

ATSG

STREAMLINING
YOUR BUSINESS
TO ENHANCE
THE CUSTOMER
EXPERIENCE



CONTACT CENTER TRENDS | WHITEPAPER

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Contact Centers in the Cloud

At their inception, cloud contact centers had only basic functionality and supported a small number of agents. Today's cloud contact centers can support tens of thousands of agents and offer innovative features and benefits that have cleared the way for large-scale enterprise use. As a result, cloud-based contact center deployments continue to surge.

In a recent survey of 700 contact center decision-makers, 62% reported that they planned to implement a cloud contact center within 18 months. The primary drivers of this growth are the inherent benefits that the cloud model offers, the high cost or impracticality of adding new omnichannel capabilities to an existing contact center, and the number of existing deployments that are approaching end-of-life.

Today's digital-first customers demand speed and efficiency. Yet, contact centers struggle to deliver the optimal experience while at the same time maintaining cost efficiency. Cloud contact centers hit this challenge head-on. They're the best option for quickly obtaining and deploying the latest technology to improve service levels and operating efficiency. With a minimal capital investment up front and monthly payments over the course of the service subscription, cloud contact centers also offer an attractive financial model.

Cloud contact centers give companies the ability to quickly respond to changing customer and business demands, with traits such as:

Capabilities

Solution providers continually upgrade software releases and applications to add the latest capabilities. This eliminates the long planning and implementation cycle that is customary for on-premises deployments.

Scalability

Capacity can be easily scaled up and down as needed, enabling companies to pay for only what they use.

Integration

Open integration to a growing number of other cloud-based services can be implemented with ease, enabling:

- Rich customer experiences
- Optimization of business processes
- Competitive differentiation
- Improved agent experiences through easy access to information

Product Suites

Cloud contact center solutions provide integrated product and application suites that:

- Are easier to implement and administer than traditional siloed solutions
- Provide better omnichannel experiences
- Contribute greatly to unified analytics and customer visibility
- Are PBX Agnostic and can bolt onto your current infrastructure

Communication

Integrated cloud-based unified communications and collaboration capabilities make it easy to universally deliver full contact center features and services to agents regardless if they are located on-premises or remotely.

Strategy

With much of the support burden shifting to the solution provider, technical and business teams are free to focus on the strategic initiatives that will make a difference.

Integrated Omnichannel

Customers demand an easy and convenient way to engage with organizations on their own terms. This means communicating via their channels of choice from anywhere, anytime, and any device. The contact center technology needed to support this capability isn't new. However, the current pace of adoption, expanding options, and growing interest in tapping data from different channels to grow relationships continue to make omnichannel a significant trend to watch.

With the evolution from multichannel to omnichannel, contact centers are realizing many benefits:

Channel Support

Contact center vendors are continually updating their omnichannel capabilities to support the latest communication technology, trends, and customer preferences. By providing consistency across channels, transitions are seamless and fragmented customer experiences are eliminated.

Channels now include:

- Voice
- Email
- Web/Online chat
- Web callback
- SMS/MMS messaging
- Video
- Social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Mobile apps
- Intelligent virtual agents/Chatbots
- IVR



Unified Database

Multichannel approaches that require each channel to have its own data repository impede the business advantages that contact centers can gain. Omnichannel tears down these silos and offers a valuable unified database that spans the customer journey. Eliminating the need for agents to request and customers to supply repetitive information streamlines transactions and improves customer experience. A unified database also provides a more complete picture of customer interactions, making it easier to derive insights and identify future opportunities.

Automation

Omnichannel solutions can leverage the latest advances in intelligent routing, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning (ML) to cost-effectively deliver the best customer experience.



Operational Efficiency

Omnichannel contact centers can operate more efficiently than their multichannel counterparts. Integrated product suites unify the use and management of channels to:

- Reduce agent training time and expense
- Streamline the agent desktop, allowing agents to cover all channels and move between them with ease
- Deliver more personalized experiences
- Improve agent experience, and their ability to serve customers
- Reduce call and session times
- Eliminate multiple disparate systems to reduce potential points of failure, resulting in more reliable service and lower IT support costs
- Reduce administrative burden

An omnichannel contact center presents a major opportunity for companies to differentiate themselves from the competition. By leveraging more options, using mined data wisely, and providing a frictionless customer experience, companies can attract new business and build customer loyalty.



Remote Workforce and Operations

The ability to support remote contact center staffing and operations isn't new. The practice has been successfully adopted by many companies, with the predominant use being the integration of at-home agents into the center. This model has proven to be a win-win for companies and staff alike, and its expansion continues to trend due to advantages such as:

Business Continuity

Remote contact center operations and management capabilities are increasingly becoming the backbone of contingency and business continuity plans. They may be relied upon to keep the contact center operational in the event of a natural disaster, catastrophic impact, or the loss of other primary services that are required to function.

