



# WHAT ROLE DOES THE CONTACT CENTRE HAVE TO PLAY IN SOCIETY'S NEXT NORMAL?

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**Since the start of 2020, almost two billion people around the world have been told that they must stay indoors, work from home and limit all social contact. And now, only months after this sudden and extreme shift, the limitations and restrictions faced by individuals, groups and organisations, are being relaxed and removed. But all with a distinct air of uncertainty and rapid change.**

There have already been articles written that look at the impact of changing work practices in industry and how people will want and be able to work in the future. Equally, there have been pieces of research carried out based on the changes to our overall societal and cultural formations. This sparks a big debate from a consumer behaviour perspective and drives us to formulate ideas on how we best serve our workforces and our customers and of course our profitability and ability to survive and grow. If we look at these two aspects and how they impact one another in the context of a contact centre, we ask ourselves where the changes to a contact centre build, technology, location and day to day running come from, and how we should be looking to handle them.

The idea of 'working from home' is now being more widely extended to 'work from anywhere', as well as more flexible with regards to working hours. With the potential rise in staff morale from a better work life balance, the flexible model, is on the rise. A poll from Gartner reports that 48% of employees will likely work remotely at least part of the time after COVID-19 versus 30% before the pandemic.

As the employees of one organisation are also another organisation's customers, gone perhaps is the just-before-9am Monday morning peak, seen within multiple industries running customer service departments, where people would arrive at work and make that quick call to their bank or gas company, before they start their traditional working day.

The traditional pattern of peaks and troughs organisations with customer engagement teams have historically experienced, based on a set 8-hour working day, across the five-day Monday to Friday week, is seeing the same fate. Over the last few months, my family and I have taken to going to the



beach or the woods for picnics, away from the rest of the world during the week, in the search for outdoor isolation. Something we would have previously done at the weekend. Granted, when schools go back, we won't have the same luxury, but there will be no rush to doing 'weekend activities' only on the weekend. That's not to say everyone will be suddenly be 'on shift' seven days a week, making up their hours. The opportunity for outcome based working practices is presented, and we should measure success based on achievement, opposed to hours worked.

This is something that our company adopted some time ago. With a team spread geographically family life isn't always in the place someone works. Over the last couple of years, we've had one of our team members spend the school holidays in Finland with family, and another travel for a month in a caravan around the UK merging work with holiday time as they went.

The nature of flexibility is that there is unlikely to be any order or pattern that replaces what has gone before. Not everyone will be flexible in the same ways on the same days or times. That doesn't mean that this unpredictability cannot be managed. Workforce management tools have always been a must have for contact centres to manage traffic. They are now more relevant than ever for their analytics capabilities as new data trends emerge, and businesses ensure they can be flexible and ensure accurate staffing levels.

We are all aware of the huge economic impact the closure of highstreets has had. The cry for the public to head back to non-essential shopping and spend, spend, spend, is obviously being heeded, as in June retail sales increased by 3.4% in comparison to June 2019, with a similar growth for July. The fastest growing rate since May 2018. But this is not the same as people heading back to the "actual" highstreet. And where retail spend might be up, physical footfall is not. A YouGov survey from June told us that just over 50% of adults were comfortable with going out in public to do non-essential shopping, with this trend of only marginally more sales in stores than online, continuing into July. Certain businesses should therefore be less concerned with when customers are returning, but how.

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## **IN JUNE RETAIL SALES INCREASED BY 3.4% IN COMPARISON TO JUNE 2019**

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Many of us, myself included, now 'go to' our favourite restaurants as takeaways. Rich Hall, our CTO celebrated a big '0' birthday recently and celebrated with his wife with a Deliveroo from a Michelin Star restaurant. It would have been a real treat - had it turned up!



Businesses, like restaurants, who conduct their complete delivery of goods and services in a physical space, in the physical presence of the customer are now finding themselves reliant on aiming to deliver that same experience via other channels. And it is not so easy, especially if it requires a third party whose primary purpose is not the same as theirs. It is not enough to simply recognise that the ability to work, socialise and shop has become dependent on having basic IT kit and a decent broadband connection. Functionally, businesses can carry on by having the right technology, but it needs to be used in the right way and fulfilling more than the basics. This puts digital customer experience at the forefront of the survival of our retail and service industries.

