Proving the Value of a Collaborative Approach to Your Contact Center

As self-service rises, enterprises need solutions that can assist the agent by providing an easy means for collaboration.

Sponsored by

8x8

Produced by

enterprise CONNECT RESEARCH

Executive Summary

New technologies, together with competition-fueled innovation in customer care, have raised customer expectations dramatically in the past decade. Along with these changing customer expectations and preferences comes a shift in the kinds of interactions taking place within the contact center today. With the use of digital channels on the rise and with the deployment of automation technologies, contact center agents have the challenge of responding to increasingly complex calls. All in all, to meet the needs of today's customers, enterprises need to embrace a comprehensive solution that empowers agents with the information they need to resolve issues quickly. With the right technology and strategy, a traditional contact center can be transformed into a truly collaborative and next-generation contact center, ready to take the larger organization into the future.
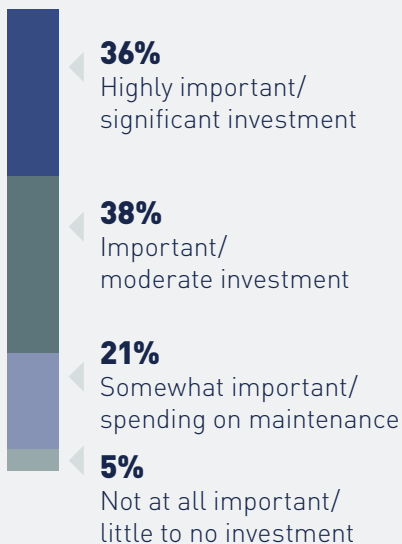
Table of Contents

A New Era of Contact Center & Customer Experience

Customer service today is not what it used to be, and businesses that take outdated approaches to provide customer care will be at a disadvantage and risk losing customers. Newly available technologies and heightened customer expectations have driven a shift in the kinds of interactions taking place within the contact center today.

Spending Allotment

How important is investing in the contact center to your enterprise?

36%
Highly important/
significant investment

38%
Important/
moderate investment

21%
Somewhat important/
spending on maintenance

5%
Not at all important/
little to no investment

(Enterprise Connect Research 2019 Contact Center & CX Survey)

That shift is manifest in the rise of self-service. Modern customers want the option to solve their own issues and easily find answers to their questions. And businesses are finding more contact center success by implementing knowledge bases and self-service applications. Customers that can use self-service to resolve their issues, place orders, or answer questions more quickly than by calling into a contact center tend to leave those interactions happier and with a better impression of the enabling company.

As evolving customer preferences is one of the key drivers for contact center investment, it comes as no surprise that enterprises are investing in their contact centers. Results from **Enterprise Connect Research's 2019 Contact Center & CX Survey** show that nearly 75% of 149 respondent companies said their enterprises recognize contact center investment as important or highly important to the overall business. As such, they're investing in their contact centers — particularly in two key areas: implementing self-service and deploying new technologies to automate parts of the customer journey.

Automation reduces costs and improves customer satisfaction. According to the 2019 Nemertes Research report "**Transforming Customer Experience with Digital Technologies**," enterprise-size companies have seen a 91% increase in the number of transactions they use self-service applications to address, compared to a 57% increase for midsize organizations and a 43% increase for small organizations. Nemertes also found that the companies most focused on increasing self-service are adding a customer rating program, new digital channels, and mobile-enabled customer service. Growing customer demand for digital engagement is likely driving these efforts.

With the use of digital channels and automation technologies on the rise, contact center agents have the challenge of responding to increasingly complex calls. All in all, to meet the needs of today's modern customer, enterprises need to embrace a comprehensive solution that empowers agents with the information they need to quickly resolve issues. With the right technology and strategy in place, a traditional contact center can be transformed into a truly collaborative and next-generation contact center, ready to take the larger organization into the future.

Digitally Enabled Self-Service as a Preferred Choice

Exploring bot use cases

As noted, today's customers are digitally empowered and look to self-service options first. Many companies — according to the Enterprise Connect Research study, 25% of respondents — have implemented self-service chatbots to help customers with the more basic and common inquiries. Specifically, chatbots help to offload the more mundane and often repetitive tasks from contact center agents, allowing agents to focus on more complex interactions and/or high-value activities.

AI & Automation in the Contact Center

Artificial intelligence and other advanced capabilities are starting to find a home in the enterprise contact, as shown in Enterprise Connect's 2019 Contact Center & CX Survey

Technology in Use	% of Respondents
Analytics/reporting	67%
Intelligent IVR	33%
Automated intelligent call routing	31%
Customer sentiment analysis	27%
Chatbots for self-service	25%
Real-time transcription or translation	19%
Automated interaction logging	13%
Bots for agent assistance/coaching	12%

Whether an enterprise has deployed chatbots or not, the concept seems to be widely accepted. When asked how important bots are to contact center success, 50% of EC Research study respondents said they consider bots moderately important, and another 40% ranked bots as highly important. Only 10% of survey respondents said bots were not at all important.

