WHITEPAPER

The Pandemic Paradigm Shift:
# Building a Future-Proof Contact Center

Contents

Introduction

The customer contact center is at the very heart of customer relationship management, serving as a direct link to the wants and needs of the customer. Origins of the modern contact center trace back to the early 1960s, when telephone operators handled inquiries in a physical, central location and processed them via telephone conversations. This single medium of operation held steadfast until the early 1990s when the age of the internet introduced email, chat, social media and text messaging.

Although the modern contact center of today has come a long way, it now needs to evolve at a rapid pace unlike anything before due to prevailing market conditions influenced by COVID-19. At the start of the pandemic, businesses had to shut down core and essential functions in accordance with health and safety regulations. Combined with an increased volume in customers seeking help, contact center inefficiencies were soon exposed and so overwhelmed at times that they collapsed the support infrastructure of the business. Contact center failures eroded customer trust for some companies, leading to loss of business and customer loyalty.

A year and half later with even greater consumer demand, contact centers have shifted from being inundated with customer calls and emails regarding product and service delays to not having enough staff to support these requests. Businesses are struggling to bring back the workforce they lost at the height of the pandemic. These pressures are driving companies to develop resilient systems and functions to cope with extreme demand fluctuations.

Utilizing a diverse set of technologies and tools, like customer experience (CX) design, on-demand support service augmentation and situational training with artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, we can look to address most of the current challenges and build for the future.
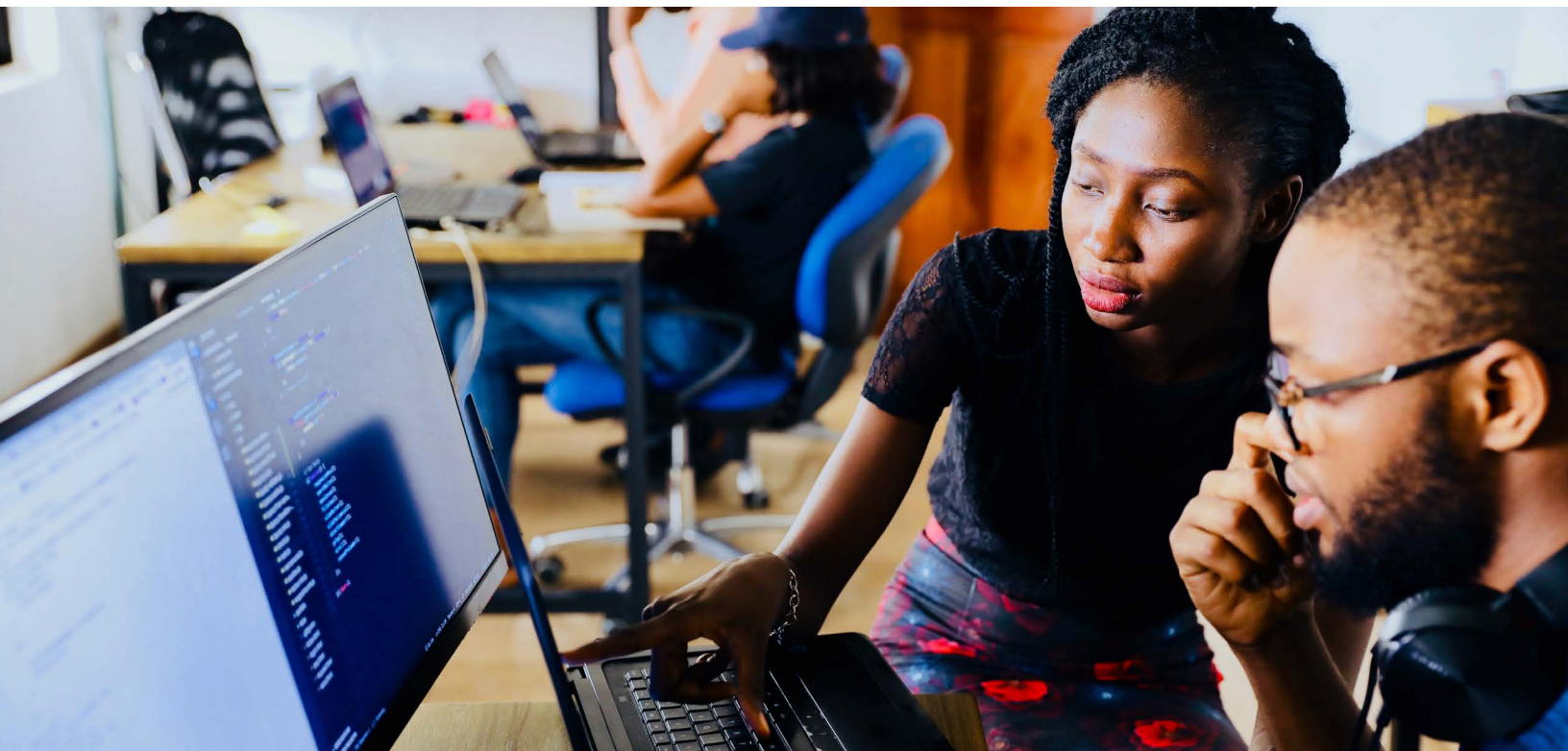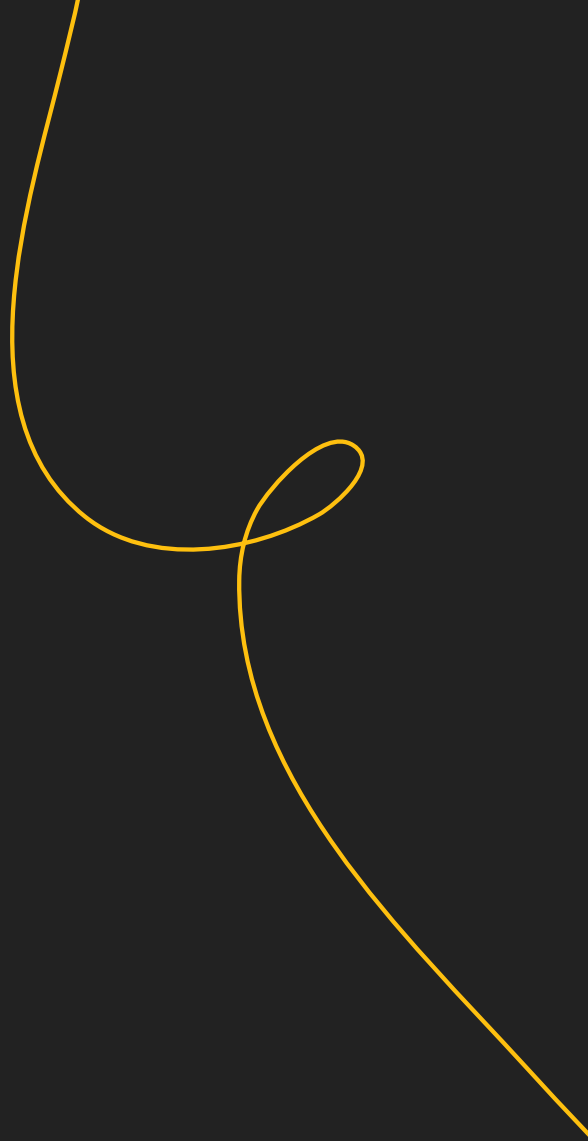
WHAT COVID-19 TAUGHT US ABOUT THE

Contact Center

What COVID-19 Taught Us About
the Contact Center

Remote Work is Here to Stay

In addition to contact centers dealing with the unprecedented rise in the volume of customer requests, there has also been a sustained increase in handling times and call abandonment rates (customers hanging up due to frustration from long hold times, poorly designed interactive voice responses (IVR) or not getting what they need from a chatbot). These are signs that the pandemic has weighed down the infrastructure and working models of many contact centers; a major reason being on-premises systems have limited ability to support remote work. The lockdowns and social distancing from the pandemic exposed the lack of flexibility and difficulties in operational management. As businesses scrambled to enable work-from-home options and tweak their setup for contact centers, it became clear that addressing some of these challenges and pivoting to remote working quickly was imperative but difficult.

