Solving customer contact centre challenges with Conversational AI

About this white paper

Contact centres are often viewed as cost drivers rather than business drivers. This is understandable, when you consider that differentiation efforts in this space have often struggled to be sustainable from a cost or staffing perspective.

Figuring out the formula of investment to increased income is helped when you have an experienced guide to shorten your journey. Read on to get the benefit of our two companies' experience, multiplied by hundreds of clients.

No company sets out to fail its customers, but many businesses today are failing to serve their customers effectively due to inadequate customer services operations. This comes with real costs: negative promotion, customer churn and missed revenue opportunities.

For too long, customer operations teams have implemented digital support as a defensive gatekeeper between customers and agents, when improving customer experience and adding value should have been the goal. The problems have become so bad that regulators have had to step into the private sector to force companies to provide better customer service. It's a wake-up call to a number of industries and there is now greater recognition that standards need to be improved.

However, in trying to fix the challenges, companies are making important misses, in terms of their approach, design and technology choices. This white paper will examine the future of contact centres starting with the change drivers, uncovering common mistakes and their hidden business costs, and explain how to rebuild to create new opportunities and better outcomes all round. If the question is how can contact centres improve their customer experience and ultimately their bottom line, then Conversational AI should be the answer.
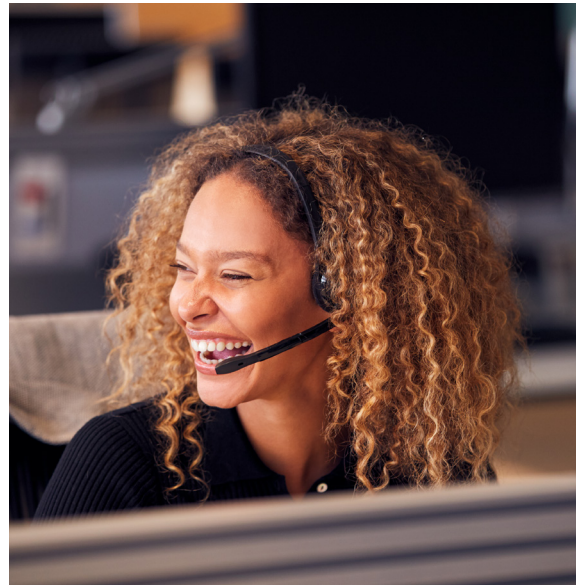
Cost is not a business driver: change is. For companies looking to adapt in the face of economic uncertainty, it can be tempting to focus on cost-saving measures while putting off investments that will bring growth. In some circumstances this can be a short-term necessity; however, it is ultimately competitors who make meaningful improvements for their customers and staff that will grow and thrive.

Change needs to happen now

Increasing demand on contact centres and rising cost-to-serve are impacting decisions that companies are making, with a knock-on impact on customer satisfaction.

Experience of the recent pandemic has changed us as customers forever; the inability to meet in person drove us online for all forms of interaction. From medical support, rescheduling holidays, to obtaining emergency loans, contact centres have been at the centre of it all. In a time that heavily influenced consumer loyalty, slow responses, high attrition rates, call volumes and delays meant organisations faced a huge loss in brand confidence.

One may think that with things now getting back to normal and people getting used to living with COVID, contact centres everywhere would be able to easily bounce back to pre-pandemic levels of service and customer satisfaction. This has not been the case.

A good example of this can be found in a report released by the Central Bank of Ireland in February 2022. It showed that 'customers of Irish banks have had to endure waits of up to two hours for telephone support with as many as 50% of one bank's customers simply giving up and ending calls before being able to speak to a human'. The Central Bank assessed call wait times, call abandonment rates and resourcing levels across the retail banks and painted a dismal picture of the level of customer care on offer. While the regulator's review did not identify the worst offenders when it came to customer care, it said it would be applying pressure on all the banks over the course of 2022. The Spanish government also proposed regulations that would require customer wait times be kept below three minutes or companies would face harsh financial penalties.

