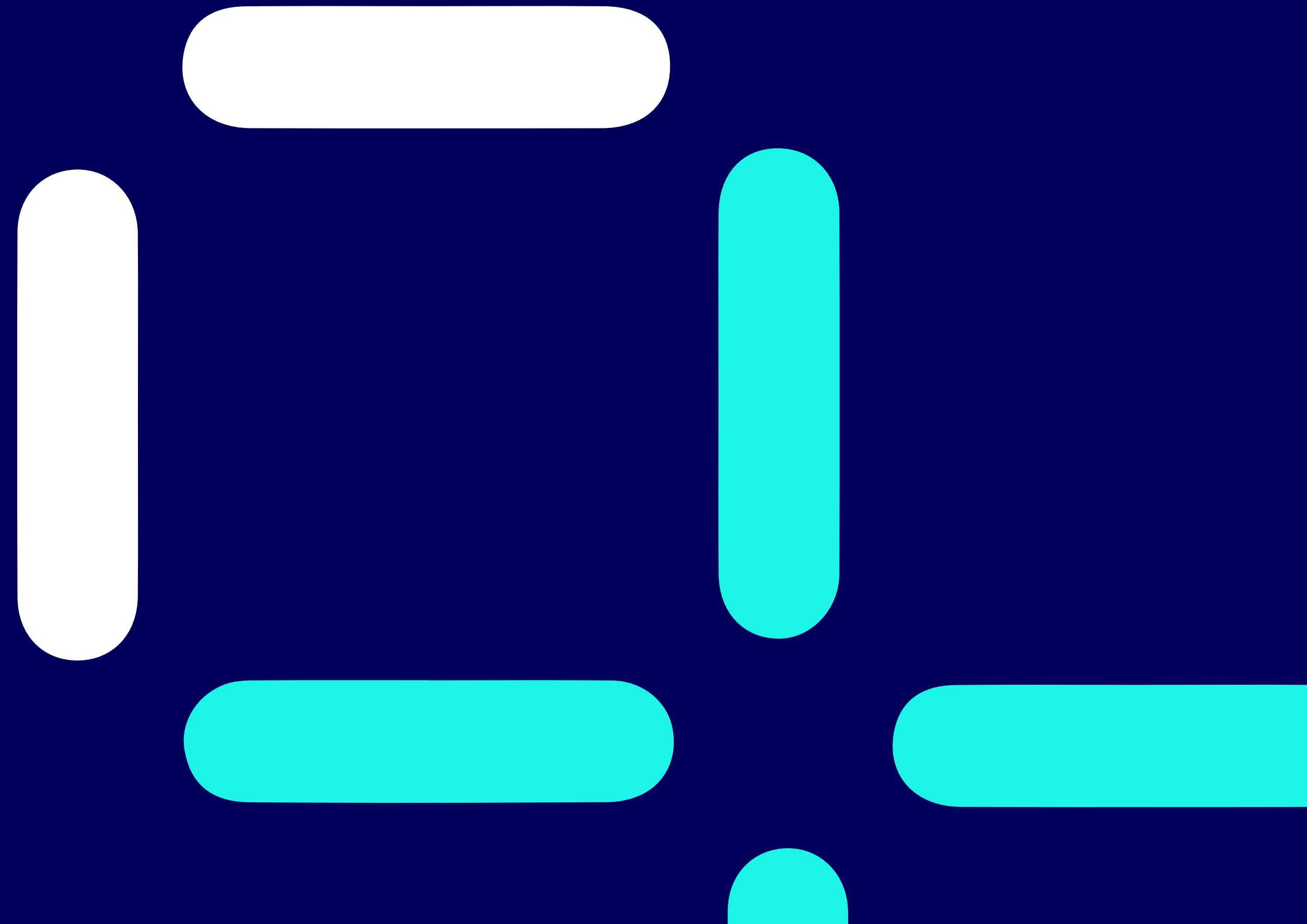# 2025: A Year of Difficult Conversations?
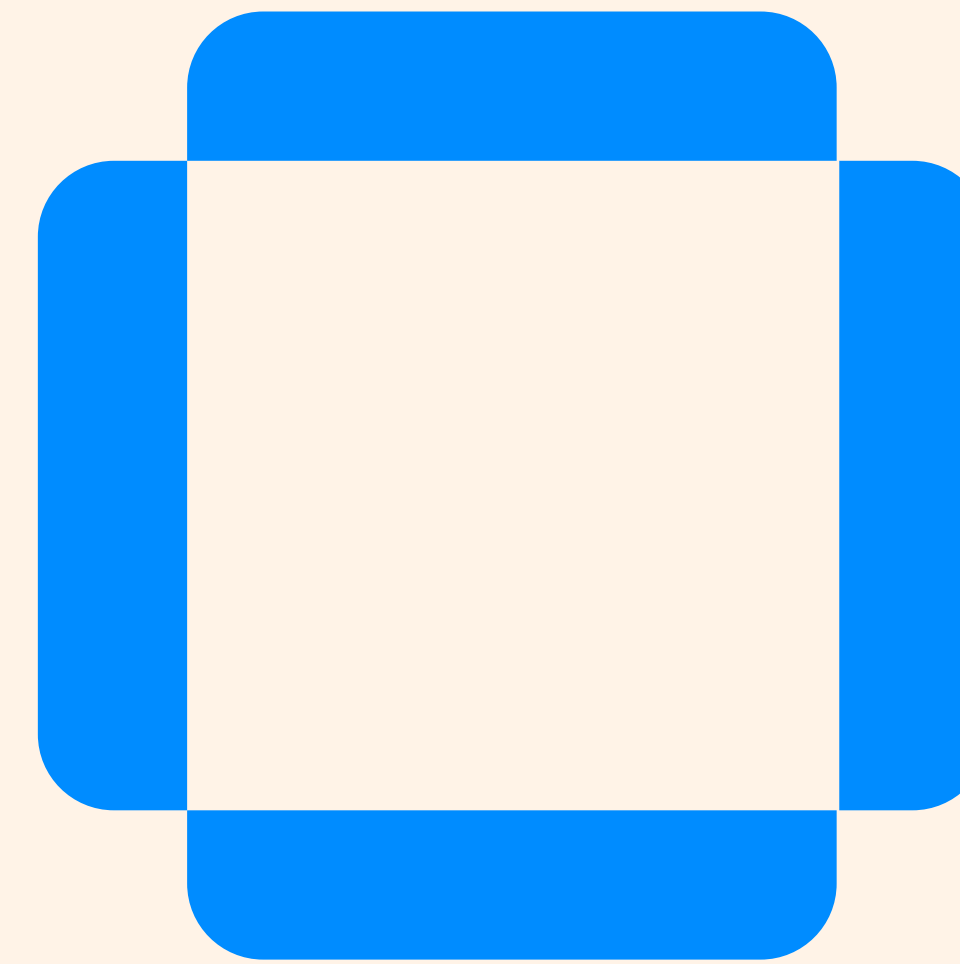
A practical guide for contact centres navigating AI implementation and challenging headwinds

ccp

Contents

Introduction

In December 2024, we gathered a group of cross-sector senior contact centre leaders to look ahead to 2025 in our annual 'big conversation'.

With representation from travel and leisure, financial services, lifestyle, wellbeing, retail, not-for-profit and subscription businesses, we explored several themes:

– **The continued rapid pace of change driven by AI and automation.**
– **Continuing 'headwinds', especially in the UK as agent costs are set to rise by 8-10% following the 2024 budget.**
– **Does the increased frequency of 'black-swan' events mean it is time to change how contact centres are perceived?**
– **How do leaders effect that change and refocus the wider business perception?**

Those themes had one over-riding consensus – they hinge on tackling 'difficult conversations' with a range of key stakeholders.