Contact centers are facing—or undergoing—significant transformational change to better leverage integrated technologies focused on improving the customer experience. Societal need for remote working in most sectors has enticed businesses to relook at the cost of office space and rentals and consider permanent work-from-home environments. Research indicates that by 2024, 30% of organizations will have moved their contact centers' operations off-premises, with a 60% jump in remote-working full-time agents. By 2024, it is predicted that cloud contact center agents will outnumber on-premises contact center agents.[1]

Tackling the issue of enabling remote working capabilities and its inherent challenges with minimal disruptions and seamless transition is key.

The Resilient Will Survive...and Thrive

The pandemic acted as a catalyst for transforming the contact center and highlighted fundamental changes in customer behaviors and needs. Businesses are experiencing similar challenges like lack of talent and wage inflation, in addition to industry-specific changes, such as:

Upticks in online ordering and returns in the retail and CPG sector

Disrupted travel plans, resulting in changed/cancelled bookings or refunds in the travel and hospitality industry

Increase in forbearance, loans, portfolio/savings adjustments, payment deferrals and payment plans in the financial services sector
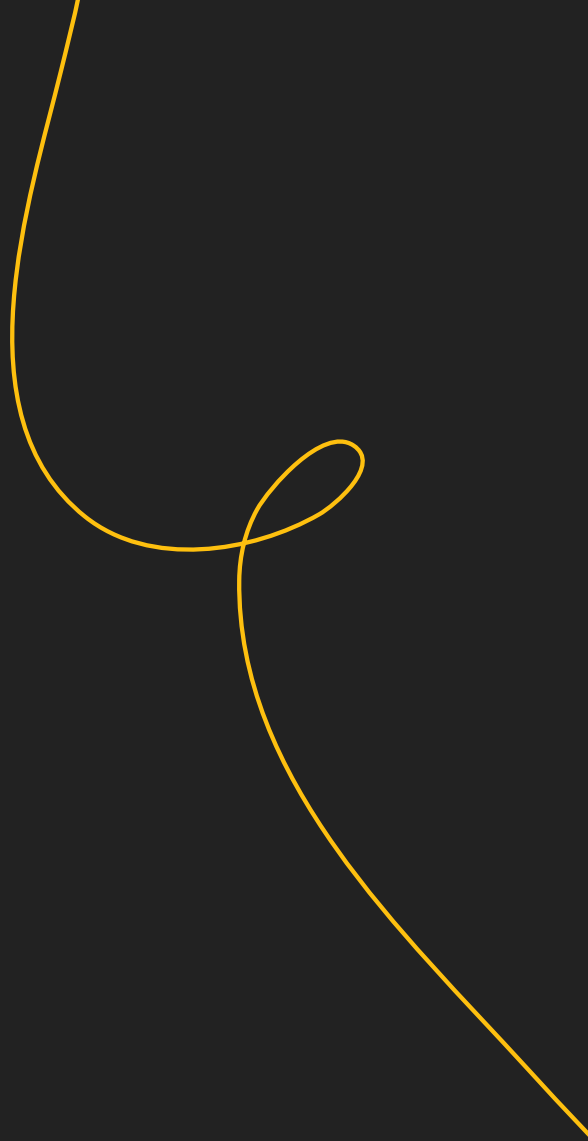
While these market changes were sudden and unprecedented, COVID-19 highlighted the importance of resilience and agility for businesses. In the beginning of the pandemic, agile businesses were better equipped to spin up virtual environments and engage gig agents to meet increased demands. This agility and savviness proved to be a competitive advantage as customers flocked to companies that offered service availability and offerings that fit their needs.

Even during pre-pandemic operating conditions, the inability of businesses to offer a modern and seamless customer contact experience cost them the satisfaction and loyalty of their customers. It's often overlooked that these consequences spill over to the workforce as well; organizations lose trained and high-performing workers to competition due to a lackluster appeal as an employer.[2] Modern contact center systems do not just enable a great customer experience, they boost agent productivity as man and machine work in harmony, elevating business performance while inducing a sense of pride and job satisfaction across the entire workforce.

The cost of inaction has never been greater. Modernizing contact centers is no longer opportunistic. It is imperative for every organization.