Yet, even the best plans were toppled by the events of the last few years. Following their tactical response to this crisis, contact center management must now strategically plan for how to operate efficiently with a reduced and/or remote staff. And in some cases quickly scale to meet heightened demand while still maintaining high service levels.

Talent Acquisition

Contact centers can obtain specialized talent that isn't available within a reasonable commuting distance to their facility. This can help fill the demand for:

- Multilingual employees
- Needed technical skillsets



Attracting Non-traditional Workers

Staffing needs can be met by hiring agents that seek alternatives to traditional on-premises employment:

- Part-time and flex-time workers
- People with special needs
- Gig workers
- Workers with a preference or requirement to work from another location

Expand Coverage

Contact centers can more easily staff for 24x7 or evening hours with a “follow the sun” model that uses headcount residing in other time zones.

Rewards

At-home work can be offered as a perk to retain experienced and top-performing staff.

Tapping New Labor Markets.

Contact centers can more easily draw staff from areas with higher workforce availability and less competition.

While the migration to cloud-based contact centers was already setting a record pace before, this shift is expected to accelerate. This is due to the inherent flexibility and advantages that cloud contact centers offer for remote operations. Companies utilizing a cloud contact center will also be best positioned to adapt and support on-premises, remote, and hybrid staffing models as business needs require.

In addition, new self-service options such as AI-powered intelligent virtual agents can effectively handle more tasks to supplement remote agents. Coupled with integrated unified communications capabilities that can be quickly deployed to extend the necessary communications services to each remote location, personnel will have everything needed to work productively.

While employees may have previously attended in-house training or gained experience before being permitted to work remotely, this may not be possible for all remote worker scenarios. This makes it critical to have an effective remote training process in place. The latest workforce management and scheduling applications will also equip contact center management with the resources they need to better manage the remote workforce.

What's more, cloud-based collaboration applications integrated into the contact center environment provide an ideal way to train and mentor remote staff and keep them engaged. Real-time chat and screen sharing applications can quickly connect remote agents with supervisors and subject matter experts to improve productivity and reduce resolution time.





Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI and the promise of what it can offer has existed for decades. R&D initiatives have leveraged each advancement in computing technology as a path to address prior shortcomings and bring AI mainstream. After years of success in behind the scenes analysis of large-scale data sets, AI is now the transparent engine behind many of today's innovations. The widespread acceptance of intelligent virtual assistant applications such as Apple Siri, Amazon Alexa, and Google Home has opened the door for the expanded use of AI in the contact center.

Implementing AI in customer-facing applications necessitates finding the right balance between efficiency and service quality. According to surveys, most people still prefer to communicate with humans. And that preference is even stronger when it comes to complex interactions. At the same time, people want quick and simple resolutions to their problems. The growing digital-first preference indicates that people will accept technology that results in fast, effective, and productive interactions. With all the benefits that AI now offers, knowing where and how to best implement AI will be a critical part of managing contact centers and customer experience.

The current and emerging use of AI in the contact center includes:

Data Analysis

The data contained in today's omnichannel contact centers and CRM applications offer a wealth of knowledge. Contact center management can use it to improve operational aspects such as predicting agent scheduling requirements. Sales can identify opportunities based on customer behavior, and marketing can build programs around customer relationships and needs.

But as the amount of data grows so does the difficulty in manually interpreting its meaning and determining what is actionable. AI can provide companies with the automated capabilities they need to decipher data quickly and gain valuable customer and business insights.

Intelligent Routing

The first form of AI used in the contact center dates back to automatic call distribution (ACD) systems deployed in the 1990s. Predictive algorithms were used to analyze and route calls to the most appropriate agents. Today, advances in AI coupled with omnichannel capabilities offer far more sophisticated ways to drive cost savings and customer satisfaction. Some examples are:

- Customers can be automatically connected to resources based on their relationship and history
- Automated determinations can be made on whether customer needs can be best addressed through self-service or a live agent
- Data gained across one or more channels can be used to determine subsequent routing
- Self-service and other AI-driven interactions can be monitored, and customers rerouted to live agents or other channels when a session becomes unproductive
- The tone of a customer's voice and what they are typing in chat sessions can be factored into routing determinations



Agent Enablement

Omnichannel and self-service options have effectively reduced the number of interactions that require a live agent. As a result, the workload of agents has shifted to the handling of more complex and time-consuming transactions that aren't currently handled with automation. Assistive resources provide a path to improving agent proficiency on complicated matters so that calls and sessions can be streamlined.

