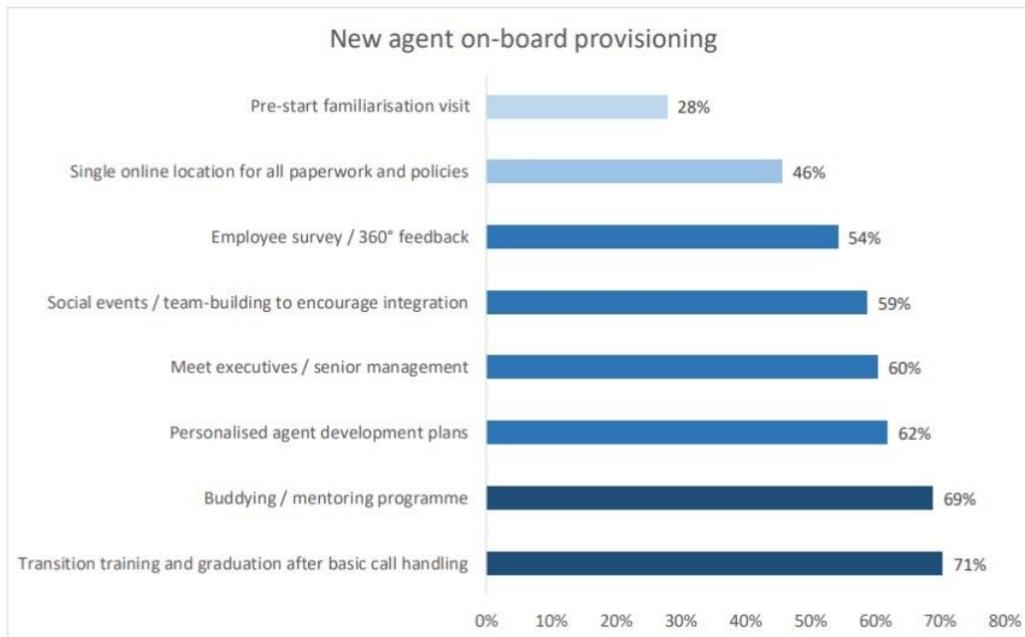
Employee Satisfaction & Team Building

You've now got a fair idea of the most common ways of tracking employee satisfaction in contact centres. Having got the measure of morale and engagement, though, where do centres go next? They look to methods by which they can sustain or boost satisfaction in the organisation.

Camaraderie and a sense of 'team' is a hallmark of firms with high employee satisfaction. Workers who feel connected to both a business and its other employees are often happier. In the contact centre niche, there are lots of aspects to teambuilding.

Onboarding

Team building is a process best started early. It's essential for contact centres to get new staff feeling like a valued worker as quickly as possible. One way that many operators try to make new agents feel comfortable is via robust onboarding.



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

A lot of training goes into a superior onboarding experience. Contact centres must educate agents on their role and help them to perform at the level required. Beyond that, there are also other things centres can do to aid team building. As the above graphic shows, many managers employ diverse methods. They include things like mentoring or social events for new and existing staff.

Making Agents Feel Valued

Not all methods of boosting employee satisfaction are practical processes. Some regard how management views and treats employees. As well as how that gets conveyed to those workers. It can make a significant difference to agent morale if they believe they're valued. Feeling as if performance gets recognised and effort doesn't go unnoticed plays a vital role.

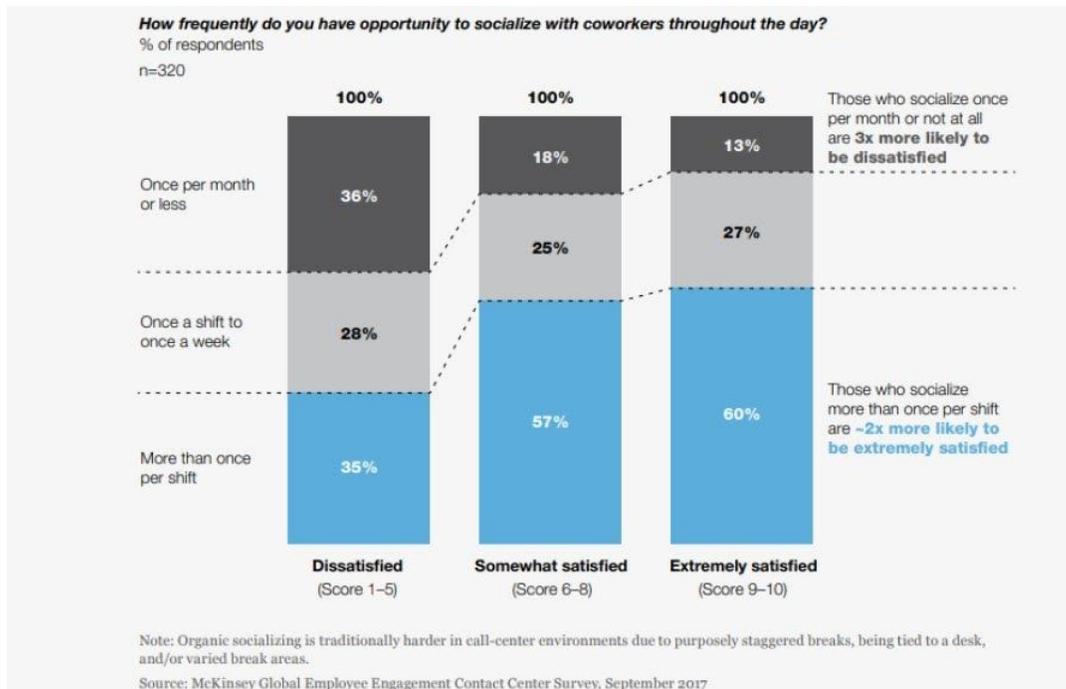
A [report from LinkedIn](#) revealed some fascinating insights into a sense of belonging at work. The study found 59% of staff feel they belong if their accomplishments get recognized. 46% of respondents reported a greater sense of belonging if they feel their company cares about them as a person.