This paper explores these challenges and aims to offer practical solutions from the frontline to help you navigate those conversations throughout 2025.

"There was one over-riding consensus... tackling 'difficult conversations' with stakeholders"

Eight key takeaways

1. We are at a 'pivotal moment'
Technological, economic, regulatory and social change is 'once in a generation'.

2. AI is not a silver bullet
But it has the potential to change the face of customer contact and drive value.

3. Define your AI use cases
Keep them tight and aligned to key business objectives, with clear rationale.

4. Good data is non-negotiable
You'll need to break silos, make data available and manage it securely.

5. AI adoption is a key challenge
The technology may be proven, but you need to take your people with you.

6. Manage key metrics
And understand the dynamics of how they interact in our new world.

7. Governance is critical
From risk management to strategic steering, ensure there are humans in the loop.

8. Success hinges on people
From stakeholder engagement to customer satisfaction, people will unlock AI value and lean into headwinds.

Technology: exponential change

The rapid pace of technology evolution is as challenging as it is exciting. The pressure from Boards to win (or not lose) the race to use AI and GenAI amplifies this considerably. But AI has some unique considerations and risks that influence ultimate adoption.

While AI has entered the mainstream, it remains a fledgling technology.

And AI concerns persist, from botched implementations and reputational risk to flawed benefits cases:

– **80% of AI projects fail[1], twice the rate of non-AI projects**
– **30% of GenAI projects won't make it past proof-ofconcept stage in 2025[2]**

Gartner blames poor data quality, inadequate risk controls, escalating costs or unclear business values for these failure rates.

However, in November 2024, AI accounted for over half of the $28bn in global venture capital investments.

"AI concerns persist, from botched implementations to flawed benefits"

[1]Rand, 2024, The Root causes of Failure for AI Projects and How they can success

[2]Gartner, 2024, 'How to Calculate Business Value and Cost for Generative AI Use Cases

Establishing AI value

Value comes from cost reduction and/or service improvement, but perspectives can be different. CFOs often see technology as a route to cost management. CTOs are tasked with driving efficiencies. Others see AI as way to improve customer experiences and competitive positioning.

To date, automation has largely focused on facilitating self-serve and easy resolutions, though not all organisations have yet reached the level they believe possible or desirable. In 2024, many of our contributors focused on implementations to support internal teams, improve processes or deliver co-pilot functionality.

Use cases
And there are plenty of customer preference stats to support both approaches.

In 'camp self-serve', 69% of customers want to be allowed to do what they want online and 70% say they are happy with the idea of automation giving prompts to an agent to help them better serve customers[3]. Half (51%) even say they would be comfortable with systems automating an assessment of their emotional state to enable agents to respond appropriately. However, despite the persistent belief over the past two decades in the "death of voice," the current reality is that 72% of customer experience management (CXM) revenues ($300 billion per annum globally)[4] are still driven by voice.

In 'camp internal team support', 53% of customers say they would change brand/provider if they thought they were automating their customer service[5], 77% of consumers say they have researched how to avoid bots and 73% have asked others for advice on how to avoid them[6].

While the numbers may tell a story of conflicting views, there is likely significant nuance. When customers need to speak to someone, *they need to speak to someone*. The prospect of full automation is alarming at a human level. But if they don't need to speak, they'll often be happier to self-serve.

Many organisations are grappling to follow the insight, to identify their use cases and determine what AI/GenAI can and should do, and to develop business cases that inspire confident decision-making against a backdrop of high failure rates and limited resources. The result for some is 'analysis paralysis'.

"Many are grappling to identify their use cases... and develop business cases that inspire confident decision-making.

[3]ICS, November 2024, 'Creating a Service Culture' presentation

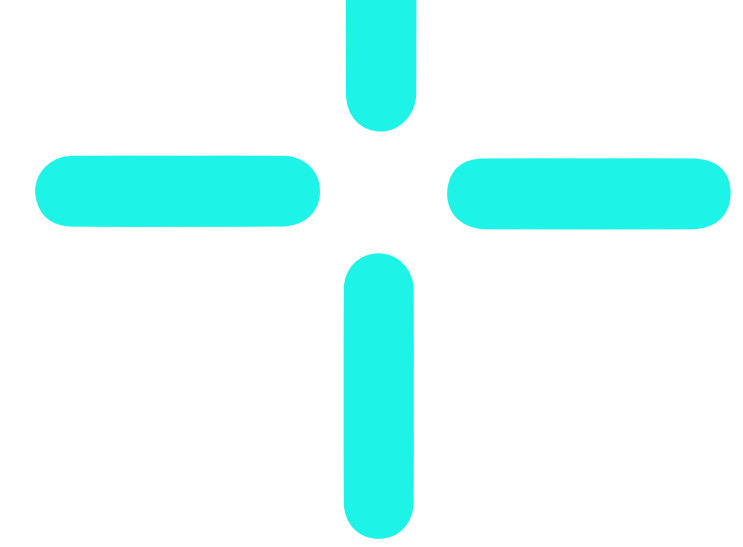[4]Everest Group, June 2024, Global Locations State of the Market 2024

[5]Call Centre Helper Magazine, July 2024

[6]Service Now, 2024, 'Consumer Voice Report 2024: Tackling the brand loyalty crisis'

The difficult conversation:
You're going to need to make the big calls on use cases for yourself.

Use cases priorities and solutions

The difficult conversation: You're going to need to make the big calls on use cases for yourself.

But there is hope. Our contributors have seen significant benefits when AI and increased automation is done right:

– **Remember, voice (and chat) has its place**

– **Define use cases with tight, specific goals in mind that align to key business objectives**
  – For example, real-time translation tools have shown promise, with improved service levels and up to 30% efficiency gains possible

– **Build the business case and prioritise the 'low hanging fruit' where the reward is high and success looks likely**
  – There needs to be clear alignment on where the opportunities exist and who owns the benefits, with an assessment of data fitness and technical debt that may need to form part of the plan

  – Take care to avoid overestimating capabilities

– Aim to deliver value early to unlock future investment

– If you can't demonstrate the benefit, demonstrate the risk and cost of not delivering the use case

– **AI rewards come in the shape of both cost reduction and competitive advantage, including customer retention. Building a case for investment in customer service links service delivery to customer lifetime value, profitability, and fulfilling commitments**

– **ROI periods will be longer where there is more data to consolidate or increased technical debt to be overcome**

– **Identify the risks, from technical to unintended consequences on customers and staff.**

"Our contributors have seen significant benefits when AI and increased automation is done right"

The impact of automation

While self-serve may be getting easier, customer service doesn't appear to be seeing significant impact.

According to the Institute of Customer Service (ICS)[7], poor customer service costs UK businesses £7.3 billion a month (up from £6.8 billion a month in July 2024), or £87.6bn per year. That's heading towards a third (29.2%) of the value of the global voice market outlined above, just in the UK.

In July 2024, customer satisfaction dropped to its lowest level since metrics began, with the UKCSI score of 75.8. This has fallen consistently since a peak of 78.4 only as recently as June 2022. It has improved slightly to 76.1 in January 2025, but just 10% of customers say they never have to call back and explain from the beginning. 55% say they have to very or fairly often. And 81% say wait times are too long[8].

Which should come as no surprise since over the past five years, average speed of answer (ASA) time has trebled from 40 seconds to 120 seconds[9].

Of course, it follows that the automation of easy tasks would increase Average Handling Time (AHT), as only the more complex queries are left for agent handling. But all things being equal, removing easier tasks should afford additional time as volume drops. So what's going on?