And if you think you are in the clear because your contact centre is not keeping your customers on hold for two hours, think again. Consumer trust has been broken and their patience is wearing thin. In fact, a

Microsoft study found that 26% of customers were extremely frustrated when an agent did not have an answer or ability to resolve an issue. You do not want to frustrate any customers, let alone a quarter of them.

At the same time, existing staff are not being given the tools they need to turn things around. In 2021, we interviewed 1,700 business and technology executives who cited improving the customer experience as their top business priority, yet on the whole they are not succeeding at doing this in contact centres.

Clearly change is needed, so let's examine the factors hampering meaningful change and the key issues that can be addressed using Conversational AI

Solutions to transform contact centre performance

Fragmentation	Use Conversational AI to unify systems
• Solutions built on legacy systems come with limitations • Information is spread across silos, even when it's needed for the same process • Staff are forced to log into multiple accounts and flip between screens to access different backend systems • Staff may be required to duplicate data between systems as part of the same workflow.	• Reach and update information in disparate systems using API calls • All data is captured, enabling data-driven decisions, refinements and process improvements • Draw upon all available information, including device details, to deliver more secure and efficient service. For example checking the phone number or device location for authentication or call routing.

Reactive decisions & processes	Build for stability
• Facing demand and labour supply challenges, measures to ramp up service and patch gaps were put together quickly. The resulting patchwork solutions require complicated interventions • Companies looking to save costs by cutting seats may end up with a higher total cost in lost revenue opportunities and lost customers.	• Dynamic scaling handles fluctuations in staffing. In fact, it can be the fastest way to handle changes across channels, with the benefit of supporting training so staff are prompted with the right wording • Agent assist supports staff, with resultant lower wait times and shorter call times • Providing support to staff can also help with retainment.

Deflection	Provide proactive guidance
• Call centres struggling with current call volumes often try to get users to help themselves in the form of self service, so divert customers to other channels • Self-service channels often fail to solve customer problems • Bots that can only handle FAQ are another type of blocker. People usually want action, not just answers. Whether the answer was helpful or not may determine their level of frustration with this outcome, but they will likely still require help.	• Reimagine processes to provide the best support. Normally automating processes will cut out several steps and eliminate bouncing customers between different departments to receive support • Reaching out to customers proactively with actionable outbound messages when appropriate, rather than waiting for their reactive inbound calls once they're potentially already stressed or disappointed • Make notifications actionable directly from the message • Results-based interaction means that customers are assisted in achieving their goals at each step.

Disempowerment	Empower staff and customers
• In their attempts to cut call times or get staff to handle more customers in parallel, companies often miss opportunities to improve customer experience. Staff are not encouraged to help customers with multiple issues or consider what other goals customers might have.	• Agent assist supports staff to provide better service, reduce their workload, and can supplement training efforts • When built properly, virtual agents can support customers through multi-step processes and recommend other actions to take next.

Conversational AI can bring solutions to the challenges previously mentioned and offer quantifiable results to contact centres such as better Net Promoter Scores, reduced cost per call, and opportunities to capture and contain revenue.

CGI's view

CGI's view is that how you design is as important as the technology you select, but the impact of each piece cannot be isolated. As with any good design process, it's about creating a loop that starts and ends with analysis: analyse, prioritise, redesign, repeat.

1. Start from existing data

As with many process reengineering efforts, the best place to start is with analysis of your existing datasets. The good news is generally, contact centres hold vast quantities of data that can help guide appropriate solutions, covering not just the number of calls you receive but also the types of queries and the regular fixes to those problems.

Starting with automation and self-service of high-frequency, low-complexity tasks is a quick way to take pressure off agents while efficiently serving your customers and improving time to value. This will also buy you more time to make greater improvements.

2. Fundamentally redesign processes

Using Conversational AI reduces the time required of customers by, for example, automatically including known data instead of asking for it again or increasing speed of information exchange both vs. email/post or by elimination/reduction of queue time. Remember, although your business processes may have been digitalised in the last couple of years, it's likely that the processes have not been adapted to take advantage of the technology and so don't produce the expected results nor increase efficiency.