The importance of making agents feel valued isn't lost at FM Outsource. The people we spoke to told us that 'do you feel valued' was a key element of their employee surveys. To get the best

sense of that from their workers, the firm asks many questions. They include queries about agent's roles, progress in the company, and recognition from managers.

Socialisation at Work

The work of agents is often demanding. That's why contact centres bring a social element to workspaces. Many organisations have well-appointed break rooms. They also encourage games or events for their employees at work. Providing opportunities for socialisation at work makes a profound difference to employee satisfaction.



Source: [McKinsey](#)

[Research from McKinsey](#) shows a clear link between socialisation at work and satisfaction. Their study had 320 respondents. Those who socialise more than once per shift were shown to be twice as likely to be extremely satisfied. Those who socialise one per month or not at all, meanwhile, were three times more likely to be dissatisfied.

Such opportunities for socialisation are trickier to provide to remote workers. That's a challenge for contact centres where home working is becoming more prevalent. Such businesses will need to look for other ways to [support remote agents](#) and build a sense of team.

Happy & Engaged Agents are the Key to Superior Customer Experience

Employee satisfaction is vital to businesses of all shapes and sizes. Workers with high morale, who are engaged with the firm they work for are more productivity. They're also less likely to take their invaluable skills elsewhere.

Tracking and maintaining satisfaction is even more crucial in the contact centre niche. Within the industry, staff turnover is high, as are the demands placed on agents. Centres often seek to differentiate themselves by offering superior customer experience. That kind of experience can only get delivered by skilled and dedicated employees.

It's for that reason that contact centres use many methods to track satisfaction. Surveys, NPS, and one-on-one interviews all give managers critical insights. Onboarding, recognition, and socialisation can then all offer a next step. They're useful ways to raise satisfaction across the board.

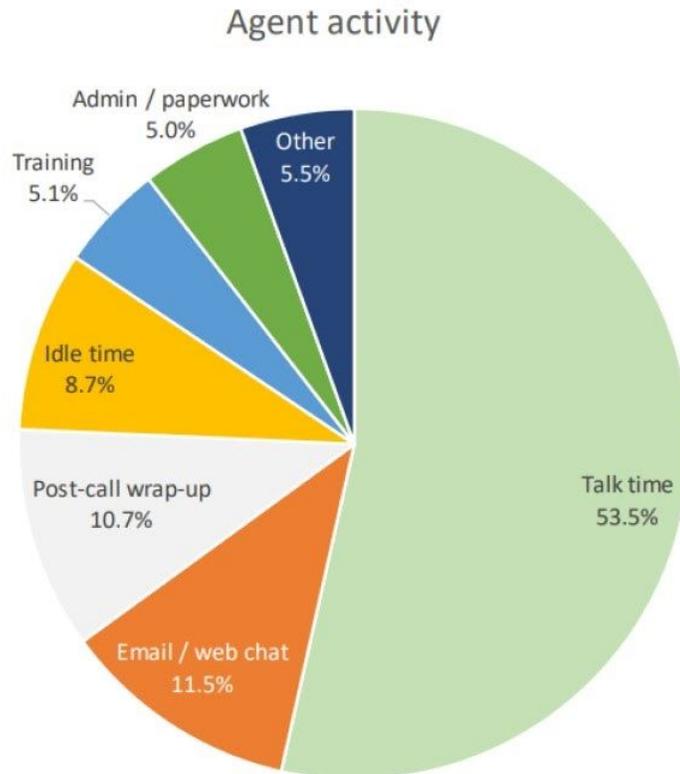
Chapter 12 | Staff Training for Omnichannel Support

In this chapter, you'll get an insight into staff training and how firms get agents ready to deliver superior customer experience. We'll look at the different aspects of agent training and how businesses in the niche approach it.

Contact centres are rapidly evolving entities. Changing customer demands and new tech are continually impacting agents' roles. We're also going to dig into that topic. Mainly, we'll focus on the unique challenges it creates as regards staff training. So, let's get started.

Training Contact Centre Teams

A modern contact centre agent is likely to respond to queries via a multitude of channels. The sheer variety of questions they could get asked is almost endless. Training helps agents prepare how to manage the different channels and handle questions. It is vital to the smooth operation of a contact centre.



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

Contact Babel recently carried out an exhaustive [industry study](#). They found that around 5% of an agent's time, on average, is spent training. That's regardless of how experienced they are or how long they've been on the job. What, then, makes extensive and ongoing training so necessary in the niche? There are three principal factors:

- Knowledge-based training
- Soft skills (communication, empathy, etc.)
- Culture & systems specific to a contact centre