[1] Gartner, Overcoming the Top Three Challenges in Setting Up Contact Center Agents for Remote Working, Pankil Sheth, Steve Blood, Stuart Downes, February 26, 2021

[2] https://www.customercontactweekdigital.com/customer-insights-analytics/whitepapers/ccw-market-study-contact-center-success-in-the-automation-age

HOW TO MODERNIZE

Contact Centers for the Future

How to Modernize
Contact Centers for the Future

To overcome the challenges contact centers face today and prepare for an increasingly complex future, organizations must adopt new ways of working and build technological capabilities that are essential in a post-pandemic world. There are several things to consider when establishing an effective, customer-centric, remote contact center.

1.

Scaling Workforce Capabilities

The most direct and visible consequence of the pandemic manifested in the form of rapidly changing workforce availability. Traditional workforce management solutions were not built for social distancing requirements. Contact centers must evolve to be the part of their organization that is not only awake at night but is also available during natural disasters, such as global pandemics.

Contact centers today need to be able to scale up and down, with both human and virtual agents available to seamlessly manage demand fluctuations. This will require access to an additional agent capacity that may live outside the organization (such as gig agents), while maintaining skill-based capacity, scheduling and work assignments so that service levels are not compromised. Building this capability will require integration with new technology solutions along with innovative ways of working to fully prepare for the uncertain future.

2.

Monitoring & Reporting Real-Time Agent Performance

One of the main challenges for the pandemic-era contact center is the ability of employers to track the productivity and performance of their remote contact center agents. Without a physical presence within a controlled office environment, businesses will need to rethink how to supervise and manage agent workforces as they transition to an off-premises model.

Tools supporting real-time reporting of agent interactions detailing agent availability, abandonment rates and call status through interactive dashboards will provide accurate logs. Maintaining quality of interactions is key to customer satisfaction scores and can be tracked with real-time transcription and phonetic indexing. Leveraging AI-assisted, automated quality assurance tools help analyze the interactions to ensure compliance to regulations and agent performance.

3.

Operating Virtual Agent Training Programs

Agent training plays an important role in the nuances of working in a remote setting. Virtual and continuous training of agents will be required to sustain consistency and productivity of operations. With limited opportunities to bond with team members and solitary working conditions, trainings focused on mental health and promoting social bonding will help improve agent mindset. In addition, interaction quality indicators can also provide insights into the performance training needs of each team member in real time, despite service demand fluctuations.

4.