Perhaps the 'The Great Resignation' and 15% decrease in Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) numbers in contact centres between 2018/19 and 2022/23[10] begs the question, is automation actually able to bridge this shortfall in resources?

In short, the expectation is that it won't. It is estimated that GenAI's impact on headcount will be moderate, with 20% of businesses anticipating no impact and 37% forecasting reductions of just 5-15%[11]. This resource squeeze and expectation of limited headcount impact may go some way to explaining the mushrooming ASA.
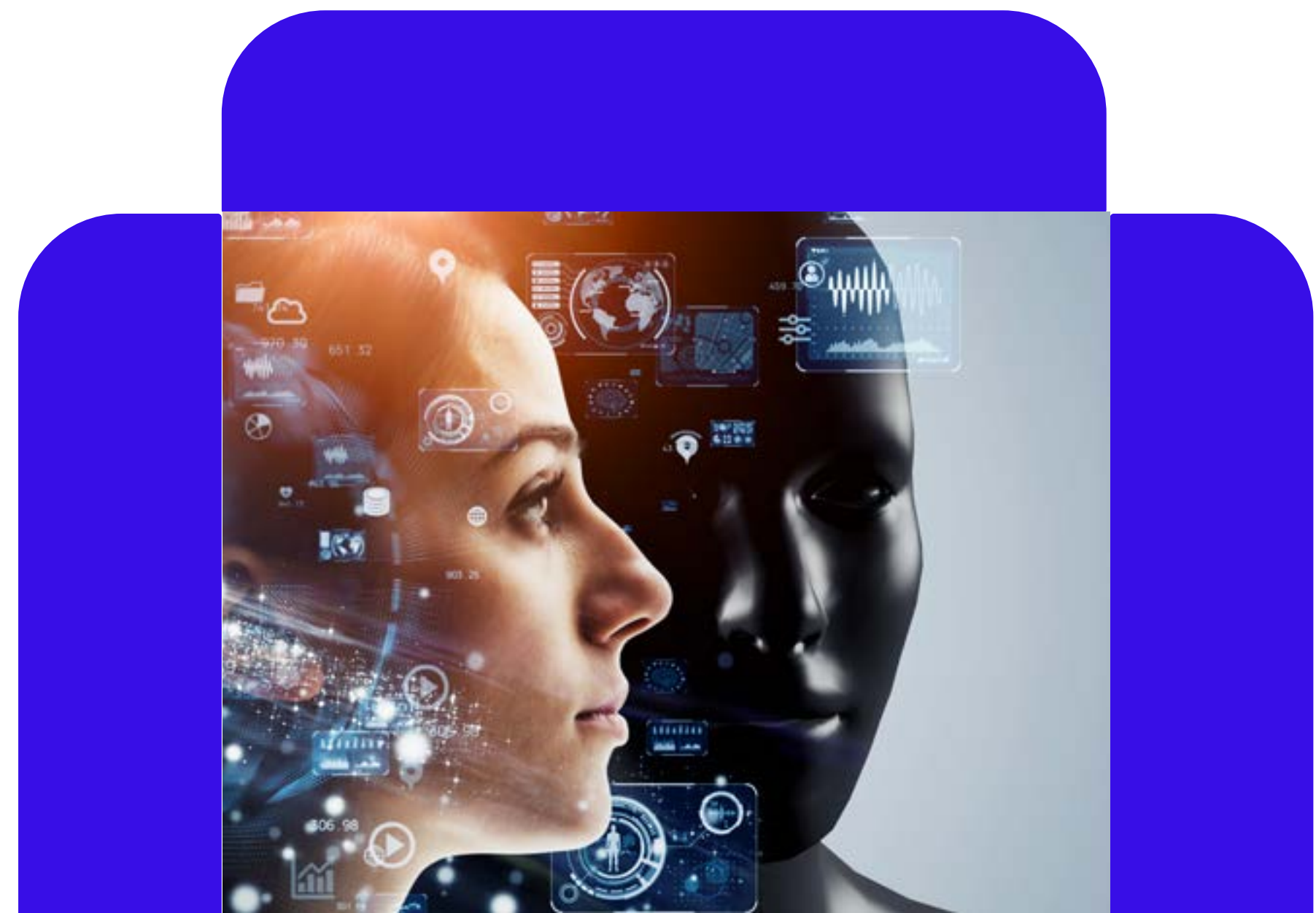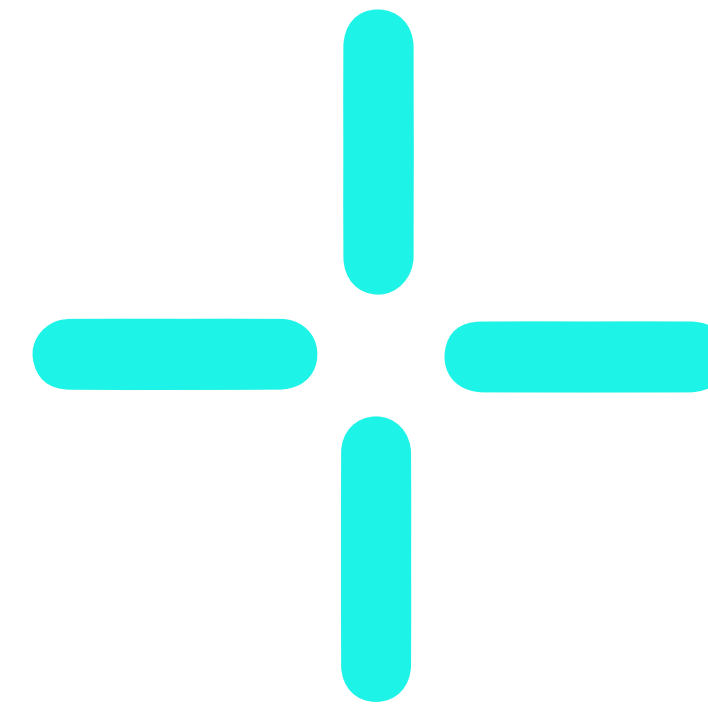
[7]ICS, UK Customer Satisfaction Index

[8]Contact Babel, 2024, 'The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide 2024-25'

[9]Contact Babel, 2024, 'The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide 2024-25'

[10]Everest Group, February 2024, Customer Experience Management (CXM) Services CXO Insights: Key Issues Report 2024

[11]ICS, UK Customer Satisfaction Index

The impact of automation

However, an increase in first contact resolution (FCR) would also increase AHT and ASA.

While the available evidence is slight, we can see that FCR was at consistently low levels from 2019-2021, but in 2022 went back up to 77%, which *could* correlate with early AI sentiment analysis/co-pilot implementations given AI has been in the top 5 areas for IT expenditure since 2019[12]. Though, as we know, correlation doesn't equal causation.

Fundamentally, understanding the root cause of the rise in ASA is multi-faceted and challenging. As is an assumption that returning ASA to 40 seconds can be monetised.