Knowledge & Expertise

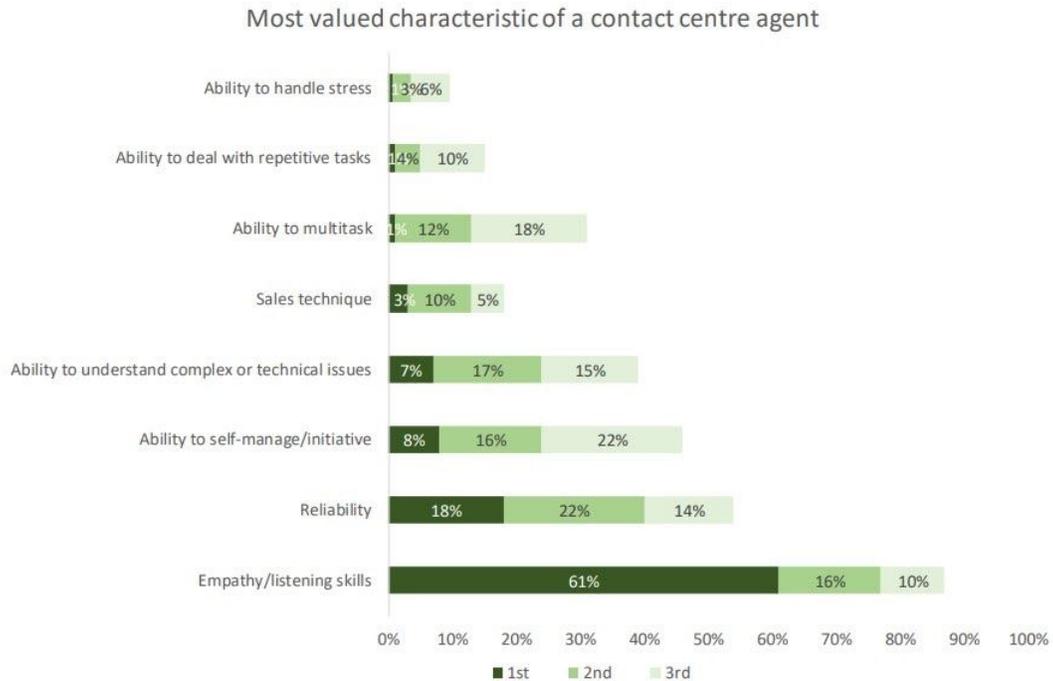
As we covered in an earlier chapter, much of an agent's role consists of answering inbound queries. Such communications from customers fall into a few general categories. They may be complaints, questions about products, or queries about a firm or brand.

So that an agent can answer any such enquiry, they need a vast pool of knowledge. Systems and software solutions can help deliver some information. Customers, though, expect agents to understand what they're asked and know how to address an issue.

Training agents to this level of expertise is not an easy task. That's especially true in outsourced contact centres. In those organisations, agents may offer customer support for different brands each day. They need knowledge of all those brands and their products.

Human & Communication Skills

In-depth product and systemic knowledge are far from all you need to be a skilled contact centre agent. There is also a range of so-called soft skills that are invaluable. These are the general [human skills](#) that enable advisors to offer a superior level of service. Two such necessary skills for agents are the ability to listen and empathise.



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

Most centre operators see empathy and listening skills as an agent’s most valued characteristics. Customers who reach out to a centre are often frustrated or have suffered a problem. Someone at the other end of the phone or another channel who listens and understands is critical. Teaching and developing soft skills is another essential element of contact centre training.

Company Culture & Specific Systems

When we talked about team building in contact centres we touched on onboarding. That’s the process of bringing new staff into a new firm and assimilating them successfully. There’s clearly a lot of training involved in onboarding. A significant part of that is teaching new agents company systems and culture.

Every agent must understand the software and platforms used in the contact centre. They also must learn and buy into the company culture if they’re going to be engaged, productive workers. This element of staff training isn’t only for new workers, though. Any changes to systems necessitate further training for existing workers. It can also be useful for all staff to get occasional refreshers on company culture and principles.

FM Outsource – A Case Study

We’ve been lucky enough to speak to a range of industry pros when creating this series. When we chatted with FM Outsource, they shared an in-depth picture of staff training at the business.

Learning and development for agents at FM Outsource gets split into two categories. Those are ‘advisor training’ and ‘campaign training’. Advisor training is the part of the process that applies

most to new employees. It's where FM Outsource teaches workers the company culture and the central skills needed to be an agent.

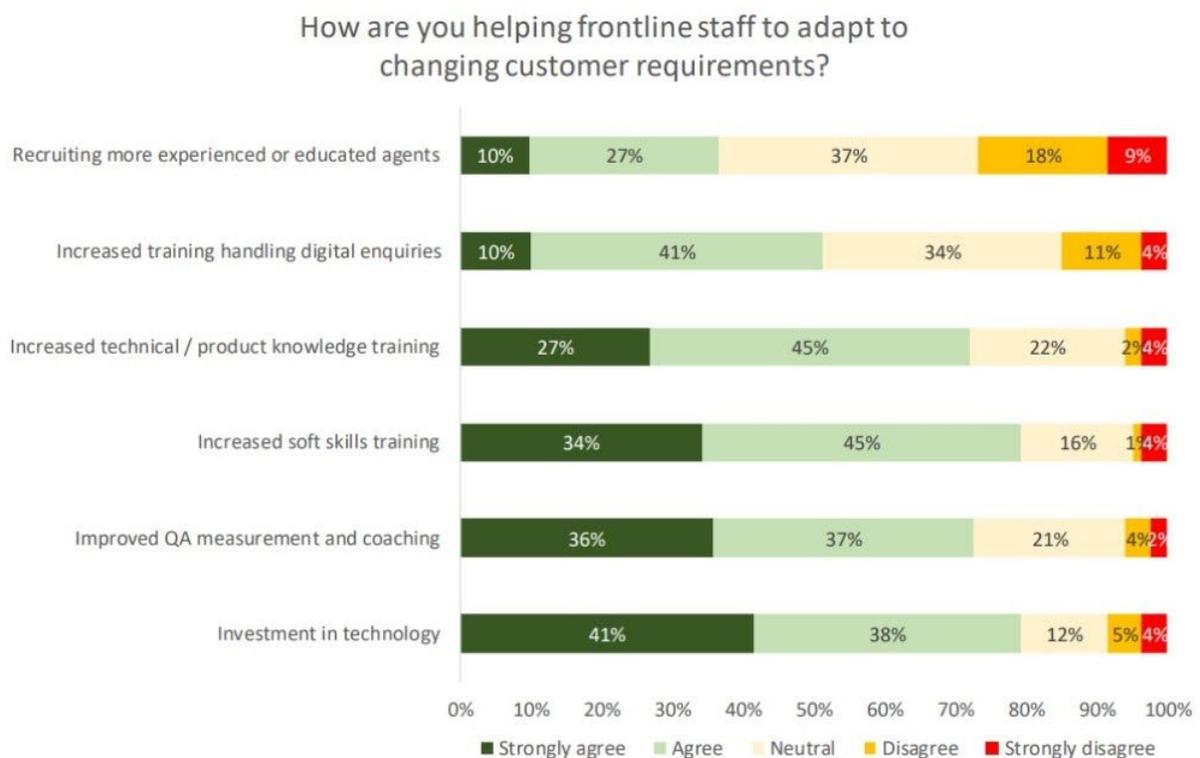
New agents at the firm start out in the classroom. They then move on to a more comprehensive stage of learning and development. Progress through these stages gets tracked on new advisor scorecards.