Technology enables you to draw upon much more information, including device details, to deliver more secure and efficient service, i.e., checking phone number or device location for authentication or call routing.

The real TX (Total Experience) game-changers will generally be found in your mid-complexity range of queries: those that require information to be correlated across systems or resolved with the help of multiple groups or steps in the supply chain. Simplifying cross-system work at the process level, with automation and digital support for employees from Conversational AI, minimises employee time spent on tasks and speeds up resolution time for customers.

3. Prioritise and plan

Improving total experience with an intelligent automation ecosystem is possible and cost effective, but it is important to identify clear objectives and milestones to achieve it. Decide what success will look like, how you will measure it, and plan work from there.

Start by focusing on resolving customer issues faster and simplifying your agents' work to design use cases for holistic omnichannel delivery that are valuable. Making it easier for agents to do their job will drive down the cost to serve. Simplify their workflows and processes, provide shortcuts and support, and minimise or automate repetitive, mindless tasks.

Look for opportunities to be proactive in communication with your customers. Outbound information can head off inbound calls, and customers will be happier when they do have to come to you if they've been kept informed along the way. Automated, actionable notifications or outbound calls by Virtual Agents can prevent or alleviate spikes when there are incidents.

4. Support staff

Creating well-thought-out ways for Virtual Agents to handle calls can mean your existing agents get better. Agent assist capabilities support staff on calls, listening in to recommend responses behind the scenes and helping to update disparate backend systems. Foremost, this helps save agent time and can help bring a consistent brand voice across channels. Importantly, it means minimal training is required to get to good fast, whether training new agents or retraining existing agents on process changes. They learn how to word new responses on the job – which can be particularly important in compliance cases. One important tip is to release new flows as agent assist first, so existing agents can in turn help train the bots.

5. Analyse and refine

With Conversational AI all data is captured, enabling data-driven decisions, refinements and process improvements. Continuously improve by employing analytics and monitoring to see how well your customers are being understood and what needs you're not handling.

There are three main types of data to investigate: factual, sentimental and contextual. Factual data is the most common type we think of when looking at call logs – what intents are people seeking help with and were they understood. Sentiment analysis is another important data set to work with. Understanding how people are feeling provides the opportunity to adjust responses in order to better handle their requests and to make people feel understood. Finally, contextual data is underutilised to companies' detriment. Experiences are much more satisfying when relevant information is taken into account. By knowing where a customer or colleague is coming from, and what they might want to do or know based on that information, we can create much more satisfying interactions.

6. Technology

Technology choices matter. Historically, if you wanted to enable new digital channels, you would have had to purchase standalone channel technology, design individual process workflows per channel and separate integration pathways.

However, this is no longer the case as we move into the era of conversational platforms. Platforms that are capable of operating across multiple channels and modalities, with consolidated, channel-aware workflows in multiple languages, all at the same time.

These platforms typically consist of a number of operational areas that allow you to build the right communication paths and channels, in the most efficient way possible.

The construction and enablement layers include all the pieces that business users and developers need to collaborate and create a wide range of sophisticated, multilingual, multichannel, Conversational AI applications that automate support of the customer journey. These solutions can easily integrate with legacy systems via APIs to provide end-to-end automation and drive customer engagement.