So the CFO may not see their savings, CTOs may stand accused of not delivering efficiencies and the CXO is under pressure to improve CSAT. And their priorities may not be aligned in the first place.
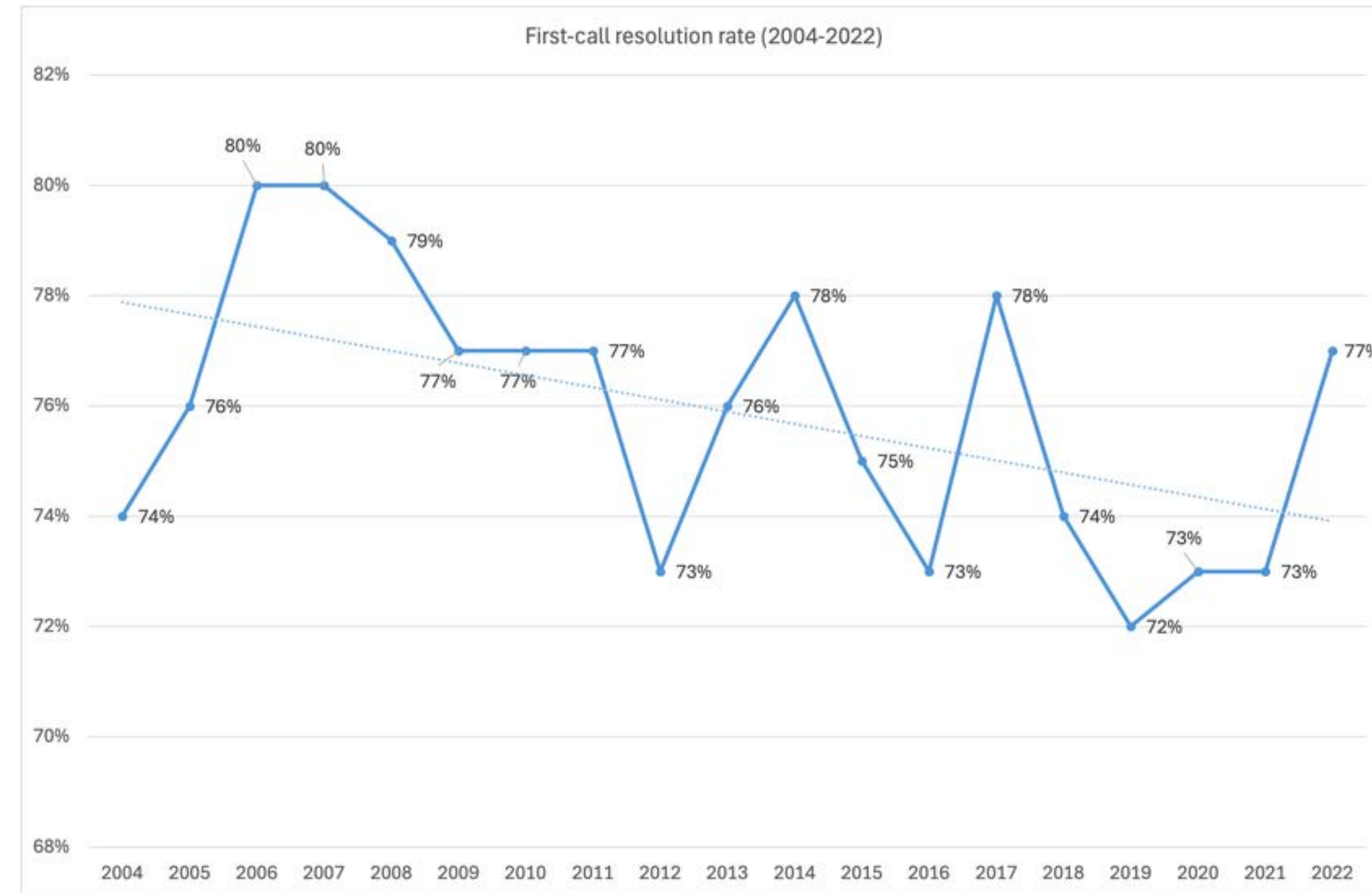
Figure 1: Contact Babel, 2023, 'The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide'

[12] Contact Babel, 2024, 'The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide 2024-25'

The difficult conversations:

Priorities may conflict, you will need to get aligned at C-Suite.

KPI dynamics may be nuanced or there may be minimal impact; customers say they need more, but have they become accustomed to waiting a bit longer? And does the wait time encourage migration to self-serve/non-voice channels?

The impact of automation: priorities and solutions

The difficult conversations: priorities may conflict, you will need to get aligned at C-suite.

KPI dynamics may be nuanced or there may be minimal impact; customers say they need more, but have they become accustomed to waiting a bit longer? And does the wait time encourage migration to self-serve/non-voice channels?

Which is why you must:

– **Measure and monitor both the cost and performance of automation**

– **Use past experiences to forecast future peaks and introduce the right self-service options**

– **Recognise and regularly review the role of KPIs that measure satisfaction, such as Customer Satisfaction (CSAT), Net Promoter Score (NPS), or AI-driven insights in understanding loyalty and repeat business**

– **Use CSAT results and discussion scoring to inform customer summaries and data aggregation efforts**

– **Know whether better resolution and reduced AHT is leading to increased satisfaction.**

The value of data

There is no doubt that quality, unified data is critical to AI success. It is essential to bring together the right information at the right moment to deliver self-service or support agents in their conversations.

Yet it has long been understood that contact centre agents make great human APIs; they've been connecting disparate systems and patching data problems for years. The introduction of AI is now exposing deep flaws in data and system connectivity.

While some of our contributors felt they had addressed this in 2024, it remains a priority for 2025 and beyond for others. In particular, challenges were cited in broader stakeholder dependencies, with readiness of suppliers and delivery partners impacting implementation and the delivery of benefits to customers, agents and the wider business.

"Contact centre agents make great human APIs... the introduction of AI is exposing deep flaws"

The difficult conversations:
You have to walk before you can run — good data is non-negotiable

Data priorities and solutions

The difficult conversation: You have to walk before you can run – good data is non-negotiable

– **Set out your data strategy to match your prioritised use cases, with expected benefits to secure buy-in**

– **Design the roadmap to deliver the strategy, ensuring you deliver value as you go**

– **Work to eliminate silos and unify data to enable consistent, personalised experiences**