When they're ready, new advisors then graduate to the company's live system, albeit on a limited basis. They handle a smaller number of contacts in a dedicated area of the contact centre. A trainer is always close at hand and gives the new agents the confidence that they have support if needed.

Campaign training is the ongoing instruction that all FM Outsource agents receive. It's the process by which they get taught the product and brand-specific details for each of the firm's clients. Depending on the client, this can be via handbooks or a dedicated on-site course. Campaign training is how FM Outsource staff get the expertise needed to do their jobs.

New Training Challenges in an Evolving Niche

What customers require of contact centres is changing. New consumer demands increasingly drive the service such organisations provide. Firms are adapting to deliver the customer experience that's now expected. The need for such adaptation means many centres are choosing to offer a more considerable amount of higher quality training.



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

There are three main ways in which trends within the contact centre niche are impacting training:

- Helping agents deal with [omnichannel](#)
- Need for improved technical expertise
- The relationship between technology and training

Handling More Channels

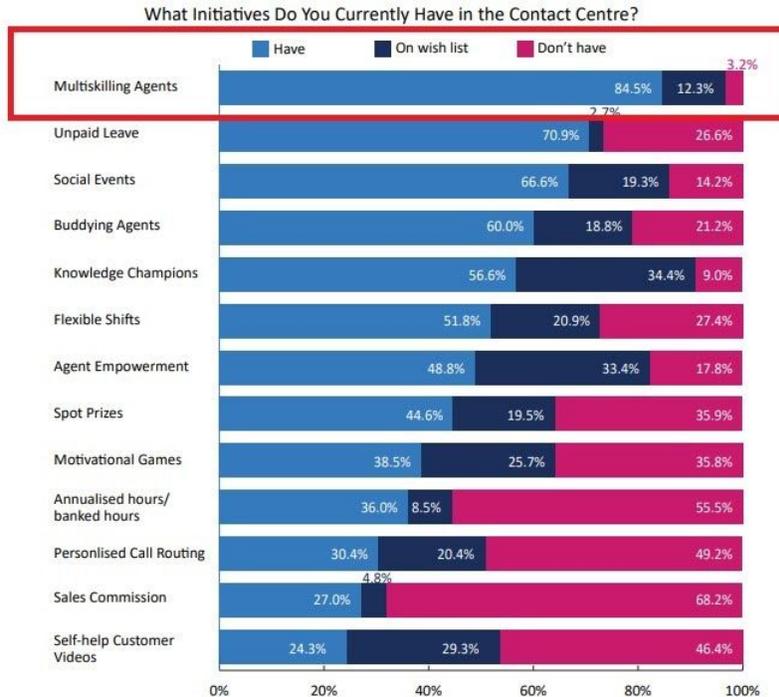
The move toward omnichannel support is one of the most significant trends in the contact centre niche. Customers want varied ways to converse with companies. Contact centres, too, benefit in terms of productivity by introducing new channels. New means of communication, though, make broader training essential.

Modern contact centre agents must know how to use every channel their centre offers. They'll also need to be proficient in moving between them and drawing info from each. That kind of proficiency can only come from training. It makes staff development in the niche more critical.

Developments at Cymphony show an increased awareness of how essential training now is. Marketing Manager, David Rolf, told us that the firm has now hired a company trainer. For the first time, Cymphony has made training a separate function in the business. Before, agent education and instruction got handled by line managers.

Integration & Other Aspects Related to Omnichannel

Omnichannel support isn't only about adding new channels. It also involves creating a unified interface. That interface must handle not only every channel but also other related systems. Truly integrated centres have a coherent path for data through many diverse systems.



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

The number of systems any one centre may use is extraordinary. Cymphony, for instance, deals with more than 50 customer relationship management (CRM) applications. Different clients of the centre use different solutions. Cymphony agents must work across all of them. Training staff to use many systems, then, is another challenge for a modern contact centre.

A Different Perspective on Tech & Staff Training

Look back at the graph a little higher up the page. You'll see that it's not only different types of training that contact centres use to support their staff. Lots of firms also reported investing in tech to help agents deliver what's expected of them.

When you talk tech in the contact centre niche, the mind naturally wanders to [chatbots and AI](#). As we covered earlier in this series, though, new tech that's disrupting the niche is far more varied than that. Developments in areas like robotic process automation (RPA), what's more, also effect training.

RPA takes repetitive, time-consuming tasks away from agents. Tech can do that legwork instead, freeing up agents for jobs that need human intelligence. By extension, advisors also won't need training in those tasks. Instead, more valuable training time can get spent on honing soft skills.

Staff Training – How Contact Centres Keep Agents at the Cutting-Edge

A contact centre's agents are their most precious resource. It's the frontline workers who deliver the superior experience customers now expect. Operators must give agents the best chance of providing that cutting-edge service. That makes staff training crucial.