However, bot utility is still limited. The more complex a given interaction becomes, the more intelligent a self-service bot needs to be, and it's still early days for using chatbots for tasks beyond the basics.

For example, bots typically fail in interactions where the customer asks subsequent questions — i.e., "What colors is product X available in?" followed by the question, "What other features does it have?" Because an average bot usually can't carry forward information from a first question into the second, it would not be able to recognize the "it" reference in that follow-on question. And while this could be solved by the customer phrasing the second question as, "What features does product X have?" businesses are not easily able to train customers on how they should interact with a bot in order to get the best results.

However, businesses can train their agents on how best to interact with a bot. By turning bots inwards to assist agents, organizations can ultimately help their customers, as these agents will have a personal help desk at their fingertips. While customer-facing self-service bots leave agents with more complex interactions to handle, inward-facing agent-assist bots can help agents address these more complicated questions.

Anecdotally, as gleaned from EC's in-depth interviews with enterprise end-user organizations, many businesses that support self-service channels are seeing a decrease in overall contact center volume but an increase in call handle time. Some interview subjects' experiences with self-service implementations support the projections of many industry analysts — those voice interactions will increase as well as the total volume of interactions. However, the percentage of interactions handled by human agents should decline thanks to efficiency gains from agent-assist bots and self-service expansion.

Additionally, from the EC research, we found that roughly 42% of respondents use call handling time as a metric to determine the success of their contact center and customer experience efforts. For contact centers that have employed self-service channels, increased call handle time can be considered a good thing — a sign that self-service (also known as call deflection) has disposed of the simpler inquiries, leaving agents to tackle the more complex interactions that require human intervention.

Going Omnichannel & Adding Intelligence

Alongside the rise of self-service, enterprise contact centers are increasingly supporting a wider variety of channels for customer communication. While the EC Research survey results show that 85% of respondents still support voice, voice alone is no longer enough to satisfy customer demands. Digital channels are becoming a requirement for businesses to better engage with their customers. According to the EC research, 75% of respondent contact centers support email, while 47% support text/SMS for customer interactions. Further, 74% of respondents indicated that adding customer-facing digital channels was either highly or moderately important for providing a successful customer experience.

When customers reach out to a company — be that via a self-service interface, a phone call, webchat, email, or any other channel or combination of channels — they expect the agent to know who they are and why they are reaching out. And they want to leave the interaction confident that they had reached the best possible agent for addressing their inquiry. That's a tall order, but one ripe for additional automation and artificial intelligence (AI).

Part and parcel of bringing on support for a variety of channels is the ability to:

1) feed relevant customer information, pulled from CRM or other systems, into the channel

2) capture context from one channel and carry it forward to another — from machine to agent or agent to agent.

Omnichannel routing leads to benefits such as efficiency gains, faster time to resolution, and improved customer experience.

Zeroing in on that still highly popular voice channel, the standard IVR needs an AI infusion, too. Enter intelligent IVRs, which apply advanced technologies such as speech recognition and natural language processing to voice conversations. An intelligent IVR not only can understand what a customer is calling about but also have a response at the ready — or pass along the call to live agent when the information requested exceeds its knowledge.

Indeed, the use of advanced technology within the contact center is proving an indicator for positive customer experience, the EC Research survey found. Among survey respondents who are happy with the customer experience their organizations deliver, 42% correlate that happiness with the use of advanced technology. In addition, 38% of respondents rate the use of AI-based communications tools like bots as highly relevant to their contact center roadmaps, while 31% indicated they currently use automated intelligent call routing and 33% use intelligent IVR. And, as interviews with contact center managers confirm, interest and perceived value of omnichannel routing is high.

For example, one of the world's largest and best-known credit reporting and financial services agencies told us that omnichannel is on the immediate roadmap for its contact center operation of roughly 3,000 agents in 28 countries. Right now, the organization gets by, manually stitching together emails and calls, for example. However, it recognizes the need not only to expand the number of digital channels it supports, but also to provide a way to carry context across channels as customers progress through their journeys.