The growth in the requirement and reliance on technology by businesses is matched by the rapid, and in some cases unexpected, change in acceptance of technology by society and consumers.

During lockdown there was a 50% increase in video conferencing and similar spikes occurred in demand for social media and virtual private network (VPN). Before now video as a communication channel between customer and business, has been slow on the uptake from both parties. However, video conferencing has become a core method of communication in work and even in social settings, replacing all forms of face to face interaction globally. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, video wouldn't have been listed as a core communication channel for consumer to business interactions, despite having been available for decades.

And there is no one demographic that this applies to. A family friend told me of her mother-in-law in her 60s who has recently moved her weekly Italian classes, with her other 60-something year old friends, from a classroom to a weekly videoconference.

While on the other side of the scale, my own children have had weekly catchups with their teacher, assessing their reading over video. The use of video is quickly becoming a part of everyday life.

Particular industry sectors, where trust and the personal touch is a key brand value may be best placed to look at an introduction of video to their customer service teams as society becomes more accepting of the fact that relationships are now being maintained via video. When you want to look someone in the eye, but you cannot be physically present, video is the next best thing to meeting in real life. Particularly as societies priorities and measures of acceptable risk change.

The Health Sector, the most personal service area there is, is already leading in this area. As people become more comfortable using video, I can see there being an increase in use of video technology across multiple other sectors.

The car industry, for example, has been one of the hardest hit in recent months, where sales have fallen to the lowest levels since 1971. As a big-ticket item, car retailers are met with the challenge of creating the same experiences for buyers who either no longer feel comfortable shopping, or for those who are now demonstrating new buying behaviours. Technology will be utilised more in these areas through things like interactive video which provides a practical solution of allowing the buyer to see their potential purchase as well as giving the customer the complete reassurance that the agents are fully focused on them, and focusing on resolving their issues and answering their questions, which can lead to a superior engagement and level of customer service.

If it hadn't been for Covid-19, this rapid acceptance of 'new' technology may not have happened on either the customer or business side.

I have worked in the Contact Centre industry since 2001, just as IP Telephony was taking over. The actual handset found in all traditional contact centres right up until a couple of months ago, has, for almost 20 years been completely unnecessary. And now, after all this time, two things are driving organisations to make the shift from having the clunky bit of plastic on their desk.

The first, when agents were sent home, unsurprisingly the telephone handset was left on the desk. The shift to using softphones had mass and immediate adoption. Secondly, with organisations looking to have more flexible working practices, a fresh look at ensuring that all employees have a consistent experience whether in the office, at home, or working from a PC, laptop, or mobile is at front of mind. For years we've known that a familiar, well designed unified experience, with everything easily accessible to agents can lead to huge efficiency gains, as well as a better working environment for employees, and now it's back on the agenda. With multiple additional channels to communicate by, such as chat, email, SMS

and video, already part of the unified desktop, I would suggest most organisations will say goodbye to the traditional handset for good.

There is no denying the shift to a digital workplace has been rapid and dramatic, however the role of contact centre is, as ever, all about delivering

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## **BUSINESSES MUST BE CREATIVE IN THE WAY THEY APPLY THEIR TECHNOLOGY, TO ADAPT**

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great customer experience, but now with a new customer journey emerging. Businesses must be creative in the way they apply their technology, to adapt, while continuing to compete on customer service. Rather than returning to the ways of old, organisations should embrace the new norm, look at ways to improve the flexibility for the workforce without compromising the experience to their customers and their staff alike. Being able to manage teams remotely is vital. Use the tools that have been available for many years enabling a consistent experience from any location, on any device, making it possible for customers to contact you in their most preferred method.

However, if anything, the last few months have emphasised it is our need for human to human interaction. 'The real person' will not be directly replaced by an artificial counterpart any time soon, and the businesses that grow into the next normal, will be those that use technology to bridge the gaps that have developed so rapidly, and allow customers to deal with their queries in the most appropriate means possible in their own new habits, while always having someone on the end of the telephone (or video) when needed.

I would hate to see our customers race back to how they did things before. COVID-19 has presented an opportunity for change... the organisations that embrace the opportunity will be the ones, in my opinion, who emerge as the victors.