Bringing Intelligence to the Contact Center

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The contact center is often one of the most undervalued parts of an enterprise’s IT estate. However, the contact center is also one of the most important points of contact, whether between a business and its customers, for customer service or sales teams, or with internal stakeholders and employees.

Investing in an improved contact center experience is one of the best ways to improve customer and/or employee satisfaction. Yet the ability to invest in the contact center is often hampered by the cost of running it.

The explosive growth of widely available cloud contact services and machine-learning tools has put powerful new Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities in the hands of contact center managers to improve customer service in all forms. Indeed, enterprise executives today cite customer experience as their No. 1 reason for investing in AI.

AI technologies offer a way to improve a contact center’s performance while at the same time reducing costs. AI can also help enterprises gain real value from the vast amounts of data stored within the contact center.

In the COVID-19 world, AI technologies have demonstrated that they can help companies adjust to the most difficult challenges. AI technologies have helped enterprises support home workers and have allowed managers and supervisors to maintain high levels of supervision even when working in different locations.

AI has also helped enterprises respond through automation and intelligent call routing – factors which have increased capacity, boosted efficiency, and improved the customer experience.

AT&T, a market-leading service provider for secure contact center, unified communications, and network services, has worked with GlobalData, a global leader in market research and analysis, to talk to enterprises who are deploying AI technology in their contact center environments.

GlobalData spoke to contact center decision makers at enterprises globally across multiple verticals (including finance, retail, utilities, healthcare, and manufacturing) to understand the benefits they have gained and advice they can offer to other enterprises looking to invest in AI.
Key Findings

- Enterprises that have deployed AI solutions are seeing real benefits from those implementations
- Respondents felt that AI is the future of the Contact Center
- AI projects that identify clear use cases are the most likely to succeed
- Companies that were early investors in AI plan to increase investment and expand use cases
- AI tools have helped to reduce customer churn and increase sales, contributing to improved customer satisfaction key performance indicators (KPIs)
- Agent satisfaction was a key outcome of AI implementations in the contact center
- Enterprises have achieved a wide range of benefits from AI implementations: improved accuracy and efficiency top the list
- First call resolution was ranked as a primary use case in implementing AI in the contact center
- AI achieves its best results when it complements human agent actions

Recommendations

- Respondents highlighted proper planning and resource allocation as the keys to success
- AI is a new technology space with new players — enterprises should evaluate multiple options before selecting a vendor
- Achieving executive support and addressing cultural resistance are critical to achieving AI adoption
- Enterprises should work closely with a trusted technology partner to evaluate their current environment, identify clear objectives, and agree on a deployment roadmap
- Businesses need to shore up internal technical expertise prior to deploying AI and commit sufficient in-house resources through the deployment and beyond
- Enterprises should identify a technology partner who understands data security and compliance requirements
What is driving the growth of AI?

COVID-19 and the Contact Center

The biggest challenge that businesses have faced in 2020/21 has undoubtedly been the impact of the Coronavirus crisis. The crisis has emphasized and heightened the importance of contact centers by increasing the need for businesses to communicate with their customers and partners while at the same time facing limitations for in-person communication. This dilemma has caused enterprises to suddenly get more serious about digital transformation. Remote working has become a viable alternative, and Cloud-based contact centers have become attractive to those who avoided it in the past. Additionally, many contact center employees have had to adjust to working from home. GlobalData’s research indicates that more than 50% of enterprises expect home-working to be much more common for the long-term after COVID-19, and 60% believe that more flexible and mobile working practices will be much more commonplace.

Automation has also taken on a new and urgent appeal. As we shift from short-term responses to the COVID-19 challenge to a new way of life, enterprises that employ self-service and scaled automation capabilities to improve customer and employee experiences will likely outpace their competition.

This whitepaper will outline some of the ways that AI technologies can help enterprises respond to the additional challenges presented by COVID-19.

Triggers & Pain Points

In addition to COVID-19, there are several familiar challenges facing contact center managers:

- Very manual operational support
- Inconsistent or non-personalized customer and employee experiences across service delivery channels
- High percentage of non-digital interactions in contact centers
- Low customer and employee satisfaction scores and customer retention
- Long wait times in phone queues
- Poor customer and employee experiences caused by underperforming bots
- Lack of simplified means for customers and employees to consume services
- Limited ability to respond quickly to shifts in business needs due to long application development lead times

AI technology is helping to overcome them....
AI Doesn’t Have to Be Difficult

AI can seem like a complicated technology area that requires the support of supercomputer resources.

During the COVID-19 crisis, businesses may also be wary of taking on projects that may seem complicated. However, the survey highlights that many enterprises are already utilizing AI and gaining positive results. This is because AI is a natural extension of the analytical tools and performance monitoring already deployed in most contact centers.

One of the key recommendations from the enterprises spoken to is that companies deploying AI technologies should identify clear business needs within the contact center environment. But the survey also highlighted that respondents felt that they could easily identify objectives that delivered both efficiency and customer satisfaction benefits.