This organization is working to reduce human-to-human interactions by relying more on AI and self-service. And moving forward, AI is going to play an increasingly larger role in the way the contact center is run, the contact center architect said.
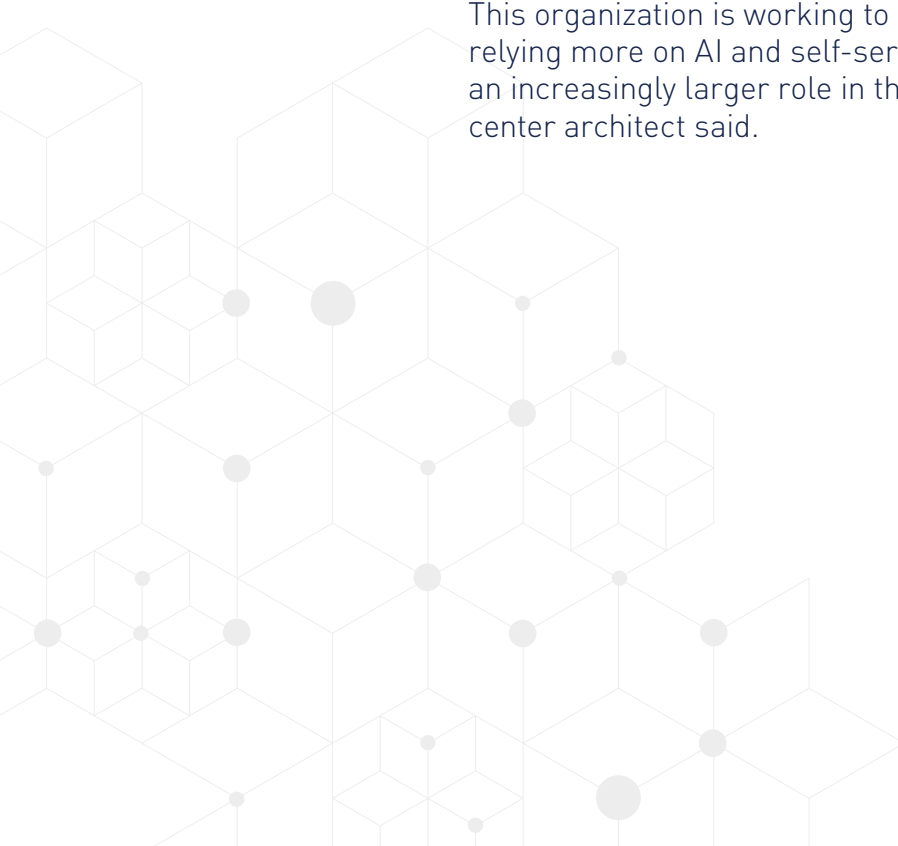
What is a Collaborative Contact Center, and How Can Enterprises Benefit?

So how can businesses get ahead of the challenges presented by this new era of contact center and customer service? One approach is to adopt technologies and strategies that can transform a traditional contact center into a collaborative one.

A collaborative contact center unifies team messaging and video conferencing with the contact center solution. This combination eliminates silos between business users and the contact center operation, providing a means for seamless collaboration across the enterprise and within the contact center between agents and leadership or support teams. A collaborative contact center becomes especially valuable in cases where the agent doesn't have the knowledge to respond to customer inquiries adequately. With collaboration technologies in place and integrated systems eliminating the barriers between the contact center and the rest of the business, an agent in a collaborative contact center could message a product manager to get the right information to then relay to the customer, for example.

6 Hallmarks of Collaborative Communications

A collaborative contact center brings together collaboration capabilities with the contact center in a unified interface. Elements of a collaborative contact center include:

» Intelligent interaction routing

» Self-service options

» Customer journey analytics

» Quality management

» Speech analytics

» One-to-one interactions

» Team collaboration

» Pre-built integrations with CRM and other apps

Another factor driving the need for a more highly collaborative contact center is the rise of at-home workers. Sixty-three percent of EC Research survey respondents report supporting work-from-home (WFH) programs for their contact center agents, and this number is on the rise. In-depth interviews revealed that organizations that do not currently support WFH programs for their agents are at least considering it as a means of keeping employees happy and boosting agent retention. But WFH programs only increase the need for team messaging, as it enables quick and easy collaboration when agents are not working in the same physical space.

The idea of a collaborative contact center seems appealing to EC Research survey respondents; 91% said it was somewhat important to highly important to have a combined unified communications (UC) and contact center solution. Of course, there may be different definitions in play here. For example,

some businesses might consider their custom integration of UC and contact center software from disparate vendors a combined solution, while others might think of a combined solution as a pre-integrated solution from a single vendor. Still others might consider combined to mean a loose integration between a vendor's UC and contact center solutions. For the sake of this paper, we're defining a combined solution as contact center and UC software from the same provider running on the same platform; this configuration provides much more value to the end-user organization than alternatives do.

In our one-on-one interviews, organizations of various sizes that did not currently use a combined offering told EC Research that they see the value in such a solution. For example, the contact center director for a large healthcare support organization expressed that an integrated system would enable the business to bring on more subject matter experts (SMEs) and support initiatives to continue business growth.

