Contact Center pipeline

FEATURE
BY BRENDAN READ,
CONTACT CENTER PIPELINE;
Q&A WITH CCP ADVISORY BOARD

ANSWERING THE CHALLENGES

Our Advisory Board shares timely insights into key contact center issues.

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ANSWERING THE CHALLENGES
OUR ADVISORY BOARD SHARES TIMELY INSIGHTS INTO KEY CONTACT CENTER ISSUES.

Contact centers are facing a wide array of environmental, financial, operational, and regulatory challenges. Examples include, but are not limited to:

· Budget pressures.

· Evolving customer expectations.

· Staffing shortages and turnover.

· Return-to-office (RTO) mandates.

How are these changes and others impacting contact centers? We reached out to our Advisory Board to discuss and offer their recommendations to help our industry's professionals answer and manage through them.

MIKE AOKI
REFLECTIVE KEYNOTES, INC.

One of the biggest trends affecting contact centers this year is that customers are becoming more demanding and less tolerant of poor service.

According to a Qualtrics survey, "Consumers are ghosting companies due to poor experiences and the consequences are costly." It said that 12% of global respondents reported a bad experience. Of those, 53% decreased or completely stopped spending with that organization.

In other words, more than half of customers will reduce or end their relationship after a poor experience. You may not get a second chance!

Remember that customer experience (CX) is more than just the contact center. By the time your service team steps in, the overall experience has already failed for the customer.

Your first goal is to prevent those failures from happening in the first place. Start by mapping the customer journey. Track each touchpoint. Identify and fix failure points to reduce customer effort.

Listen to the voice of the customer and the voice of the employee to uncover friction. Then remove that friction. Begin with the easiest wins. Ask yourself, "What is one common point of dissatisfaction you can resolve right now?"

Once the customer reaches your contact center, the next priority is to treat them with empathy and resolve their issue. That requires emotional intelligence and critical thinking skills.

To ensure your human agents have those skills, review your recruitment profiles, hiring practices, onboarding program, knowledge base, ongoing training, and coaching. Provide your team with the skills, support, and discretion needed to assist customers with their most frustrating challenges.

JON ARNOLD
J ARNOLD & ASSOCIATES

There's a good case to be made that the contact center space has never gone through such challenging times, and the worst thing a CX leader can do is stand still and hope the status quo will hold up.

On the other hand, knowing where to start can be just as daunting. Since there are so many different challenges, a good starting point is to understand the bigger picture, rather than trying to address each challenge in isolation, and without a plan.

To get that bigger picture, CX leaders must first distinguish between internal and external challenges. While the latter may be out of your immediate control, external challenges still have an impact on your contact center.

At a high level, here are the leading challenges for each type, all of which are likely problematic for your contact center.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

- **Staffing issues**. These include not enough agents to support call volumes, high attrition from agents that don't last, it is hard to attract new agents, and there is the cost and time required to train them.

> **"LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER AND THE VOICE OF THE EMPLOYEE TO UNCOVER FRICTION. THEN REMOVE THAT FRICTION."**
>
> **-- MIKE AOKI**

> **"...THE WORST THING A CX LEADER CAN DO IS STAND STILL AND HOPE THE STATUS QUO WILL HOLD UP."**
>
> **-- JON ARNOLD**

- **RTO mandates**. This applies to contact centers as well, and with so many remote agents, it's getting harder to bring them into a centralized facility.

- **Budgets**. It is harder now to get capital expenditure (capex) approvals for modernizing premises-based systems even when there is a strong business case for them. Plus, contact centers are often viewed as a cost center, making it more difficult to get funding for badly needed new technologies.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

- **Rapidly changing technologies**. IT and CX leaders have a hard time keeping current, as well as knowing how to make the right investments.

- **Changing customer expectations**. They want personalized service and efficient problem resolution, plus they are ahead of contact centers for adopting new technology like AI.

- **Regulations and compliance**. Many verticals must work within these ever-expanding frameworks, and legacy technology makes it difficult for contact centers to properly support customers.
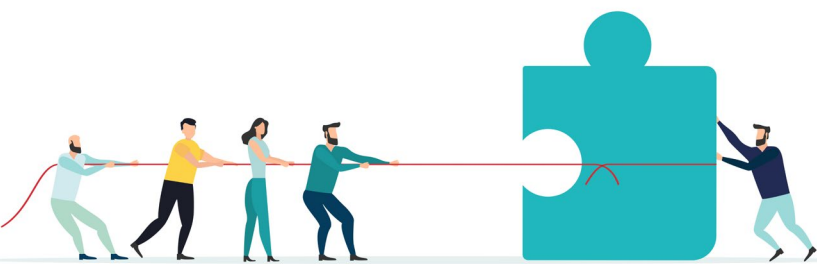
HOW CX LEADERS CAN MANAGE

Adapting to change is never easy, especially with AI evolving so quickly. With so many challenges to address, CX leaders need an overall plan in order to prioritize actions and investments.