– **Recognise data's dual role: enabling customer insights while safeguarding against misuse.**
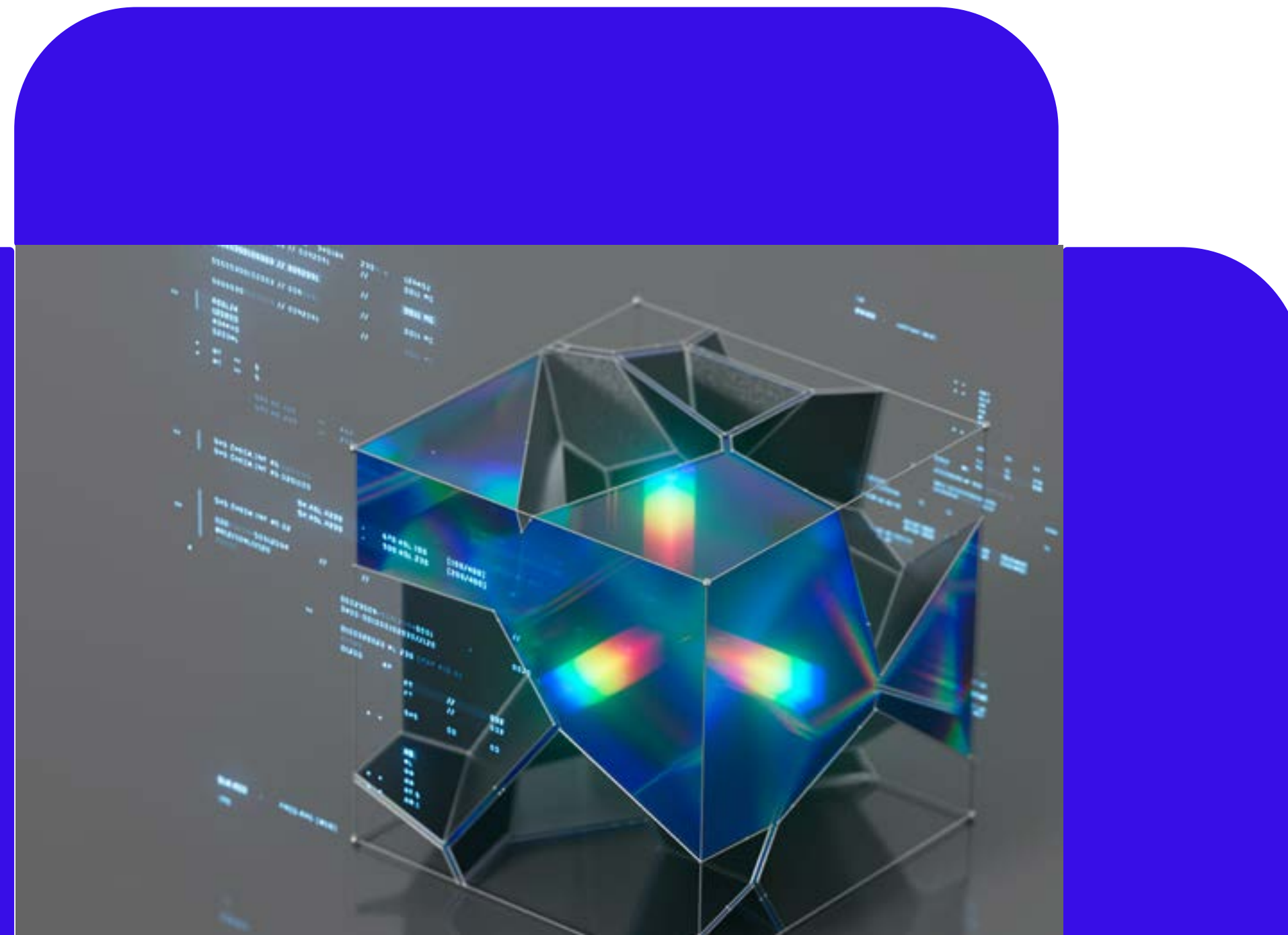
Risk control

Aside from project failures, AI carries risks that many businesses have never had to deal with before, such as hallucinations and biases, that make outputs incorrect or nonsensical.

It demands heavy data processing that far exceeds traditional data science and that has a significant environmental impact. There are questions of ethics in the data processed and knowledge created and potential for regulatory compliance breaches.

The degree of potential harm is dependent upon the task at hand, but the risk to reputation, customer and data security has never been more prevalent.

Data security
Not only is it difficult to consolidate data, there is an increased risk that the potential to access it through a single entry point makes it more vulnerable to mal actors. Make no mistake, the value of data to them means they are automating too – and it's sophisticated.

The need to host multiple clients and meet the processing and storage demands of AI while improving data accessibility and costs, means more data centres are being built, with McKinsey forecasting the potential for demand to more than triple by 2030[13]. But this comes with risk. The threat from data breaches, ransomware and more multiplies with greater opportunity and reward for criminal activity.

Technical debt
Legacy systems are often burdened by 'technical debt' that makes effecting change all the more challenging. When organisations were asked, 'To what extent is legacy technology holding back customer experience?', 46% said it was a major problem, with just 16% saying it was no problem.

In small-mid sized contact centres with 50-200 seats, this was amplified further, as 'no problem' dropped to 11% and major problem climbed to 51%.

The consequences, seem obvious, but to bear that out, when asked 'How well does your organisation currently support your CX programmes?', for 'CX technology', just 35% gave a good-excellent score; for 'Organisational readiness for change', over half (53%) gave a poor-fair score.[14]

[13] McKinsey, October 2024, 'AI power: Expanding data center capacity to meet growing demand'

[14] Contact Babel, 2024, 'The UK Customer Experience Decision-Makers' Guide 2024-25'

The difficult conversations:

AI carries enormous risks to customers, agents, the environment and brand reputation.

You may need to resist board pressure to rush the benefits of implementation in favour of mitigating the risk.

Risk control priorities and solutions

The difficult conversation: AI carries enormous risks to customers, agents, the environment and brand reputation. You may need to resist board pressure to rush the benefits of implementation in favour of mitigating the risk.

– **Create governance protocols and frameworks with management structures and processes**

– **Build, test and deliver incrementally with strict controls in place**
  – Always think safe, ethical and sustainable with a cautious approach to algorithm development

  – Build algorithms in components so you understand the impact of each development and test hypotheses regularly

  – Review knowledge articles, including their currency and structure

  – Engage people in the building and testing process – known as Human in the Loop (HITL) – to mitigate risks of bias/hallucinations/etc as they understand the nuance of how to talk to customers and the results you should expect

– **It's essential to build in explainability, especially in service of regulatory compliance**

– **Establish processes for quality assurance (QA) and frequent updates**
  – Employ and refine Quality Models to balance compliance and customer needs

  – Ensure regulatory and cultural advice varies appropriately by country in global operations

– **Build robust controls for data access and third-party interactions**

– **Plan for legacy system technical debt, the integration of new technologies and ongoing maintenance and monitoring.**

"Our businesses are expected to manage [heightened stress] with fewer resources"

Adoption

Assuming legacy data can be brought together and surfaced to enable AI, the humans involved, whether customers or employees, are still critical to using it and unlocking the benefits.

Where organisations have progressed out of POC, even if the technology is working, the resultant changes in working practices required and evolving customer needs can be a challenge to adoption.

As one contributor said, "Previously, agents often had the ability to manage processes to their own structures. To ensure adoption of new processes, new approaches are necessary". In any transformation, there can be a significant "we've always done it this way" hurdle to overcome.

What's more, while agents are exceptional at circumventing intended process, albeit with good intentions, finding workarounds for poorly implemented AI is much harder. Meaning that where previous implementations may have been accepted with shortcomings, there is a higher bar for adoption of AI; agents need a reliable, unified desktop to work most effectively.

"The humans involved are critical to using it and unlocking the benefits."

Leaders may also face staff who mistrust what the AI is doing, feel a loss of agency in their role, and fear being replaced.