AT&T has AI built into its AT&T Cloud Contact Center platform. It also offers AI as part of its modular ‘add-ons’ using the AT&T Contact Center Essentials portfolio. This enables AT&T to work with existing infrastructure, whether on premises or cloud-based, reducing the complexity and cost of the deployment process. The services available include:

- Omnichannel
- Chatbots
- Customer Journey Orchestration
- Conversational AI
- Cloud-based Intelligent Virtual Assistant (IVR)

“Make things easier with the use of AI”
Head of IT, Pharmaceuticals, APAC

“Right planning is key”
Head of Contact Center, Manufacturing, North America
The GlobalData and AT&T survey also highlights many of the potential use cases for AI in the Contact Center. The table below highlights the three top priority areas the surveyed enterprises were seeking to improve when investing in AI.
AI Use cases

- The table above highlights that AI is being used to address the most common pain points for contact center managers:

- Improving customer service and customer retention

- Allowing the most common and routine inquiries to be automated, freeing up agents for more complicated customer calls

- AI improves data recording accuracy and gives agents access to more relevant information, which improves first time call resolution

- Agents who are better able to help customers and are performing less repetitive tasks deliver better service and are less likely to leave

- AI is helping agents to identify sales opportunities and ensure that customers are getting the right product or service

- AI-powered analytics are being used to better understand customer behavior and internal business practices

- AI can help businesses identify irregular behavior and transactions, increasing fraud prevention

- Combining AI and IoT can trigger automatic alerts — e.g., for maintenance, or safety or security alerts

- The potential of AI is helping businesses achieve a competitive advantage through an improved customer experience

The Benefits of AI: Expected and Unexpected

Respondents indicated that AI has delivered benefits in the areas that they anticipated, but also in ways that they had not anticipated:
Agent Satisfaction and Training

Staff turnover is one of the biggest challenges facing contact center managers. The cost of training agents can be high and often involves taking more experienced agents off the front line to help newer colleagues.

Enterprises surveyed stated that they found one of the most unexpected, but very welcomed, benefits of deploying AI technologies in the contact center is improved employee satisfaction. Agents felt that they were better able to help customers, meaning that they were happier in their job. This is important because it improves the performance of the contact center and significantly reduces staff turnover.

AI technology also offers ways to support agents. AI assistants, for example, can provide recommendations to agents — e.g., sales suggestions, or common solutions to indicated problems. AI-assisted agent support also enables agents to more quickly find answers — such as to customer queries, or corporate guidelines and procedures. This is particularly important for newer agents who may otherwise need to seek assistance from colleagues. The ability to quickly gain access to information and procedures can also reduce the amount of time agents need to spend in training and increase upsell/cross-sell opportunities.

Following the impact of COVID-19, supporting agents has become even more important. Many customers calling in to contact centers are in heightened emotional states — a situation that puts more stress on agents. The agents themselves may have disrupted home lives and, particularly if working from home, may be working in less-than-ideal circumstances. The ability for managers to detect when agents are under stress will improve performance levels and lead to higher staff satisfaction. This can be achieved through AI technology such as sentiment analysis, which can in real-time monitor a conversation and analyze through language used how a customer engagement is progressing.
To present information about caller and likely reason for call
Agent-facing digital signage or wallboards
Support a knowledge base where system makes suggestions in real time to agents in real time
Workforce optimization and workforce management
Obtain recommendations for the optimization of capabilities such as effective call routing and escalation
Automate the optimization of processes such as call routing and escalation
Other

APAC  North America  Western Europe

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Automation and Efficiency

One of the biggest cost factors in any contact center is staffing. Staffing can also create uncertainty when it comes to adapting to unexpected demand. Enterprises have found that AI technology offers a way to identify and automate the most common and routine inquiries, and for calls that require the help of a human agent, to direct the call to the agent best able to help the customer.

AI enables a wide set of use cases including the following:

- **Data Collection** — Product registration, program enrollment, insurance policy verification, customer authentication, product details entry, CRM entry
- **Reservations/Appointments** — Make/cancel appointments, schedule delivery, outbound reservation confirmation
- **Order Management** — Order status, returns, reorder confirmation, delivery reminders, predictive outbound campaigns for restocking
- **Billing/Inquiry** — Invoice requests, balance inquiries, outbound collections calls
- **Account Management** — Address updates, activation, password resets, reward program

“It allows service reps to focus on complex queries and helps to resolve regular queries faster, which helps to reduce the queue time.”

VP of IT, Insurance, Western Europe
Furthermore, when COVID-19 created situations where businesses needed to increase agent capacity at short notice, AI-powered chatbots have allowed contact centers to better respond to the increase in demand. Leveraging AI can enable a more empathetic agent experience through tools that track customer and employee sentiment or preferences and highlight personalized offers or services.

Enterprises that have used AI to help them understand why people are calling to a contact center have found that it is often the everyday questions that generate the largest volume of calls — e.g., balance inquiries or password resets.