Before getting to the tactical responses for your plan, some guiding principles should be in place to support the rationale for your actions. Here are three that will serve all CX leaders well, regardless of how effectively they are keeping up with change.

1 Become more customer-centric

Customer expectations will keep rising, and with a high comfort level using technology, they won't settle for legacy-caliber CX. Contact centers have long been operations-centric, where the focus was on internal performance rather than customer satisfaction. That focus needs to change, where all technologies and investments become built around driving better CX rather than improving agent KPIs.

2 Embrace AI for automation

Contact centers cannot afford to ignore AI, especially for its potential to automate processes as well as customer service. The latter is especially important, as call volumes will continue rising, and hiring more agents to support that isn't a practical option.

Today's AI-driven bots can handle a wide range of self-service inquiries, and are a major improvement over legacy IVR. These bots will only get better, and they represent the best way for contact centers to manage call volumes.

3 Agile approach for technology

Technology change is now a constant, and CX leaders need to move on from legacy models, where new technology remains static once in place.

As contact centers move to the cloud, the software-as-a-service (SaaS) model makes it much easier to adopt new technologies and applications, which is exactly what's needed to keep pace with today's customer expectations. This agile approach is different from the world of premises-based contact centers, but it will be critical for managing all the challenges outlined here.

DR. DEBRA BENTSON
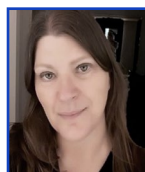
"Please stay" ...and reduce turnover

Why do people leave? The most common reasons to leave a position are integrity in the recruiting process about the work, how leadership values people, and combating the drudgery of doing the same thing repeatedly.

How can managers help retain employees who would prefer to stay but feel they must move on to other employers?

1. **Be candid about the actual work**. Avoid glamorizing the work during recruiting to get positions filled. Contact center work is hard: more specifically, mentally hard. Most callers do not call to tell us everything is great with their service; they call because they need help, and that call for help may be expressed with negative emotions.

   The hiring process can include opportunities to listen to simple and challenging calls, meet with agents to hear about doing the job, and honestly describing the expectations and measurements. They should know how they will be measured, tracked, and recorded in literally everything they do.

   These steps may weed out some candidates but will help improve the chances that they will complete the training and better match the real needs of the work.

2. **Leaders need to be "people people" because employees who feel safe and happy will stay longer and produce better results**. There are three kinds of leaders: those who have empathy, those who can learn of feign empathy, and those who need to be "promoted to customer."

   Leadership has the lofty responsibility for defining and creating the culture that encourages excellence, giving grace, and elevating the employee experience. This entails building relationships through meaningful dialogs, demonstrating genuine interest in agents as people, and having rigor around not letting coaching become a box-checking exercise.

   Train and empower agents to solve problems to boost their confidence, competence, and knowledge that they are trusted in making decisions. Not being empowered to fix things is like a knuckle crack with a ruler – it telegraphs that you cannot be trusted to make reasonable decisions to both the agents and the customer – ouch!, that hits the employee and customer experiences.

3. **Disrupt the drudgery of repetition by intentionally infusing their days and weeks with a variety of enriching activities.** Offer agents, and not just the favorites, other activities on a regular cadence. Include projects, off-phone cases, cross training/work in other departments, mentoring new hires, evaluating quality, and developing process improvements. This variety will freshen them up, improve bench strength, and reveal their potential.

It's true in and out of business that if you value and treat people well, they will stay longer.

> **"...IF YOU VALUE AND TREAT PEOPLE WELL THEY WILL STAY LONGER."**
>
> **-- DR. DEBRA BENTSON**

LORI BOCKLUND
STRATEGIC CONTACT, INC.

CHANGE IS A CONSTANT; HOW YOU ADAPT IS THE DIFFERENTIATOR

The Ancient Greek Philosopher Heraclitus tells us: "the only constant in life is change." I went down a little rabbit hole reading about that quote and loved the drumbeat of how we all need to adapt to change, because it is coming at us all the time, whether we like it or not. And that is how it is in contact centers. The channels, customer expectations, employee needs, and where and how they work *change*.

All that change creates excitement AND difficulty. Let's implement a bot (voice and chat) to help customers self-serve! We can use agent assist to shorten training and make agents more productive! We will lure staff back to the office with… well, mandates. None of that is easy.