Failure of AI to truly solve for the use case and attempts to 'impose' new practices can result in adoption being thwarted and scepticism prevailing.
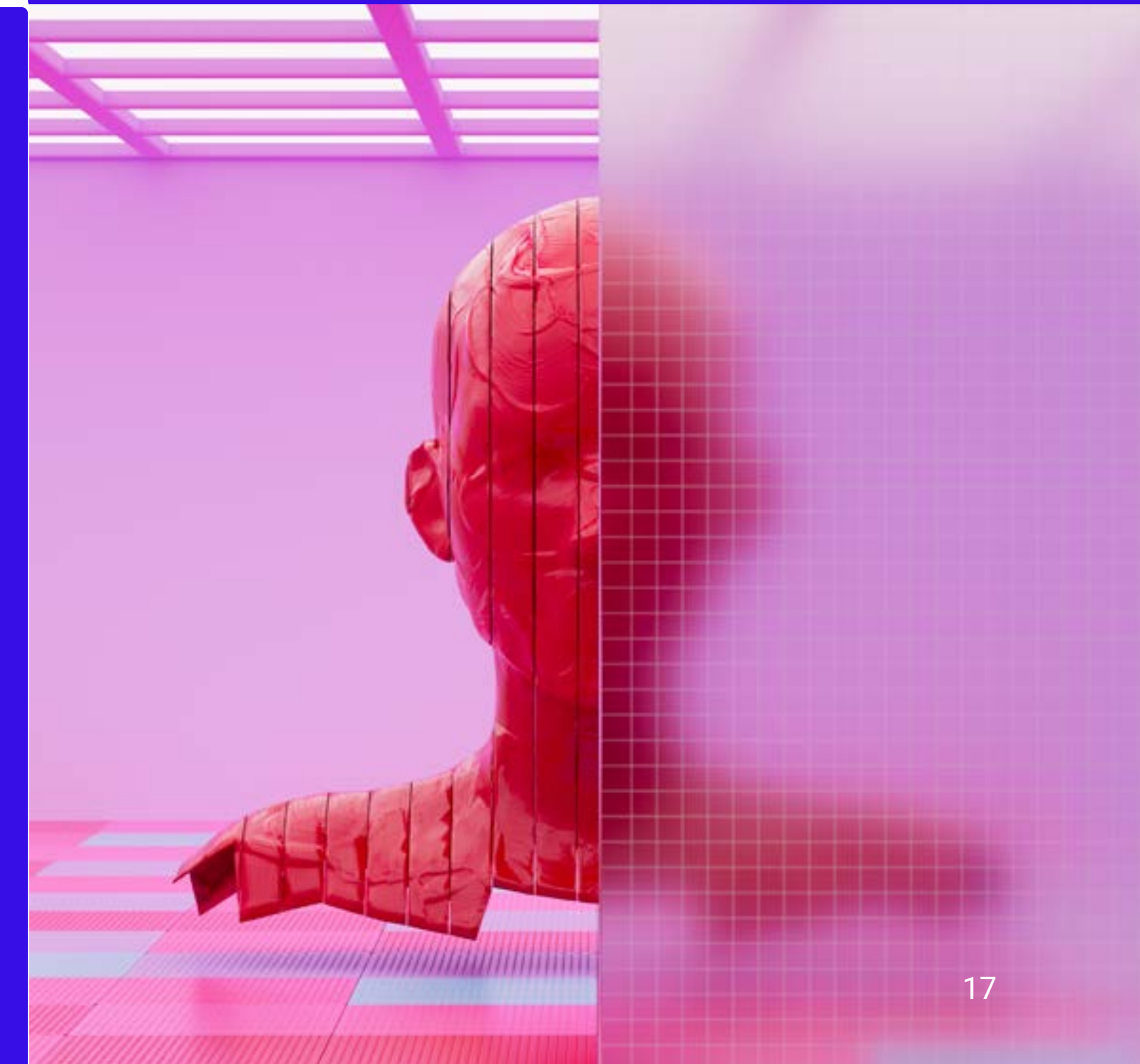
The difficult conversations:
Proof of concept might not work (that's the point); if it does, people are your biggest challenge.

Adoption priorities and solutions

The difficult conversation: POC might not work (that's the point); if it does, people are your biggest challenge.

– **Have a plan for adoption right from when you are defining your use cases, business cases and roadmaps**

– **Stakeholder engagement is key: collaborate and communicate**

– **Governance planning and management is paramount but any sticks need carrots too.**

"Any sticks need carrots too"

Headwinds: Economic, regulatory and more

As our discussion progressed, we turned to the challenges of current headwinds and the impact on the humans in the process– our people and our customers.

Economic uncertainty, rising employment costs and increased regulation all place pressures on contact centres. Our people and customers are facing heightened stress levels and dissatisfaction, and our businesses are expected to manage those with fewer resources.

– **Customers are more dissatisfied than ever, according to UKCSI**

– **47% of the UK is considered vulnerable by the FCA[15], and 40% of companies are not doing well enough when identifying and supporting them**

– **Agent costs are set to rise by 8-10%, when the changes NI thresholds take effect in April 2025**

– **A forthcoming report from Contact Babel is expected to highlight a 34% increase in average agent salary since 2020 to £24,600 (IPI event, Feb 25), against inflation of 24.7% in the same period[16].**

– **For one contributor, frequency of escalations to executive levels was up 30% over the past five years**

"**Our businesses are expected to manage [heightened stress] with fewer resources**"

[15]FCA, May 2024, Consumer Duty letter to CEOs

[16] Bank of England Inflation Calculator

Our people

As automation increasingly handles simple queries, the knock-on effect on agents of dealing with only the more complex is clear and was of concern to our discussion group.

Every conversation is more intense. Problem diagnosis and resolution is more challenging. Customers who need help are more stressed or vulnerable, amplified by 'black swan events' from the pandemic to cost of living crisis and global conflicts. Agents no longer have the respite of an easy call. And they are increasingly faced with inappropriate or down right abusive behaviour from customers.

And with many 'contact centres' disbursed into agents' homes since covid, they are often less connected to their peers and managers. Less able to let off steam with others in the same boat.

What's more, rather than being seen as a valuable resource that fixes broken processes, customers and wider business failings, as well as representing the brand, contact centres are often seen as cost centres. And people hold very real fears of job insecurity from technology. Yet they are the first and last point of contact your customers have with your brand, responsible for thousands of interactions a week, irrespective of the trigger. The balance of agent autonomy, business and regulatory requirements, cost management and job satisfaction is fine.

"Every conversation is more intense; problem diagnosis and resolution is more challenging"

Those people challenges inevitably become compounded when there are fewer, quality candidates available to fill roles with changing demands on them, placing more pressure on an already stretched workforce. For executives, the burden of a 30% increase in escalation is stressful and tiring, and often exacerbated by direct customer contact via social media.

These pressures, coupled with rising people costs in the UK, also drive the push toward offshoring and/or automation.

The difficult conversations:

From the intensity of those with customers to facing your workforce may no longer be 'fit for purpose'.

Plus taking your people with you on the journey to AI and acknowledging the impact of your contact centre on business growth.

These are wide ranging, C-suite conversations that demand whole business solutions.

People priorities and solutions

The difficult conversations: here they range from the intensity of those with customers to facing that your workforce may no longer be 'fit for purpose', while resource availability reduces and costs continue to rise.

Plus the unenviable task of taking your people with you on the journey to AI and acknowledging the impact of your contact centre on business growth – for better or worse. These are wide-ranging, C-suite conversations that demand whole business solutions.

– **Recruitment, Training and Agent support**
  – Contact centres can provide the starting point for many careers; ensure there are progression opportunities into broader roles with clear career pathways and structured governance to identify, develop and retain talent while improving your recruitment reputation.

  – The changing profile of customer conversations and query types must be reflected in revisions to job profiles, recruitment policies and target agent

demographics/skillsets. For example through psychometric testing during interview and selection to ensure resilience.

– Support existing agents with training in resilience and empathy to help them manage customers' emotional demands effectively. Consider additional soft skills and cultural training.

– Monitor and address online sentiment (including "hate groups")

– Ensure your people – from agents to their managers and the wider business – have iron-clad knowledge of compliance standards, such as FCA or industry-specific regulation, and that there are watertight processes in place for regulation such as PCI.

– Training and process guides must evolve to support both the changes in technology and service delivery styles.

– Introduce processes to deal with customers who repeatedly behave inappropriately towards agents – be prepared to tell them their behaviour

means you don't want them as a customer. Consider this a trade-off between revenue and the cost of managing employee morale and wellbeing.

– **Commercial Management**
  – When customers need you, a proper contact centre helps to retain customers and fuel growth.

  – Your people are conduits for feedback and improvements; but in an AI age, this is an increasingly rare form of valuable insight.

– **Engage agents are involved in AI development and implementation**
  – Successful automation requires both technical and cultural readiness

  – Embedding their knowledge in how AI should behave is non-negotiable – they are a key human in the loop (HITL). And only ever consider handing off those processes to automation when the evidence of success can be seen while the agent is still in the loop.