It's easy to see the value of such integration. With a collaborative contact center, agents are better able to address customer inquiries by tapping into SMEs or support teams, leading to more accurate answers, speedier time to resolution, and improved customer experience. Companies without a combined contact center and UC solution essentially force their agents to go outside the interaction to get answers from SMEs, and further, they must rely on agents to accurately document all interactions in order to avoid having redundant interactions and wasting resources. Other organizations may rely on training their contact center agents to be SMEs themselves, but this is not cost-friendly and can be a difficult approach to maintain.

4 Takeaways on Contact Center Agents

Key statistics from the Enterprise Connect 2019 Contact Center & CX Survey:

» 40% of respondents expect the number of agents to increase over the next 12 months

» 63% of respondent organizations support work-from-home programs for their contact center agents

» 91% of respondents see importance of unifying collaboration technologies with the contact center, to allow agents to reach business experts and shorten time to resolution

» Agent training/coaching capabilities ranked among most important factors for contact center success

Collaborative Contact Center Solution for the Win, Sooner or Later

There are two general paths for a business to take to a collaborative contact center. It can either go all-in — procuring, deploying, and migrating to a combined contact center and UC offering in one fell swoop — or, it can go with a standalone contact center-as-a-service (CCaaS) offering and then add the UC/collaboration part down the road when it's ready.

While certain situations may impact which path a given enterprise takes, the decision often comes down to business priorities. For example, if it's a priority for a business to reduce technology costs and create a highly collaborative environment, an all-in approach might be best for its more immediate benefits. A good place to start for any business is to ask itself, what's the business priority to create a collaborative environment for the whole company? Or, rather, is the goal just to make incremental improvements so that the business can move faster? Getting the answers to these questions can help inform the best path for an organization to take.

Of course, organizations may also have different comfort levels with the risk associated with making one big move to go all-in. Or differing opinions on the decision-making team may influence which path a company takes.

Organizations that opt for the phased approach could be doing so based on a variety of factors. For example, existing contract lifecycles may be a roadblock and prohibit a company from getting a combined solution all at once. Other factors could include existing business strategies and roadmaps that are already in place. Or perhaps the enterprise is not satisfied with a current provider and that's what's driving its decision to change.

In general, the enterprise buyer for UC systems is rarely the same person as the buyer for the enterprise contact center system — UC often falls under the IT organization, while contact center often falls under operations or a COO-type of division. This means that in most cases, the UC/CC decision requires input from two totally separate decision-making groups, which brings us back to that business priorities conversation.

One other variable that could be a factor is company size and complexity. Larger companies are also more likely to be complex, which means they may have trouble taking an "all-in" approach and doing everything at once. Smaller companies, on the other hand, likely are less complex and may be more agile as a result.

Collaborative Contact Center: Investing in Business Success

As we explored in the opening of this whitepaper, nearly 75% of survey respondents said that their enterprises recognize contact center investment as important or highly important to the overall business, and as such, they're investing in their contact centers. Plus, as we learned from our in-depth interviews, enterprises seem to understand that this investment needs to be focused on both the agents and the customers. While we are seeing more organizations look toward emerging technologies to automate parts of the customer journey, the opportunity in combining contact center and UC in a single platform lies ahead for them. Opting for such a combined solution is a key part of establishing a collaborative contact center for business and boosting the quality of service provided to customers, not to mention the employee experience for the agents.

As shown in our research survey, enterprises do see the value of a combined contact center and UC solution, but there are other factors at play. When it comes to which factors are most important for evaluating contact center solution providers, security, pricing and total cost of ownership (TCO) top the list. Sixty-eight percent of respondents deemed a provider's security is highly important, while 64% noted pricing and TCO as highly important.

Top 5 Success Metrics

… as identified by respondents to Enterprise Connect's 2019 Contact Center & CX Survey

1. Customer ratings/surveys

2. Operational costs

3. Customer attrition/retention

4. Call handling time

5. First-call resolution rate

This shows that as enterprises look to empower agents and establish a collaborative contact center, providers that have strong security features and offer high-value solutions come out on top. That also means that while the bells and whistles are important for enterprises evaluating a solution, basic factors like cost and security continue to matter to enterprise buyers. It's not one or the other, but rather, it's both the basics and the next-generation features that are important in this new era of the contact center. And because every business has different priorities when it comes to its contact center, the most successful providers will be those that enable business customers to take on the specific initiatives that are important to them.

About 8x8

8x8, Inc. (NYSE: EGHT) is transforming the future of business communications as a leading Software-as-a-Service provider of voice, video, chat, contact center and enterprise-class API solutions powered by one global cloud communications platform. 8x8 empowers workforces worldwide to connect individuals and teams so they can collaborate faster and work smarter. Real-time analytics and intelligence provide businesses unique insights across all interactions and channels so they can delight end-customers and accelerate their business. For additional information, visit **www.8x8.com**, or follow 8x8 on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.