My recommendations on how to deal with today's changes while inevitably facing budget and resource constraints follow themes that have appeared in past articles:

1. **Build and pursue a strategy**. Don't go after tactical fixes or point solutions. You will fare much better if you have a vision and a path to get there, ideally with a thoughtful business case behind it. These changes aren't a moment in time; they are part of a continuum (and constant!). And you must – and can – build agility into your strategy.

2. **Remember it's not about technology alone**. Artificial intelligence and all the amazing capabilities vendors offer make it enticing to think, "if we could just buy X, we'd solve our problems." Alas, it is never that simple. People, process, and technology is still a meaningful mantra!

3. **Implement with purpose**. Design, configuration, testing, training, rollout, and tuning matter. Implementation takes time and resources to get things right and requires an open mind to do new and different things…and embrace change!

4. **Apply Change Management**. Whether new technology, processes, or organizational roles and responsibilities, projects impact people. If you help them on that journey, you will lower risks and reap greater rewards.

5. **Never stop**. Know that you won't be finished when you go live with the latest technology, put a new process in place, or finally get enough staff, or the right staff. The journey continues with analysis, optimization, and adapting to the *next* change that comes along.

> **"THE JOURNEY CONTINUES WITH ANALYSIS, OPTIMIZATION, AND ADAPTING TO THE NEXT CHANGE THAT COMES ALONG."**
>
> **-- LORI BOCKLUND**

TIFFANY LAREAU
HUMAN NUMBERS, INC.

Contact centers face complexities that ask for solutions based on sound principles. My colleagues and I at Human Numbers encounter these every day.

Forward-thinking centers find creative ways to optimize resources. For example:

· Shifting to cloud-based infrastructure reduces hardware costs.

· Partnering with specialized service providers allows centers to focus on high-value customer interactions, thereby reducing overall expenses.

· Customers want seamless, personalized experiences across channels. Implementing unified platforms that provide a consistent experience across phone, email, chat, social media, and apps increases satisfaction.

· Developing comprehensive knowledge bases and intuitive IVR systems lowers volume and empowers customers to resolve simple issues independently.

· Using AI solutions for routine inquiries frees human agents for more complex tasks. But AI isn't a magic wand; it requires human testing first.

Investments in these programs enhance agents' abilities to empathize with and connect to customers, producing better satisfaction scores and increasing loyalty.

The tight labor market requires a fresh approach to talent management. Offering remote and hybrid options expands the talent pool.

· Implementing clear advancement paths with robust development programs and mentorship opportunities leads to higher employee satisfaction.

· Applying game-based (gamification) learning techniques makes training more engaging and effective.

· Prioritizing employee wellbeing through mental health support, fitness programs, and work-life balance eases burnout and improves performance.

The trick is in how we manage and retain talent. Closing the back door is more effective than leaving the front door wide open. There's an increase in RTO as a mandate and the hybrid model remains a popular solution.

· Upgrading infrastructure to support seamless collaboration between in-office and remote workers, including advanced video conferencing systems and virtual collaboration tools, is crucial.

· Implementing RTO policies gradually allows time for adjustment and feedback, with greater employee buy-in.

· Redesigning office spaces to support different types of work, from collaborative projects to focused individual tasks, enhances productivity and satisfaction.

· Surveying employees and adjusting policies based on their input fosters a culture of trust and flexibility.

Few associates will enjoy fully returning to the office. Clearly communicating the impact of what we're doing and why, highlighting the needs and benefits, will go a long way in this conversation with them. If you can't think of any core benefits, evaluate if RTO is the right path forward.

A contact center's success hinges on its ability to adapt and innovate. The key lies in balancing technological advancements with our human touch that defines exceptional CXs. EX = CX - the employee experience drives customer retention.

> **"THE KEY LIES IN BALANCING TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS WITH OUR HUMAN TOUCH THAT DEFINES EXCEPTIONAL CXS."**
>
> **-- TIFFANY LAREAU**

MICHELE ROWAN
PRESIDENT, CUSTOMER CONTACT STRATEGIES LLC

Let's start with where people work. Given the maturity and expansive scope of tools available to get work done, collaborate, and socialize, it's confusing for employees to be mandated into offices two-three-times per week. It's causing some disengagement in the workplace, and prompting many people to rethink their employment relationships.

The recommendation is for companies to loosen the reins on mandatory office time, and when in person gatherings really are warranted, companies need to optimize and celebrate those experiences: to match the effort of the commute.

Post-COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that professional development is stalling, particularly external professional growth. Connecting with others outside of the organization via professional conferences and exchanges gives people agency to get creative, innovate, and retool continuous improvement momentum in the workplace.

Sadly, I don't know of any organizations that haven't materially trimmed external professional development budgets. Even virtual events are suffering reduced attendance. While the political climate can be partly responsible for the gaps this year, the trend has not turned since 2022, and needs to.