Chatbot technology has evolved sufficiently to deliver a life-like experience to customers. Indeed, the speed with which customers can be connected to a chatbot-agent and have their inquiries solved often delivers an improvement in customer satisfaction scores. Furthermore, these virtual agents can be easily flexed on a utility, pay-as-you-go pricing model to allow companies to more easily respond to unexpected peaks in demand.

Chatbots can also make it easier to open more ways for customers to contact a business, such as via websites or mobile apps. In addition, the evolution in the technology means chatbots can handle increasingly complex inquiries and be used for other tasks in internal call centers such as data recording, report receiving, and booking facilities.

One of the most popular early use cases for AI in the contact center has been enhanced Interactive Voice Response. IVR is not new to the contact center world, but its performance has often been mixed, leading to a poor customer experience. As well as helping enterprises to identify patterns in customer behavior, AI has also enhanced the performance of IVR solutions, making them more reliable when directing a customer to the most appropriate agent — whether virtual or human. This helps to reduce waiting times and improve first call resolution percentages.

The enterprises surveyed found that one of the benefits they experienced with AI technology was the ability to better monitor quality control across the contact center. AI-powered monitoring systems can deliver data in near-real time, but as well as providing the data it can also be set to deliver instant insights into potential problems or help to identify best practice.

“Virtual agents helped in quickly solving queries.”
Head of Contact Center, Manufacturing, North America

“AI helps to understand customer needs in a better way. Customer feedbacks are usually on a positive side.”
IT Director, Energy Sector, APAC

“Quality monitoring has now become quick and effective.”
IT Manager, Telecoms, North America
The addition of sentiment monitoring, which monitors a customer’s use of language and tone of voice, can also allow for automated responses when a customer may be having a negative experience — e.g., automatically notifying a manager that they may wish to intervene on a call.
Implementation Practices and Recommendations

AI is a learning curve for enterprises. The technology can address a wide range of scenarios within the contact center, and understanding where and how to deploy it is critical to achieving the best results. The companies surveyed offered a range of advice for companies looking to use AI within the contact center.

“Identify the processes where we can utilize AI”
Head of IT, Pharmaceuticals, APAC

Integrate AI into Business Practices: AI should not be a standalone IT component. It delivers better results when it is embedded within the day-to-day processes and actions within the contact center. This should be true when it comes to routing calls into a data center, helping an agent to better deal with a call, or recording, processing, and analyzing data. AI is learning technology and works best when it is given the right data to analyze. Embedding AI within processes ensures that it is being fed the right data and therefore procuring the right insights.

“Clear understanding of the implementation and planning process” – Information Systems Director, Finance, Western Europe

Planning and Resources: Almost all the enterprises surveyed agreed that AI projects require thorough planning and should have a clear leadership team backed with sufficient resources. Proper planning led enterprises to spend less money and achieve better results.

“AI allows service reps to focus on complex queries and helps to resolve regular queries faster” VP of IT, Insurance, Western Europe

Remove Mundanity for Agents: One of the key benefits of AI identified by the enterprises surveyed was improved agent satisfaction. Businesses can improve agents’ working conditions by using a combination of IVR and chatbots to deal with repetitive inquiries such as password resets, balance inquiries, and order tracking.
“AI helps to understand customer needs in a better way”

IT Director, Retail, APAC

Helping Humans, Not Replacing Them: While AI can deliver automation, its most emphatic benefits can be seen when it is used to assist human agents and managers. For agents, AI should be used to provide support for more difficult processes and customer inquiries. AI can also be recommended to the agent for the most likely solution or the most suitable product to address the customer’s needs. For managers, AI can be used to detect when a call is not progressing as it should and step in to support the agent and assist the customer.

Next Steps

“I think AI is the future of technology” VP of IT, Insurance, Western Europe

COVID-19 has completely changed the workplace, how workforces collaborate, and how business interact with their customers. Supporting agents working from home is an eventuality that most contact center managers have never had to consider. Digital transformation within the contact center is now a do-or-die priority for businesses.

Furthermore, the rate of change has increased exponentially. Contact center transformation projects that would have previously been planned and implemented over two years are now happening in two months (or even less). These projects have been enabled by and powered by cloud technology and AI.

AI has enabled automation of simple inquiries, freeing agents from boring repetition and allowing them to assist those with more complicated requirements. AI and chatbot technology have allowed contact center managers to flexibly provision additional resources in near-real time. AI has also provided the tools to allow managers to supervise agents, ensuring staff welfare and a consistent customer experience.

Beyond COVID-19, AI and machine learning will give enterprises the insight to better understand the vast volumes of data produced in contact centers. This data will provide the pathway to an improved customer experience, better efficiency, and an understanding of your customers that will improve brand loyalty and increase sales. AI will also lead to happier and better-informed agents with the tools to deliver great service.

AI Checklist

• Identify clear use cases
• Ensure senior level support
• Provide sufficient resources
• Confirm that the AI is learning from accurate and up-to-date data
• Find a partner who can deliver integrated, best in class AI and contact center platforms
• Remember, AI is the future of the contact center...