Learning and development for agents have always been essential. Advisors must blend product knowledge and personal skills to serve consumers best. Recent changes in the contact centre niche have made training even more invaluable.

New tech and changing customer demand are seeing the industry evolve apace. Agents must be skilled and agile enough to respond. Training that aids them in handling multiple channels is one notable trend. Beyond that, technical training to help them navigate complex, integrated systems is also on the rise. These trends are both driven and supported by new technology.

Agents must learn to wield new solutions that are now part of their day-to-day activities. Other technology, meanwhile, takes burdens away from agents. That gives them more time to develop their soft skills. Such nuanced changes will contribute to the changing face of the niche in the coming years. Precisely what shape the sector and firms within it will adopt in the future is up for debate. It's also the subject of the next – and final – chapter.

Chapter 13 | The Future of Call Centres

We're drawing toward the conclusion this eBook focussed on the call centre niche. Hopefully, you should have a good picture of the state of the field and prevailing trends. What's left is to turn our minds to the future.

What does the future hold for call centres? That's the question we're going to tackle in this chapter.

We'll look at the prevailing tendencies in the niche, and whether they may continue or evolve in the next five years. We also asked our industry pros to give their expert insight into the future direction of the field. All that should help us produce a fair picture of what a contact centre may look like in 2025.

Calls to Contacts

The phrase 'call centre' has been around for decades. As we've mentioned a few times before, though, it's by no means as accurate as it once was. Agents in the niche now handle a [plethora of](#)

[channels](#) alongside traditional calls. Today's businesses in the industry are unquestionably contact centres.

What, though, does the future hold? Will there be a continued trend away from telephony? Could centres develop where calls get replaced entirely by other means of communication? Might we reach a stage where there are no agents at contact centres, answering calls? The industry pros we spoke to don't think so.

FM Outsource recognised the trend toward chat and messaging channels. Founder, Jack Barmby, told us that, in his opinion, there was 'potential for some telephony to get subsumed by other channels'.

Notably, they predicted an uptick in popularity for messaging apps. FM Outsource named WhatsApp and Apple Business Chat as examples. They, though, feel that merely reflects an overall shift in people's communications. Such apps – and social alternatives – get favoured over voice calls by many people in daily life.

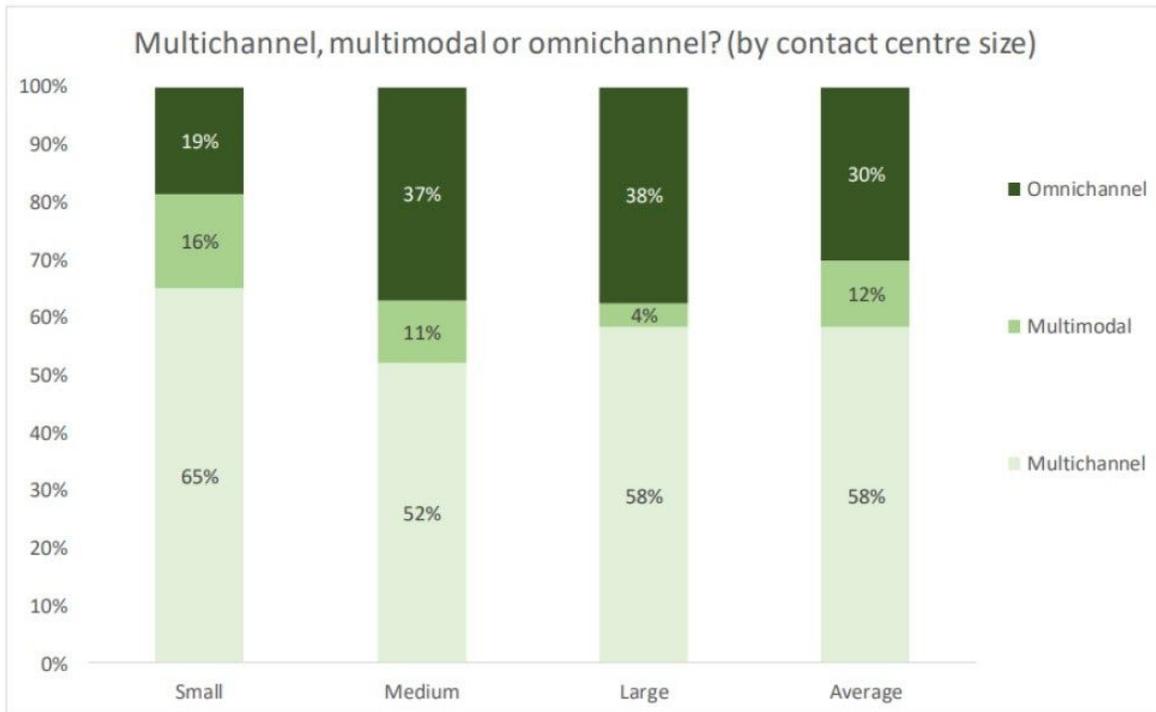
When explicitly asked about the future of telephony, FM Outsource were definitive. They claimed that it would remain one of contact centres' top three channels. There was an interesting caveat, but we'll get to that later.

Marketing Manager at Cymphony, David Rolfe, shared a similar view. He believes that the shift from voice to messaging and chat platforms will continue. As a whole, though, David asserted that his firm 'still focuses on the personal, human element'. That's something only telephony provides.

Omnichannel Rather Than Multichannel

Future contact centres, then, may be more balanced in terms of channels. Where today inbound calls still form the [vast majority of customer contacts](#), other channels may start picking up. How channels integrate and fit within broader systems, therefore, is likely to change.

There's already an industry trend toward omnichannel support. That desire for omnichannel stems from a greater focus on [customer experience](#) (CX). For seamless CX across the channels customers want to use, genuine omnichannel is a necessity.



