

Tech won't kill the contact centre, it'll make it more powerful

By Wynand Smit

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Over the past few years, there have been increasingly dire predictions that automation and technology will be the major job killer of our generation. Some have predicted that whole job fields will be rendered obsolete, with the contact centre pegged as one of the areas set for change.

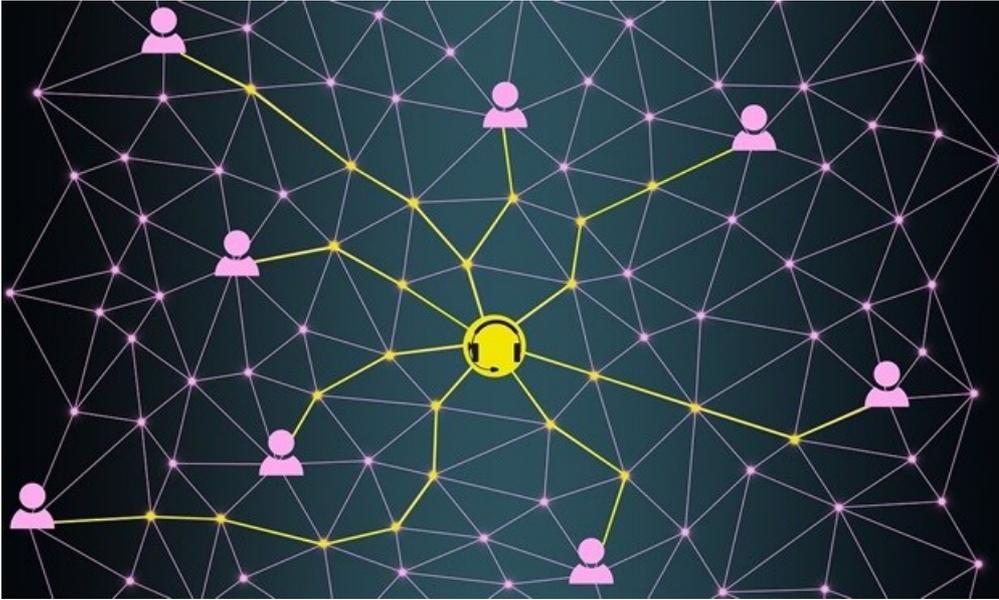


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There are distinct kinds of automation playing disparate roles across many applications, however, and some will, in fact, enhance operations and generate new opportunities for businesses to provide more efficient, streamlined operations, while upskilling employees whose roles may become obsolete.

Contact centre agents, it's argued, could be replaced with chatbots, voice-based virtual assistants, and increasingly sophisticated self-service options. While all of these technologies are playing, and will continue to play, an increasingly important role in the contact centre, they won't kill it. There will always be a place for human beings – particularly when it comes to interactions or tasks that require creativity, empathy or other human traits.

The power of people

Intuitively, you'd expect that most people would want to avoid calling a contact centre. After all, how many times have you heard someone complaining about how many hours they spent on the phone trying to sort out an issue they have with an organisation? Surely chatbots and the like would save a lot of customer frustration?

In fact, the opposite could be true. While the global chatbot market is experiencing serious growth, people still expect to talk to human experts, especially when making complex decisions. The complexity of an interaction governs the levels of need for human intervention.

One Google study, for example, found that 61% of mobile users call a business when they're in the purchase phase of the buying cycle. For the most part, the study found, they're doing so because they want a quick answer (people can speak much more quickly than they can type) and because they want to speak to a real person.

Further evidence of consumers' desire to speak to real people lies in the fact that calls to businesses have increased significantly, even as smartphones become near ubiquitous. According to the advertising and marketing advisory firm BIA/Kelsey, calls to businesses are expected to exceed 169 billion per year by 2020.

These calls have big business benefits too, generating sales and follow-up activities at a rate 10-15 times higher than digital form submissions.



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While that suggests that human-staffed contact centres aren't going to disappear anytime soon, there are obviously still frustrations that need to be dealt with. All those complaints people have around spending hours on the phone don't come from nowhere.

Part of the problem is with the way contact centre agents are traditionally trained. Usually, they're trained in how to deal with a set of problems specific to the organisation they represent. But the human brain can only retain so much information. So, if a customer phones with a query that the contact centre agent doesn't remember how to deal with, time is wasted looking up the solution or consulting with a manager who has the answer on hand. As a result, the whole system jams up, causing customer frustration as they wait for a representative to resolve their query.

One effective way to free up this jam is to remove the knowledge burden away from the contact centre agents. Instead of having to become specialists in a particular subject, creating an interactive company knowledge-base guided by a virtual assistant could provide agents with the right information when they need it. Not only would this allow them to deal with queries faster, it would also mean that organisations could shift their training focus to interpersonal skills, something that's vital in the contact centre.

Given how important the contact centre already is to business growth and customer retention, imagine the outcomes of a contact centre with more highly skilled agents, answering questions faster and more accurately to help their businesses service their customers better?

So, while there is no doubt that technology is changing (and will continue to change) the contact centre, those changes will largely be for the better, making it an even more powerful weapon in every organisation's armoury.

ABOUT WYNAND SMIT

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