AI offers the ability to monitor activities across omnichannel environments to predict a customer's intentions or requirements. It can also guide agents through a dynamic or defined process that best addresses the customer's needs. The benefits to be realized are:

- Improved customer experience
- Reduction in agent training time and expense
- Increased agent productivity and job satisfaction

Chatbots & Intelligent Virtual Agents

Chatbots are an effective way to drive more efficient contact center operations. By aligning chatbot capabilities to the types of interactions that customers have and how their needs are addressed by live agents, chatbots can become a supplemental workforce to take on the most common tasks.

Early use of chatbots in the contact center enabled the recall of general information and account details, collection of data before live agent involvement, and routing determinations.

Advances in speech processing and Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology are now driving new opportunities to reduce costs while delivering better service. NLP is powered by AI and enables better communication between humans and computers through natural spoken language. With these capabilities, chatbots are evolving into intelligent virtual agents that offer:

- An always available, handsfree channel for customers
- A more intuitive, natural interface that bolsters customer acceptance
- The power to take on more complex tasks, freeing live agents to focus on the areas where they can deliver the most value
- The ability to support complete conversations in a manner that's both valuable and contextual
- Improved accuracy and effectiveness
- The intelligence to "read between the lines" and sense the tone when customers are speaking

Despite the advances in technology, contact center management needs to carefully consider where and how virtual agents and chatbots can replace live agents. Blurring the line, trying to mask the use of chatbots, or forcing their use will negatively impact customer experience. A good strategy is to be clear about which contact center services use automation and which use live agents. When possible, always give customers a choice and be as transparent as possible.



Analytics

The collection of data to manage contact center operations dates back to early Automated Call Distribution (ACD) systems, where the primary use was to reduce both cost and call times while improving customer service. While that remains an important goal, the ever-expanding capabilities and complexity of the contact center has required the collection, analysis, and use of data to continually evolve.

Current trends in contact center analytics include:

Complete Operational Visibility

Customers want to interface with brands on their own terms and they expect service excellence. This includes ease of use, personalization, and consistency across all channels. Meeting these demands in a complex contact center environment requires close management and a strong data foundation to support decisions.

With the growing significance of leveraging data to drive results, companies must now factor availability and ease of accessing meaningful data into their contact center purchase decisions. With the advent of omnichannel, there is also a need for management to have in-depth visibility across all channels. Selecting an omnichannel product suite with a unified database offers a more accurate and complete picture.

Another important consideration is the ease of integrating cloud-based contact centers with other applications to streamline business processes. This expands the number of sources that contain valuable information. A strategy to incorporate this data into the overall management of the center is needed to maintain end-to-end visibility.

Cross-functional Data Utilization

Besides day-to-day contact center management, visibility into the customer journey is invaluable. Data such as web-browsing history and chat session interactions can merge with data on current customer services to speed transactions, enable targeted marketing programs, and grow both revenue and customer loyalty. No picture of the customer relationship is complete without the full knowledge of how and why they have interacted with your company.

Cloud-based Analytics

Today's omnichannel contact centers have a massive amount of data to contribute. But factor in the integration of other business systems like Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and the data available to management can quickly become unfathomable.

To realize the most from this strategic asset, contact centers are increasingly adopting cloud-based analytics tools residing on Microsoft Azure, Amazon Web Services (AWS), and Google Cloud to translate large data sets into actionable insights. Given the advantages and growth of cloud-based contact centers, it's reasonable to expect that cloud-based analytics will become even more prevalent in the industry.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Historical and real-time data is essential to managing a contact center. But, as the sources and amount of data grow so does the difficulty in analyzing it. Timely data that are needed to respond and drive better outcomes in real-time is even more elusive.

AI provides the ability to perform real-time analysis of large and complex data sets and provide the right information at the right time. Potential uses include:

- Providing agents with an immediate history of all customer interactions so they can deliver better support
- Merging customer and product data to recommend solutions to agents, resulting in improved first call resolution and reductions in handling time
- Alerting management of trends requiring proactive attention to avoid service level impacts
- Monitoring and reporting on customer and agent experience using algorithms that are customized for the business
- Enriching data to expand the types of interactions that intelligent virtual agents can handle
- Offering predictive insights on agent scheduling

Agent Experience

Offering top-notch customer experience (CX) continues to hold its position as a top priority within the contact center. And with today's digital-first customers frequently exhausting self-service options before reaching out for human assistance, agents are increasingly handling more complex transactions where a great experience is the hardest to maintain.

Equipping agents with the resources they need to succeed promotes job satisfaction, which contributes greatly to your quest of delivering the best customer experience. Happy agents stay longer and gain more experience, resulting in reduced call handling times and improved first call resolution rates. And retaining agents is a surefire way to reduce the burden of onboarding new agents, which can average from \$10,000 to \$20,000 and require a training cycle of two to four weeks. Reducing agent turnover, which is the highest of any occupation at 30-40% annually, will also alleviate the challenge of attracting new agents in a highly-competitive job market.