Source: [Contact Babel](#)

Most centres haven't yet reached the intuitive integration needed for omnichannel support. There are still barriers to full unification of platforms. Data doesn't have a coherent pathway through contact centre systems.

In the next five years, more and higher quality integration of systems is likely to be a continuing pattern. David at Cymphony told us that such integrations were a focus for the future at the company. He explained that connecting information across client CRM platforms was a priority.

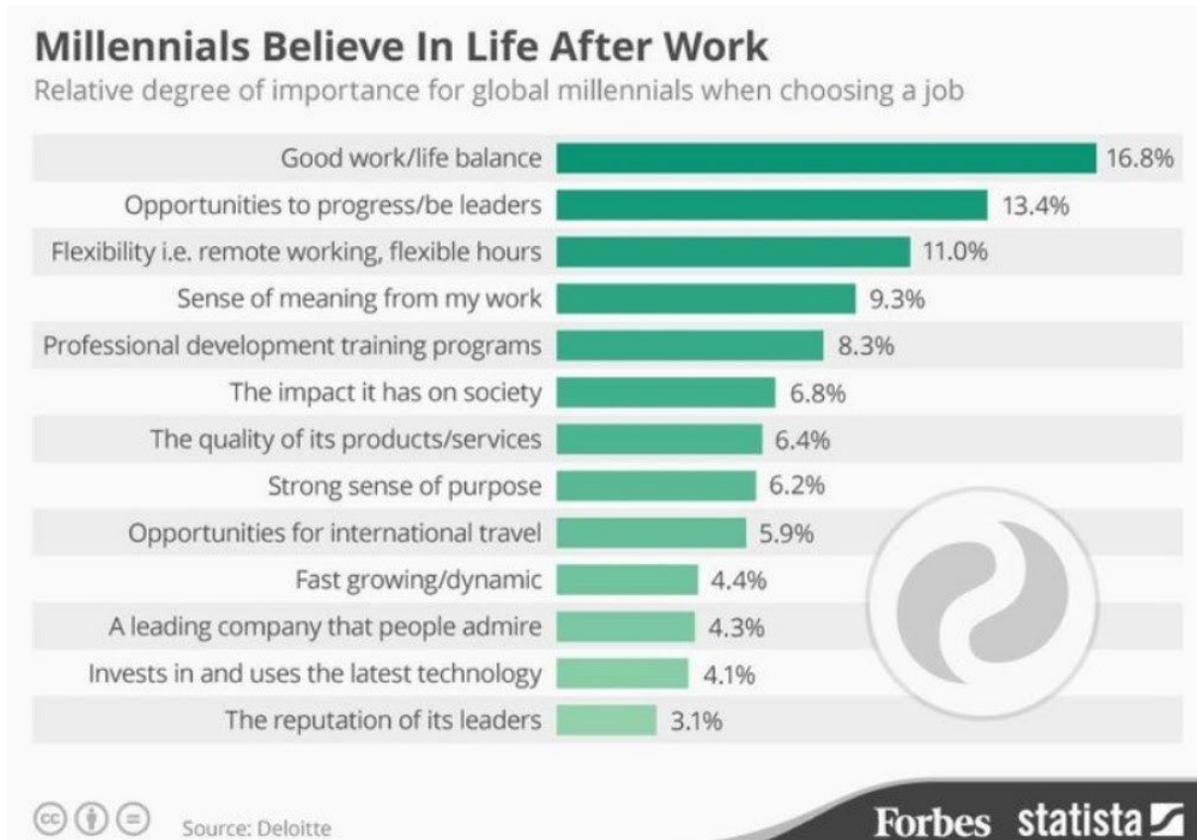
Cloud-Based Solutions & Homeworking

We've already talked at length about the first word of the phrase "contact centre". As time goes on, though, the relevance of the second word may also come into question. The workforce of future businesses in the niche, after all, may become increasingly decentralised. That's thanks to the accelerating move toward homeworking.

All of our industry pros shared a similarly positive view of having agents based at home. David at Cymphony explained that 20% of their workers were home-based. He also revealed that Cymphony now actively hire remote agents. Charlotte Flanagan at FM Outsource, meanwhile, told us that around 60% of agents across the firm were remote.

Flexibility and a larger talent pool are two benefits of homeworking for contact centres. Agents based at home are easier to get online as and when a centre needs them. That makes accurate, efficient workforce management (WFM) more straightforward. When new agents don't have to

work at an actual centre, too, where they live doesn't matter. Businesses can hire the best candidates wherever they are.



Source: [Forbes](#)

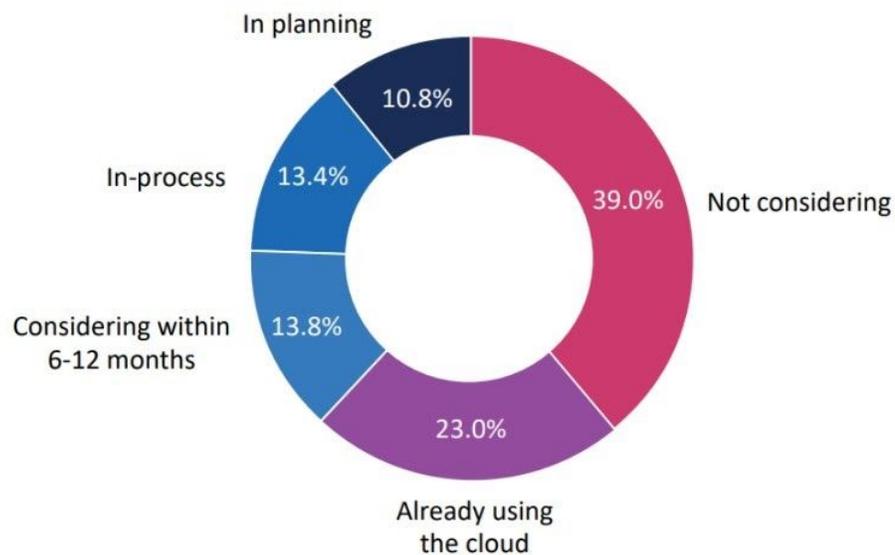
Homeworking is also an arrangement that appeals to agents. Modern workers – in contact centres and elsewhere – crave an improved work-life balance. The greater freedom and flexibility of remote working chimes with that desire. The trend toward remote agents, then, is set to pick up more pace in the next five years.