  – Ensure they understand their role in AI development in improving not just organisational (aka cost) efficiency

but customer and employee satisfaction. Encourage them to embrace tools that not only facilitate self-service in straightforward circumstances, but help them to be more efficient and effective in helping customers who really need them. Paint them a picture of improved job satisfaction through a reduced burden in finding the right solutions, and happier customers whose queries are resolved quickly and easily.

– **Reap the benefits of new systems and processes**
  – Training aligned to new systems design has seen one of our contributors' recent hires rank in the top 10% for staff performance through streamlined onboarding. Whereas the development for long tenured staff has aligned to patching processes for up to 20 years.

Customers

Stating the obvious, customers want to be able to complete their journey in their chosen channel.

But processes and platforms may not allow this, and a journey may not be made up of just a single interaction. And when things don't go according to plan, or a customer needs to make a change, any lack of customer-centricity comes into sharp relief.

For example, a customer making a travel booking online who subsequently needs to make a change to that booking will most likely wish to return to the same area of the website to make those changes within the online booking.

However, if the booking systems don't support this, "unwanted" contacts land in the contact centre, with a cost to the business for servicing this requirement and to the customer in terms of effort. And frustration. Because they have shared their information and preferences and expect them to be honoured.

Indeed, customer data is a valuable commodity. The ability to manage customer journeys, customer lifetime value, delivery and profitability better - and its appeal to investors - makes acquiring it a key strategic objective. Using it well is has the power to transform customer experiences, and customers understand that. More to the point, they expect it - and don't care at all about profitability and investors.

"Slick automation is not a universal panacea"

However, slick automation is not a universal panacea. Vulnerable customers and complex interactions demand human empathy and expertise.

Customers are still dissatisfied and still feeling the effects of the cost-of-living crisis. More than a quarter (28%) of UK adults are not coping or finding it difficult to cope financially (vs 11% in 2020 reporting the felt heavily burdened keeping up with their domestic bills and credit commitments). They are cutting back and working more,

and despite some improvements, almost half (49%) of UK adults report stress-related experiences due to the rising cost of living[17]. Stresses that undoubtedly translate to how they interact with customer service providers.

And 16% of people[18] are unlikely ever to go online, either through choice or access limitations.

[17] FCA, 2024, Financial Lives

[18] Good Things foundation, September 2024, 'Digital inclusion: What the main UK datasets tell us'

The difficult conversation:

Is one that shouldn't be difficult at all.

Serving customers in efficient, cost-effective and empathetic ways that suit them in that very moment is the ultimate goal. Because we know that we're judged by their best (and worst) experiences. Easy. The difficulty is in exposing the mismatch and generating the impetus (and budget) to do something about it.

Customer priorities and solutions

The difficult conversation: Is one that shouldn't be difficult at all. Serving customers in efficient, cost-effective and empathetic ways that suit them in that very moment is the ultimate goal. Because we know that we're judged by their best (and worst) experiences. Easy. The difficulty is in exposing the mismatch and generating the impetus (and budget) to do something about it.

– **Understand the customer journey – it's vital to success**
  – Use customer data and insights to identify challenges, understand what initiates customer contact and how they want to communication to enable better engagement, particularly with asynchronous conversation tools such as WhatsApp.

  – Understand customer segments and profiles to understand revenue and loyalty drivers and embed cross-sell, upsell and retention strategies.

– **Help customers to interact according to their preferences** *in that moment*
  – Develop triage and communications strategies across numerous scenarios to support customers and reduce the impact on agents and executives (remember the social media escalations)

  – Allow customers to pay how they want – 64% say they want options (ICS)[19]

  – Support agents with modernised, interconnected systems and data that help them solve problems quickly and effectively.

– **Support vulnerable, stressed or excluded customers**
  – Provide findable and accessible channels

  – Tailor agent recruitment profiles to reflect the changing market, industry and technology

– Employ soft skills training and psychological insights into customer behaviour to reduce resolution times and improve customer (and agent) satisfaction

– Understand that moving from simple empathetic responses to fact-based solutions delivered by AI (whether self-serve or co-pilot) can risk alienating customers if not handled carefully.

[19] ICS, July 2024, 'UKCSI – The state of customer satisfaction in the UK'

Making change happen

The 'black swan' events of recent years have impacted confidence and decision making, which combined with the challenges arising from keeping pace with technology and other headwinds is something of a perfect storm.

Indecision comes with opportunity costs of not making the most of technology to deliver better, more efficient service. But it's much easier to feel more viscerally the risk of making the wrong decision as that impacts today's known costs and profitability.

And this is perhaps the most difficult conversation of all. How do senior teams gain the confidence between themselves and throughout the organisation to commission and run transformational AI and GenAI projects against a backdrop of an 80% failure rate? Plus, in all likelihood, key stakeholders, from customers to frontline agents and the wider business, already bear the scars of poor experiences to date.

"It's easier to feel more viscerally the risk of making the wrong decision"

Unlocking this indecision is the key to unlocking the opportunity while taking every caution in managing the associated risks

The good news is that our contributors had seen significant benefits when AI and automation was well implemented . From the aforementioned improvement in staff performance, morale and retention to increased self-service rates and customer satisfaction through removal of customer effort, when implemented effectively.

We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that service and our industry is essentially people led and those people need to be enabled by technology.
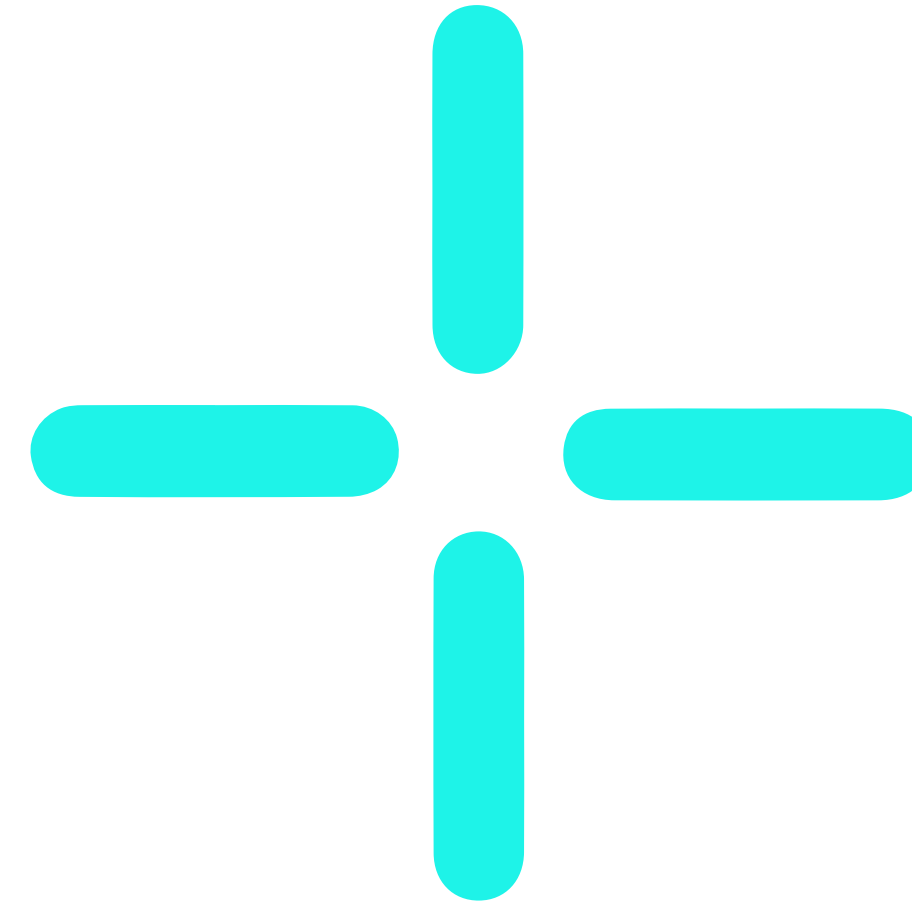
Getting it right: from good to great

The scale of organisational transformation demanded by AI and GenAI is a once in a generation challenge that allows organisations to strive for excellence and take the leap from "good to great" in also managing those headwinds.