Conversational AI system architecture layers
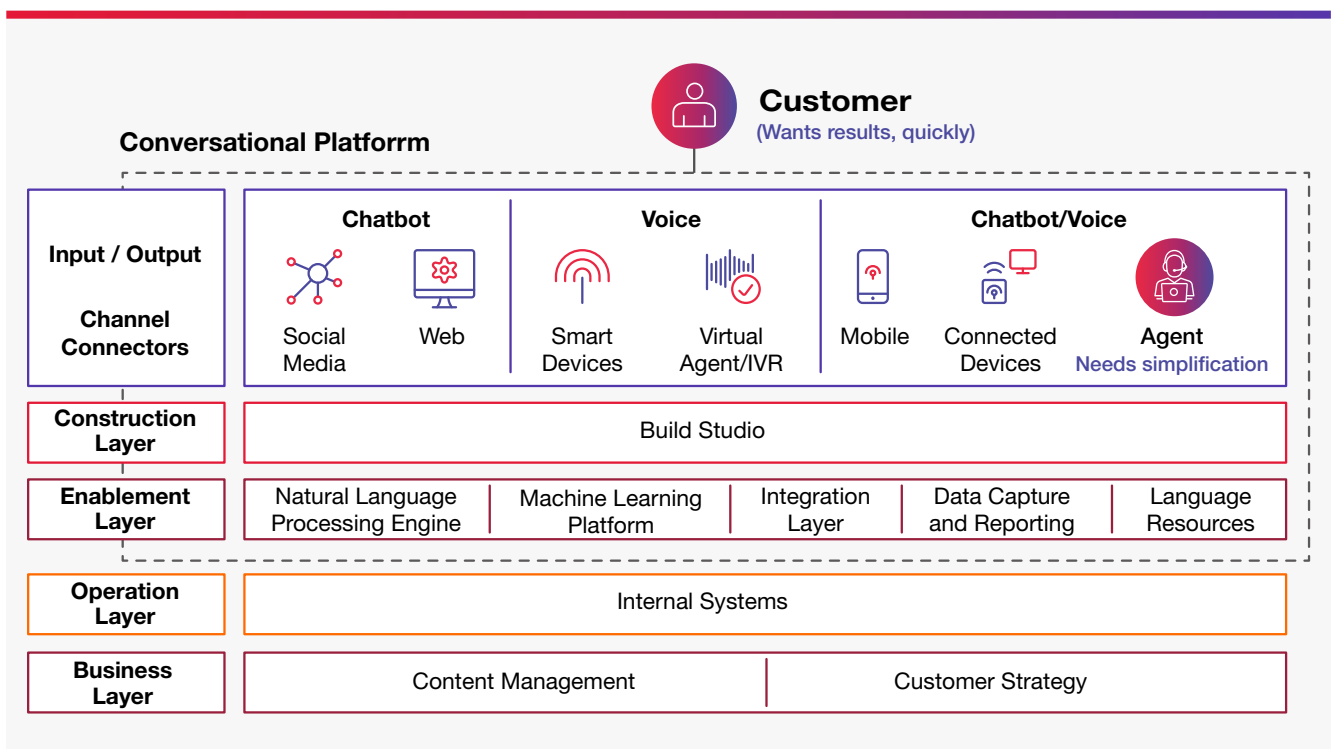
- Modality can be adjusted dependent on channel frictionlessly

- Channel connectors empower Virtual Agents to work across the omni-channel seamlessly from social messenger to in-car without the need to rebuild workflows

- Powerful tools including NLP and Machine Learning Algorithms are now inbuilt to understand context or provide sentiment analysis bring Virtual Agents to life whilst data capture and reporting allows for customer experience analysis

- Internal systems provide and record data through APIs, for legacy systems RPA can be an enabler for automation

It's all about the data

The more engaged a customer is, the more information they reveal. Since data is so intrinsic to the return on investment (ROI) of Conversational AI, we recommend that customers own their data and even provide data mining and privacy tools to maximise its value. Using conversational platforms with embedded data capture resources, organisations can move beyond basic business intelligence and offer greater customer personalisation, targeted recommendations, and predictive AI models.

The real value provided by Conversational AI technology starts with intelligent routing and truly shines when you get to end-to-end automation solutions. The combined effects of technology selection and design are shown in the Stages of Chatbot Maturity below.