CEO and founder of Poly AI, Nikola Mrksic, certainly agrees. He told us that he felt 'those contact centres doing best and improving profit margins are those able to push people outside of the workplace'.

As well as a trend to homeworking, Nikola suggested how things may go a little further in the future. He predicted that offshoring may become more prevalent. That's the employment of remote agents in different countries, something already quite common.

Nikola also mused on the possibility of a contact centre niche equivalent of Uber or Lyft. Given the flexibility craved by both centres and agents, it's not at all far-fetched. Current ride-share drivers log on and work as and when they wish – often on top of another job. Future customer support could get delivered in precisely the same way.

How Would You Best Describe Your Plans for Moving to a Cloud Contact Centre?



Source: [Call Centre Helper](#)

Whatever the precise shape of remote work in the future, there's no doubt that [cloud-based solutions will be vital](#). It's cloud-hosted platforms and systems that allow agents to log on and work from anywhere. Movement to the cloud is already prevalent in the contact centre niche. It's a trend that is only going to accelerate in the coming years.

Complex Tech to Support Rather Than Replace Agents

How technology will impact the future of contact centres is a hot-button topic. One opinion is that tech like chatbots and other AI will eventually replace human agents.

The people we spoke to at FM Outsource characterise the theory as being that customer service is on 'an ever-shrinking iceberg'. That the need for [human customer support](#) is ever melting away, to get replaced by self-service. It's not an opinion that Jack at the firm subscribes to:

'I don't see it that way. There's always been self-service, and tech has always changed the game...What stays the same is that people want the human touch.'

As we've already touched on, the human touch is also something to which Cymphony remains devoted. How, then, can we explain the increasing demand for tech-driven customer service? As Poly AI's Nikola told us, after all, 'there's never been more appetite for automated customer service than there is today.'

The explanation comes from how tech gets employed in the contact centre. What was apparent from our interviews with the pros was that there's no desire to replace agents. Instead, the kind of tech that Poly AI creates, and contact centres use, aims to support them.

Nikola described his firm's tech as allowing agents to 'concentrate on high-value tasks'. The people we spoke to at FM Outsource agreed. They said that tech should 'do the legwork; the agent should focus on managing the customer'. This prevailing opinion in the niche tells us a lot about the future of tech in contact centres.



Source: [Customer Think](#)

As in other sectors, new tech will impact the contact centre niche. Five years down the line, automation, AI, and other solutions will be far more prevalent. They won't, however, be processes that usurp human agents and take their jobs. Rather, they'll be tools to help agents do those jobs better.

Proactive Customer Service

Earlier, we discussed telephony in centres of the future. We mentioned a fascinating caveat that Jack at FM Outsource flagged up. When predicting that calls would stay a vital channel, he gave a further reason why. He speculated that it might be thanks to a rise in proactive, outbound calling.

Proactive customer support could become a broader trend in the future contact centre. Smarter AI and more digital channels make such pre-emptive support more viable. [Sentiment analysis](#) lets chatbots sense when a customer gets frustrated or angry. An agent can then get triggered to call the customer to provide better resolution.

Proactive customer service can also apply to those who don't actively seek support. AI-driven social listening is developing apace. With it, brands can find individuals speaking negatively about them. That's even if the person doesn't contact their official accounts. The company can then direct the customer to a private channel, where the issue gets resolved.

The idea of more proactive support is one that fits well with that of improving CX. When the customer is the focus, a company desires to make their life easier. That means solving issues before customers reach the stage of complaining. Pre-emptive problem solving, too, has another benefit. It reduces the number of interactions a contact centre may have to deal with, moving forward.

Contact Centres 2025

Predicting the future is tricky. In December 2019, no one could guess that only three months later, most of the world would be under lockdown. There's no way to say with any certainty, therefore, how the contact centres of 2025 will look. What we can do, though, is use what we've learnt to make an educated – and hopefully useful – guess.

By 2025, large contact centres with hundreds of agents on-site will be fewer and farther between. The norm for customer service will be for it to get delivered by home-based agents. Those agents will work flexible hours according to their and their employer's needs. Some may even log on to help customers for a few hours to supplement a separate primary income.

To ensure agents can work that way, most centres will employ cloud-based solutions. When hosted in the cloud, contact systems allow agents to log on from anywhere. Those systems, too, will likely get powered by [UCaaS platforms](#). That's what will make switching between and integrating different channels more straightforward.

Speaking of channels, live chat, and messaging apps will be part of the arsenal of almost all centres. So too will chatbots and other AI-driven modes of communication. For the most part, though, AI solutions will form tools to make the jobs of agents easier.

Whether these predictions come wholly or even partially true remains to be seen. What's certain, though, is that the next five years for the contact centre niche won't be dull.

Chapter 14 | Final Thoughts

The contact centre industry is often misunderstood. It can even occasionally get taken for granted or maligned. When many people think of contact centres, they imagine the cold calls that interrupt their dinner. There's so much more to the businesses – and particularly the people – in the niche than that.

Hopefully, our ebook has opened your eyes to the nuances of the [contact centre](#) industry. By taking a microscope to the field and speaking to experts, we've tried to give you an insight that most people lack. That is unless they work as an agent or other member of the all-important contact centre staff.