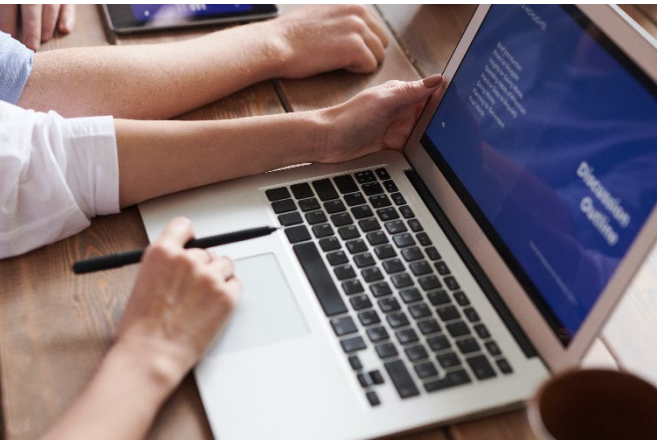
The trend of focusing on agent experience as the means to improve contact center outcomes is gaining momentum. It involves identifying and addressing issues that are negatively impacting agent performance and satisfaction. And increasingly, the solution is technology that empowers agents to work smarter and more efficiently.



Some of the key areas where new contact center technology is improving agent experience are:

Context Data

Having knowledge of customer history and why they may be contacting the center helps in getting customers directed to agents with the best skillset. This then allows agents to better serve them, resulting in higher agent satisfaction. While omnichannel services and other applications provide a wealth of data, having an intuitive interface that delivers the right information at the right time is key to helping the agent understand the context of the transaction. Advances in AI and systems integration are now being leveraged to get actionable data into the hands of agents quickly.



Information Access

Dealing with multiple disparate systems, performing repetitious tasks, delays in accessing needed information, and having to take time to interpret data are among the top agent complaints. At the same time, the customer's perception may be that the agent is not capable or efficient. Through data integration, open access to information, and workflow optimization, the experience can be improved for agents and customers alike. Cloud-based applications are increasingly the preferred solution due to the ease of implementation, accessibility, and management.

Process Automation

Automating common activities will improve agent productivity and process compliance, reduce burnout, and enable agents to put more emphasis in meeting the needs of customers. Many companies are moving their contact center to the Cloud because it's the fastest, easiest, and least expensive route to obtain the latest capabilities to streamline operations. Technologies such as AI-powered automation can provide assistive support to make the job of the agent easier, so they can focus on results and delivering exemplary customer support.



Leveraging Customer Service for Revenue Growth

Customer service is no longer just a problem to be resolved, and contact centers aren't just a drain on the bottom line to be minimized. Leading companies are instead viewing contact centers as an opportunity to build brand loyalty, gain consumer insights, and increase revenue.

This is a proactive customer service approach, and it's gaining favor with leaders in every industry. Combining analytics with a customer-centric approach allows companies to use any customer service interaction as a chance to offer new products and services.

And just as marketing and sales are relying on consumer data to provide more meaningful advertising and offers, the same can be true of customer service. In fact, sales and customer service are increasingly intertwined in the contact center. This is all built on a customer-centric model, where insights gleaned from data can be used to grow revenue by maximizing every interaction.



When a contact center starts functioning as a revenue center its goals begin to change. Instead of trying to keep all interactions as short as possible, it pays to take the time to forge relationships with customers and make each interaction more meaningful. This shift in focus may justify an increased agent count to generate more revenue, or a switch to more automated services that allow agents to have a role that combines service and sales. Whichever the case, the potential revenue boost from better interactions may compensate for any extra costs.

To effectively transition customer service to a revenue center, the contact center must have a robust infrastructure. It must provide agents with visibility into the customer journey from products and services purchased to prior support inquiries. The most advanced organizations will move past traditional CRM features. They will use AI for predictive insights to automatically determine sales opportunities based on customer history. These can be displayed for the agent during a call or presented by chatbots. Even FAQ and knowledgebase content can be tailored to each customer to introduce them to new products and services.

About ATSG

ATSG is a global leader in transformational technology solutions as a service for today's digital enterprise. ATSG provides Intelligent IT through Technology Solutions as a Service (TSaaS) to a variety of customers; leveraging a portfolio of Digital Infrastructure, Digital Workplace, Collaboration and Customer Experience offerings, and its comprehensive Ai2 automation platform, which delivers reliable, elastic, dynamic infrastructure, collaboration, applications, as well as world-class IT operations.



Want to see how the latest solutions can improve your contact center?

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