On a brighter note, staffing and retention for companies that deploy the remote work model for contact centers is much improved. I know of many companies who have reduced their new-hire classes by 50% or better. The chronic churn most contact centers experienced when fully office-based is disappearing. I hope to see the benefits and cost savings here re-invested in professional development.

LAURA SIKORSKI
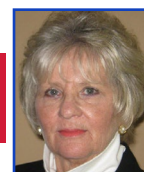
Contact centers are indeed facing a wide variety of challenges. My advice is to always begin your solution to a problem with "Getting Back to Contact Center Basics."

Take a deep breath and think about the word "innovate" and its underlying meaning, which is improvement. It might involve developing new products or services or improving technologies, processes, and marketing.

> *"...STAFFING AND RETENTION FOR COMPANIES THAT DEPLOY THE REMOTE WORK MODEL FOR CONTACT CENTERS IS MUCH IMPROVED."*
>
> *-- MICHELE ROWAN*

Long-term success with your contact center is realizing revenue, service rankings, and customer retention are crucial.

To achieve that, are you still following your path to service excellence? You need to remember the "3 R's": Reinventing, Reconnecting, and Refreshing with your company's values, mission, and vision.

Now let's look at the challenges.

BUDGET PRESSURES

First begin with understanding your expenses. Do you have the ability to contribute to your contact center needs and if so, do you have plans on how to control these expenses on a monthly and annual basis?

1 *Operating expenses:*

· Personnel (payroll and benefits, salaries, taxes, healthcare), recruiting and turnover, employee relations, seminars, and incentives.

· Systems/software (technology e.g., contact center-as-a-service (CCaaS), payroll/attendance, CRM, collaboration/networking, workforce optimization)

2 *Capital expenses:*

· Leasehold improvements

· Furniture, fixtures, and equipment

3 *Building operations:*

· Rent

· Utilities

· Security

· Liability insurance

4 *Other expenses:*

· Consumables

· Printing and stationery

EVOLVING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Second, start by looking at your website through the eyes of your customers. Do you have a customer portal?

How are you presenting the products and services that you offer? Are you presenting what your company offers in a simple and logical way to satisfy customer needs? Do you have too many FAQs?
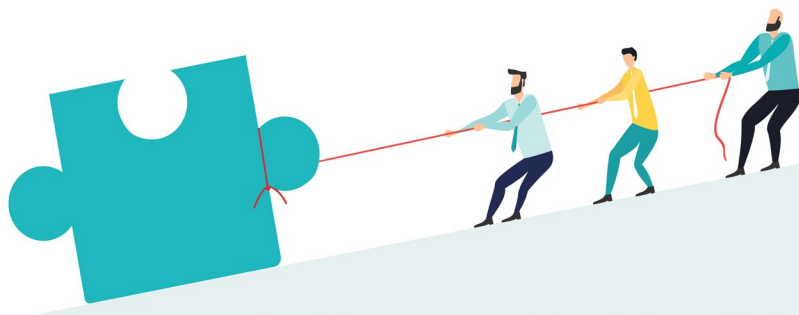
Nine out of 10 times I am extremely frustrated when I go to a website for the first time and try to use the search function. It once took me 10 times to get an answer to a new dishwasher issue that I was having!

Every interaction is an event that impacts how your company is perceived by your customers. So, think like your customers. They want to do business with you on *their* terms, when *they* want, on the channel of *their* choice, and *they* expect the same service *regardless* of the channel.

> *"LONG-TERM SUCCESS WITH YOUR CONTACT CENTER IS REALIZING REVENUE, SERVICE RANKINGS, AND CUSTOMER RETENTION ARE CRUCIAL."*
>
> *-- LAURA SIKORSKI*

STAFF SHORTAGES AND TURNOVER

Finally, but not least, your employees are your company's best resource and greatest asset. Employee satisfaction is paramount; the happier they are, the better they treat your customers.

Remember the "EXIT" interview. It will give you a heads-up on why staff is voluntarily leaving or why you're letting them go is your fault! Ⓟ

Brendan Read is Editor of Contact Center Pipeline. He has been covering and working in customer service and sales and for contact center companies for most of his career. Brendan has edited and written for leading industry publications and has been an industry analyst. He also has authored and co-authored books on contact center design, customer support, and working from home. Brendan can be reached at brendan@contactcenterpipeline.com.

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FOR CONTACT CENTER PROFESSIONALS

ENABLING A NEW GENERATION OF CX AND EX PROFESSIONALS to create successful customer management strategies, develop cutting-edge technologies, refine the skills necessary to advance their career, and build a culture that advances the contact center within the organization—that's what we do.

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INSIGHT AND INSPIRATION FOR CONTACT CENTER PROFESSIONALS