To refresh your memory - or if you didn't stick with every chapter - let's recap some of the main takeaways. In essence, you can put the fascinating details we've learnt into three categories:

- People
- Processes
- Technology

A People Business

It wasn't long into our chats with industry pros that we learnt how they all felt about contact centre agents. Everybody we spoke to made the point that the contact centre niche is a people business. Without agents operating the phones or answering emails, centres don't have a service to offer to clients.

As well as being essential to the success of their employers, agents' jobs are also demanding. Contact centres expect high levels of service efficiency and quality. Those demands lead to two notable hallmarks of the niche. What those are, are high staff turnover and a laser-like focus on training.

It's tough for contact centres to retain their workers. Employees come and go in the niche with more regularity than in most others. One vital challenge for managers, then, is to keep hold of their most talented team members. There is a range of ways that those in charge of businesses in the niche try to do so.

Why is Engagement Important? Engaged business benefit from:



Source: [Rencai Group](#)

Training and team building are two interconnected methods. Agents who feel they're best equipped to do their job well are more likely to stick around. In the same vein, employees who are engaged with their firm and the team around them don't look elsewhere as often. That's alongside generally being more productive.

Many contact centres also seek to support a better work-life balance for their staff. Having a job that fits around their personal life is far more important to the modern workforce. Centres are increasingly looking to home and remote working to aid this. The evidence for this is in the rapid uptake of cloud solutions within the industry.

Allowing agents to log on and work from anywhere is a win-win. The agents get the flexibility they crave. Centres boost staff retention and have more control over their workforce management (WFM). That assists them in responding to changing customer demands. Speaking of which, a shift in consumer focus is a factor that shines through when you look at contact centre processes.

Complex, Interconnected Processes

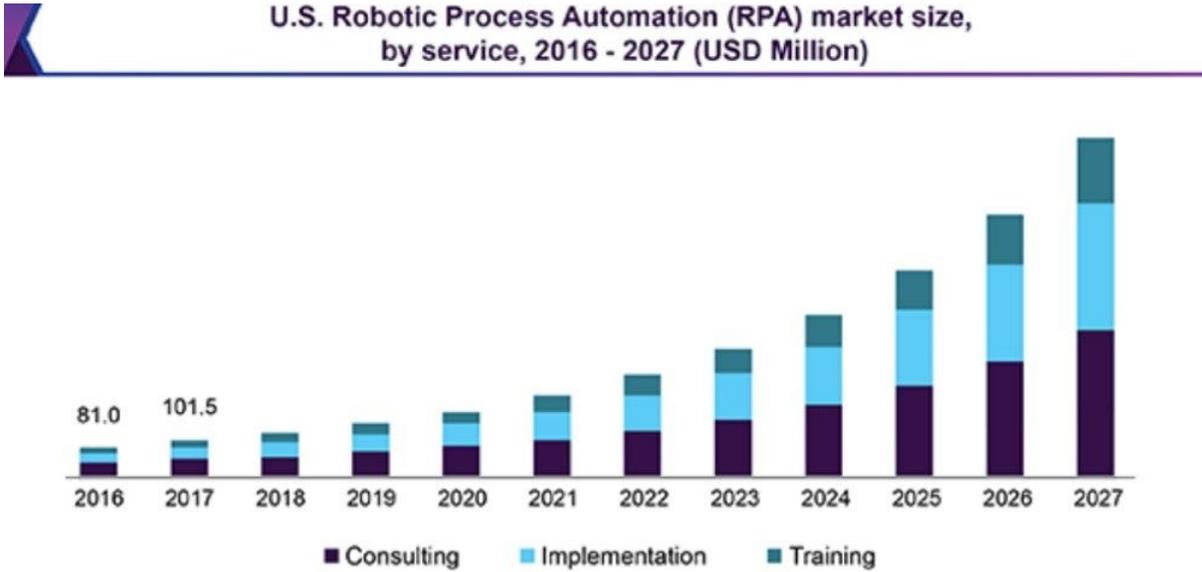
As well as the primacy of people, our series unearthed other fascinating insights. We discovered, for example, the complex processes that combine as part of running a centre. The principle concern of centres is to deliver a superior [customer experience](#) (CX). To do so, they must balance a diverse array of tasks.

One of the fundamental requirements is to have enough human resources to meet customer demand. It's that element of centre operations that relies on forecasting and WFM. Managers must assess trends, make predictions, and best place the firm to respond to them.

On the frontline, too, modern agents now have a plethora of responsibilities. They must handle and manage a growing list of channels, systems, and platforms. That's alongside the more traditional jobs of answering or making phone calls. All this must get done with the ultimate CX remaining at the forefront of their minds. It's for that reason that contact centres are starting to look to tech to help support their workers.

Ever-Evolving Tech

Digital transformation is taking hold in many fields. The contact centre niche is very much an early adopter when it comes to new solutions of varying types. Alongside cloud hosting, the industry is also looking definitively toward AI and automation. Use cases for those areas of tech development often get found in the contact centre field.



Source: [Grand View Research](#)

Robotic Process Automation (RPA), for instance, is tailor-made for contact centres. More firms are finding the benefit of automating repetitive processes. That is, in short, that it unlocks the potential of their workers. Other AI – in the form of chatbots and the like – is getting similarly employed.

It's not only AI, either. Contact centres are also investing in tech solutions to improve in many other ways. Interfaces and platforms to aid omnichannel support are prime examples. To deliver

consistent CX across channels, centres need a unified and integrated system. The difficulty of such integration remains a principal hurdle to true omnichannel support.

That's a mere whistle-stop tour of all the things we've learnt in compiling this ebook. We hope you've enjoyed our investigation into contact centres and found it useful. We'd also like to thank the industry experts who gave their time to help us put it together.