Cloud Enablement & Data Security

With the remote working model comes the 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) approach, which has seen an increase of about 25% since the start of pandemic.[3] This is often accompanied by minimal enterprise prevention and detection measures, increasing risks of easier home Wi-Fi attacks.[4] Combined with a rise in customer data hacks using social engineering, man-in-the-middle and phishing attacks, remote working has prompted new concerns and data security measures. Remote access to sensitive and personal data needs effective control measures using secure networks, enabling wider use of virtual desktops and WebRTC technologies. In addition to securing connections, businesses also must plan for need/role-based access to data depending on the type of request, client profile and other case attributes. Encryption or obfuscation of sensitive data is also a nice-to-have feature to add a further layer of security to personal information.
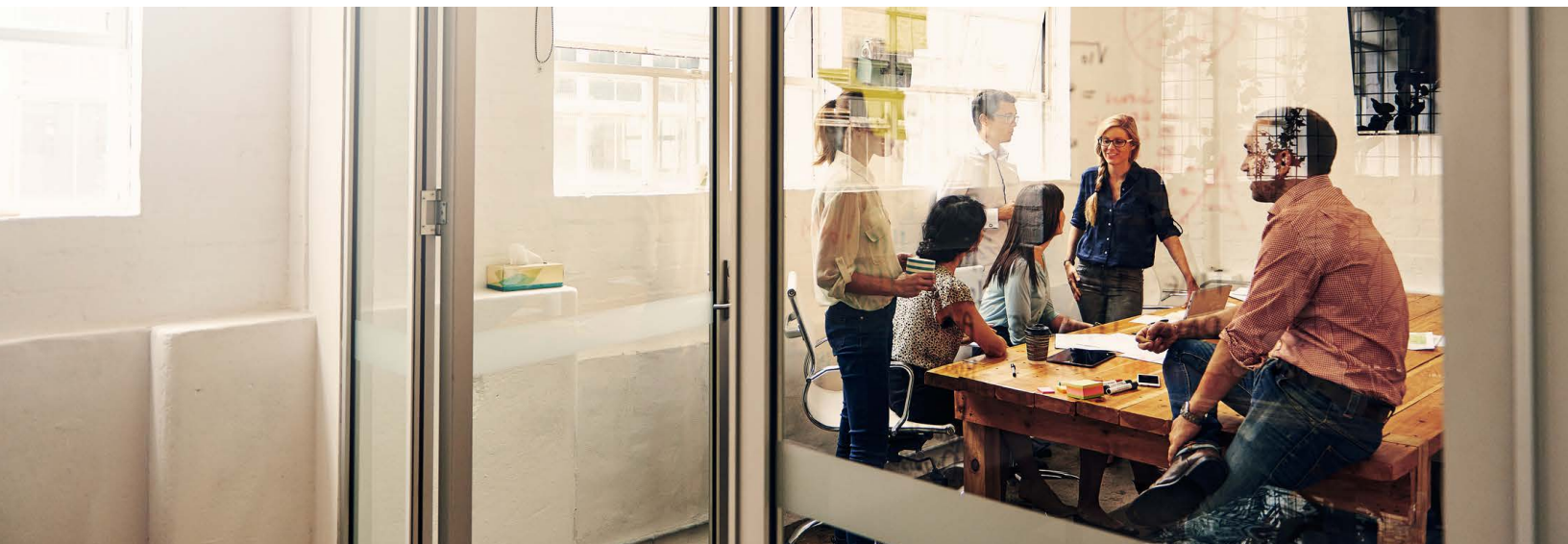
5.

Reimagining CX Design

Improving customer experience and call satisfaction will require reimagining CX design for the entire contact center. Some of the challenges we mentioned earlier—like longer wait times, handling times and increased call abandonment rates—can be traced back to specific design decisions. These are typically demonstrated during call transfers when customer authentication steps are repeated or when systems lack out-of-the-box features, such as automated call-back. However, no single functionality or technology alone can elevate the customer experience and contact center performance to withstand the new needs surfaced by the pandemic, let alone exceed ever-rising consumer expectations.

The journey to a better CX starts with renewing one's understanding of the customer journey, through the end-to-end contact center processes. Focusing on customer journeys helps navigate user interactions, promote usability and improve end-to-end process optimization. Self-service offerings, automation and custom digital solutions can greatly assist in tackling identified issues (and opportunities), resulting in greater satisfaction scores. And there is more—a byproduct of this strategy is greater agent productivity and job satisfaction. In fact, agent empowerment through modern and advanced tools is the bedrock of a successful contact experience.

---

[3] https://www.isc2.org/-/media/ISC2/Research/2020/COVID-19-Impact-Report/CyberEdge-COVID-19-Impact-Report.ashx

[4] https://www.csoonline.com/article/3532825/6-ways-attackers-are-exploiting-the-covid-19-crisis.html

Conclusion

The pandemic has dramatically changed the dynamics of how businesses operate, and contact centers are front and center in this challenge. On the other hand, contact centers, as a function, have not fully kept up with technology evolution, resulting in an ever-increasing transformation opportunity that now is a need for success. Contact center leaders must prepare to operate in the new business environment by building net new capabilities and chart out a path that balances investments with progressive value delivery. To successfully execute such a complex transformation journey, executives should establish a vision and build an experienced and specialized team that brings together the broad spectrum of skills and expertise the contact center of tomorrow needs, today.

EPAM Continuum integrates business, experience and technology consulting focused on accelerating breakthrough ideas into meaningful impact.

The Future. Made Real.™

Content

Kshitij Sharma
Principal, Intelligent Automation Consulting
EPAM Continuum

Harsha Srikantan
Senior Manager, Intelligent Automation
Consulting, EPAM Continuum

Interested in discussing the best ways to manage change?
Join the conversation.
www.epam.com/intelligent-automation