So what lessons can we learn from previous watershed moments? Excellence begins with excellent change management; it is critical across all aspects of people, systems and processes.

That means:
- Gaining insight from data to experience narratives to support strategic decision making across key KPIs

- Well-conceived business cases that satisfy all stakeholder needs across the operational ecosystem

- Detailed roadmaps that tackle people, processes and systems simultaneously and deliver incremental value

- Stakeholder engagement and communication to take people with you

- Governance structures, from steering groups to risk identification, planning and management

- Understanding that AI and GenAI alone is not the answer. Headcount may not reduce and customers still need to speak to agents.

"The scale of organisational transformation is a once in a generation challenge"

Strategy and insight

Both data- and experience-driven insights are valuable here, where customer stories and call listening can support the findings of data and statistics, with the added bonus that hearing experiences fosters collaboration and alignment.

Remember:
– Driving resolution often requires multiple contacts for a single case. This may arise because:

– The customer's needs are complex and can't be resolved at first contact

– FCR failed

– They 'multi-channel' you because they didn't get a response in their chosen channel in time.

– **Reducing duplicate contacts, whatever their reason, lowers costs per customer and improves efficiency. Diagnose them well.**

– **In-app contact minimises verification needs, with the potential to reduce AHT.**

– **Asynchronous communication can expedite resolution, while serving customer preferences, such as through enabling customers to share photos or join video calls. For example, product recalls can be addressed through visual confirmation.**

"Hearing experiences fosters collaboration and alignment"

Business cases and roadmaps

The way to engage key stakeholders and secure buy-in is through clear strategy, compelling use and business cases and detailed roadmaps.

Business cases must demonstrate how a proposed operational or technology solution aligns with strategy, the required investment, phased development, planned governance and how and when value will be delivered.

Remember:
– AI and GenI are not silver bullets; all business cases need to consider people, processes and systems.

– Technology can minimise errors by eliminating human mistakes (assuming a bot isn't making repeated unchecked errors at pace!)

– Automation efforts require an audit of knowledge articles to streamline responses. Key steps include:

– Reviewing current articles and their structure.

– Establishing processes for quality assurance (QA) and frequent updates.

– Ensuring advice varies appropriately by country.

"Use this opportunity to redefine [contact centres] as value protectors and generators"

Roadmaps need to take account not just of how any technology build will happen but what that means in terms of organisational redesign, including any recruitment and training, and customer journey redesign and communication.

Remember:
– Delivery timescales may be impacted if you have a lot of technical debt to consider.

– Data infrastructure is a critical first step to supporting your technology use case.

– But your roadmap needs to demonstrate data, technology build, operational process design and wide implementation considerations.

Contact centres are often seen as cost centres; use this opportunity to redefine them as value protectors and generators, and staff accordingly.

Stakeholder engagement and communication

Change management invariably involves many difficult conversations with all stakeholders. Your goal is to sell them a vision and involve them at the right times.

Each stakeholder group will need differing messages, as we strive to express our aspirations in WIFM (what's in it for me?) terms.

C-suite:
Ensure they understand:
– Both the opportunities and limitations of the technology, so they know what else is needed
– The costs of implementation, but also the opportunity costs of not implementing
– The role of proof of concept and potential for failure
– The root causes of failures and risks of rushing AI
– The criticality of HITL both in development and operationally
– The resultant operating model needs, such as a different type of human agent

Agents
Because engaging them in developing AI means you will:
– Mitigate fears of job losses/insecurity
– Ensure the AI is doing what it should. Agents are among your best designers, testers and critics.
– Deliver the right training and development plans

"Sell them a vision and involve them at the right times"

Technical stakeholders
Be clear about:
– Data requirements and what is needed to put the right information in front of algorithms, agents or customers at the right moment
– Technical debt and where changes need to be made to consolidate, or whether you need point solutions
– Likely outcomes and the risks of getting it wrong so that you can effectively manage expectations/mitigate risk

Wider business
Ensure they understand:
– The impact of implementations on the operation and the people within it, including what it means for recruitment and training as a minimum
– Their role in supporting and delivering AI-driven transformation

Customers
Be clear with customers:
– About how and when they can self-serve, and the associated benefits
– How to get out of automated process quickly when they aren't delivering
– How they can speak to you when they need you

Governance

Proper change management project offices and transformation protocols are essential to successful delivery. From structured steering groups at strategic and tactical levels to effective risk control.

Risk control will cut across what any technology is doing and its effect on processes to security and compliance.

Remember:
- **Global operations require different cultural and regulatory considerations by country**

- **Rising cybersecurity threats, such as ransomware, demand robust controls for data access and third-party interactions**

- **Knowledge of compliance standards like PCI is essential**

- **Stakeholders must be engaged early to ensure technology aligns with minimum security standards**

- **Support for vulnerable customers is essential.**

9 pieces of advice

1

Invest in Agent Development
Train agents both to handle customer queries and adapt to evolving tools. Empower them to improve efficiency and provide structured career progression to retain and motivate.

2

Balance Automation with Empathy
Reap the benefits of operational efficiencies without alienating customers. Maintain emotional intelligence through human touchpoints, especially for the vulnerable or complex.

3

Unify and Leverage Data
Break down silos for personalised, consistent customer experiences. Ensure data insights drive decisions while safeguarding against misuse or cybersecurity threats.

4

Adapt to Changing Customer Preferences
Meet customers where they are. Prioritise hybrid approaches that integrate voice, asynchronous tools (e.g., WhatsApp), and online options. Maintain payments and interaction flexibility.

5

Be Realistic About AI Adoption
Don't overpromise. Focus on iterative improvements, aligning stakeholders early, and learning from small successes rather than attempting large, high-risk implementations.

6

Prioritise Operational Efficiency Metrics
Monitor and improve key metrics, e.g. Average Handle Time (AHT), First Contact Resolution (FCR), and Average Speed of Answer (ASA) to enhance customer satisfaction and lower costs.

7

Support Agents in High-Stress Environments
Equip agents with resilience and empathy training to manage stressful escalations and challenging customer dynamics. Provide robust support mechanisms for increased intensity.

8

Secure Buy-In with Comprehensive Roadmaps
Present clear benefits cases and roadmaps to stakeholders. Demonstrate success through data and customer stories to foster alignment and secure funding.

9

Recognise Contact Centres as a Strategic Asset
Shift perceptions of contact centres across the wider business from cost centres to growth platforms by integrating customer insights into broader business strategies.

About the authors

At Customer Contact Panel, we shape contact centre operations and find the right technology and outsourced partnerships to help our clients match their ambition.

Whatever the requirement, we always start with the ask to bring stakeholders together and define operational needs. Only then do we make plans for solutions, whether that's optimising existing processes, people and systems, or finding new outsource or technology partnerships - from filling gaps with handy enablers to service or digital transformation.

With our inside track on the contact centre industry, we're your gateway to the possible, whether that's learning what's new or which providers can fulfil your needs. Our natural operating mode is to share expertise generously.

We know the value of the right cultural, brand or relationship fit. Which technology trade-offs to make. And how to get the best and most flexible deals.

Plus our fee structure is transparent and scrupulously fair so that there are never any doubts about our independence.

That means you can make confident decisions knowing that working with us is always equitable.

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