Stages of chatbot maturity

Customer: I have a connectivity problem

FAQ Bot	Basic routing	Intelligent routing	End-to-end automation
"For your connectivity-related problems **visit the following link…**"	"I hear you have connectivity problems. **I will pass you to the technical team.**"	"Good morning, Ms. Smith. This is Bot from Company Y. We noticed you're having connectivity issues and our system indicates that the bill from May was not processed properly. **Could you confirm your address and I will connect you to the billing department?**"	"Good morning, Ms. Smith. This is X from Company Y. We noticed you're having connectivity issues and our system indicates that the bill from May was not processed properly. **Let's get your payment processed. Start by confirming your address.**"

Drawback	Benefits
• Example of the 'deflection' strategy that directs the user away from the contact centre • Does not provide engagement and there is no way to confirm whether the customer problem has been solved. • Minimal integration with third-party systems • Might appear to save time, but does not qualify the customer request • Does not help the operator, who will have to ask again for information and risk annoying the customer if they are transferred again.	• The solution gathers information from the user to qualify the type of issue • Connects to third party systems to check the information • Corrects it, and provides a solution to the customer before an agent intervenes • Agents aren't even needed with end-to-end automation.

Good technology makes good design possible; but without good design, even good technology can deliver bad bots.

Let Conversational AI work for your organisation

As global costs for products and services increase, managers of contact centres are placing focus on cost-efficient operations. With this, cost efficiency turns into programs that are leaning towards 'run the mess for less' or 'manage with what you have' rather than creating value-driven business cases.

Ironically, the costs of the inaction when it comes to Conversational AI investment far outweigh the costs of fixing things. And getting started should not be a high-cost proposition. Start small and grow is the best way to implement Conversational AI solutions.

Conversational AI can help you decrease costs while you improve the experience of your customers and your agents. Augmentation of existing staff with Virtual Agents and agent assist support will shorten agent call times and handle some requests fully (containment rate), without staff involvement. These efficiencies bring down your total cost per call (CPC) dramatically. Using our ROI calculator, we can show companies what to expect in their particular situation. Let's run one simple calculation: If you can reduce staff time spent by 30% and your current CPC is £4, your CPC goes down to £2.80.

The ROI of a Conversational AI solution and the impact it has on customer satisfaction will increase proportionally to the complexity of the use case and the maturity of the enterprise. Providing better customer service improves Net Promoter Scores (NPS) – some clients have experienced double-digit percentage increases on this metric for both chat and phone channels.

And intangible costs, like time saved training because of agent assist and its resulting time saved per call, add up to real savings and sources of both employee and customer satisfaction.

By making their customers happier companies can raise CSATs, attract new customers, reduce churn, handle purchase difficulties, sell contextually and grow new revenue through increasing basket size.

Just as in our everyday lives, positive, natural conversations lead to positive outcomes for all. Turning your contact centre from a cost driver to a business driver does require careful planning, but by focusing on digitalising the conversations you have and would like to have with your customers, you can create truly engaging journeys that have tangible impacts across your entire brand experience.

About Artificial Solutions

Artificial Solutions® (SSME:ASAI) is the leading specialist in Conversational AI. We enable communication with applications, websites, and devices in everyday, humanlike natural language via voice, text, touch, or gesture input.

Artificial Solutions' advanced conversational AI Teneo®, allows business users and developers to create sophisticated, highly intelligent applications that run across 86 languages and dialects, multiple platforms, and channels in record time. The ability to analyse and make use of the enormous quantities of conversational data is fully integrated within Teneo, delivering unprecedented levels of data insight that reveal what customers are truly thinking.

Artificial Solutions' conversational AI technology makes it easy to implement a wide range of natural language applications such as virtual assistants, conversational bots, speech-based conversational UIs for smart devices and more. It is already used daily by millions of people across hundreds of private and public sector deployments worldwide.

For more information, please visit
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About CGI

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Founded in 1976, CGI is among the largest IT and business consulting services firms in the world.

We are insights-driven and outcomes-based to help accelerate returns on your investments. Across 21 industry sectors in 400 locations worldwide, our 88,500 professionals provide comprehensive, scalable and sustainable IT and business consulting services that are informed globally and delivered locally.

We partner with over 150 technology companies so that we can dynamically bring you best-of-breed technology, to not only help you deliver today's business outcomes, but also be ready for tomorrow.

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