Clearer Connections: How to Build a More Intelligent Contact Center

MARKET TRENDS REPORT

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Executive Summary

This year has changed how people think about government services. Although the services that the government provides are largely the same – driver's licenses, unemployment support and health care, for instance – the way it delivers them may never be the same.

Agencies see that the public simply wants to be able to get what they need quickly and through a channel they're comfortable with, whether that is a phone call, text chat, social media or self-service options. What's more, they want to jump from channel to channel seamlessly without having to retell their story. Another complication: How all of this looks might differ based on generational preferences. For contact center managers and workers, all of this can add up to difficult and frustrating interactions.

Customer experience (CX) has not always been a top priority at agencies, but is becoming one rapidly. For instance, it's a cross-agency priority goal in the President's Management Agenda, and the Government Contact Center Council formed to discuss and share best practices to improve CX. And recognizing that contact centers are often the first, if not only, point of interaction with the public for many agencies, members of both houses of Congress have introduced legislation calling for ways to modernize contact centers.

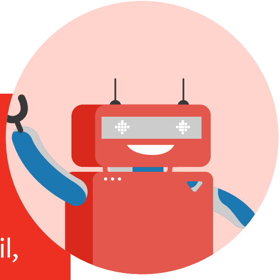
The challenge is that the contact center increased in complexity in recent years, with agents now managing multiple channels, including voice, email, chat and even social media. This omni-channel environment requires a whole new level of automation that takes advantage of the flexibility and scalability of the cloud.

Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as an essential tool in improving both the efficiency and effectiveness of human agents and providing a better customer journey. A main example of this is bots. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stood up a bot called the Coronavirus Self-Checker for people to use to check their symptoms.

To learn more about just what agencies need to navigate this new and evolving environment, GovLoop teamed with Avaya, a provider of unified communications and collaboration tools to government offices and contact centers.

What is a contact center?

"A contact center is a central point in an organization where your customer contact channels, such as telephone, email, text, chat, fax, Text Telephones (TTY), web or mail, are managed."



By The Numbers

$20 billion

the amount the federal government spends each year on contact centers.

30% **to** 45%

the amount of contact center staff attrition – more than double the national average of 15%.

The Texas Workforce Commission received millions of additional contacts every week during the COVID-19 pandemic.

70%

the amount of customer interactions that will involve emerging technology such as chatbots by 2022, up from 15% today.

10,000 **to** 120,000

the amount that telehealth video appointments through the Veterans Affairs Department's VA Video Connect increased between February and May 2020.

"TWC tele-centers' record call volume in previous crises was around 60,000 calls a day. Calls during the COVID-19 crisis rose to the millions within a week."

– The Texas Workforce Commission, in announcing the launch of a new chatbot for unemployment insurance claims

"Meeting customer expectations, keeping sensitive data and systems secure, and ensuring responsive, multi-channel access to services are all critical parts of the vision for modern Government."

– President's Management Agenda

Customer Experience in Crisis Mode

Challenge: Traditional Processes Can't Keep Pace

In the best of circumstances, government contact centers are a demanding environment. Increasingly, constituents are looking to leverage multiple channels to interact with agencies, including voice, chat, email, text, social and self-service options.

And it's not just that they want to use multiple channels – they also want to jump from one channel to another seamlessly. And they don't want to be told that agents are available only between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. on weekdays. They expect service when they need it.

All of this can be a nightmare for contact centers to manage. Many contact centers have different agents handling different channels. That sounds efficient, but think about someone contacting an agency by chat, then following up with a call. Will the agent answering the phone be aware of that original contact and what was said?

This environment proved even more challenging with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents concerned about the virus's effect on their health and employment reached out to local, state and federal agencies in record numbers, and those agencies had to respond, even as they themselves faced challenges with shifting from onsite to online work.

"Being able to deal with that spike was critical to provide relief to communities and citizens that you had it under control, and that you could provide the information in an appropriate manner," said Davide Petramala, Director of Customer and Partner Onboarding at Avaya. "And that appropriate manner became the ability to not have to physically go in and find information."

Some agencies had multiple entry points to their contact centers, including digital options, before the pandemic, but those tended to be siloed, so someone who can't complete a transaction online would have to start over when they call a live agent.

Government contact centers need to move beyond the traditional processes to keep pace with modern customer expectations.

"What this [pandemic-driven] digital transformation forced was more consolidation: one intelligent conversation that the whole call center has access to, that delivers it at multiple touchpoints."

– Davide Petramala

Solution: Put Automation, AI to Work

What's needed is a true omni-channel strategy that creates a seamless customer journey. Such a strategy will ensure that agents have full visibility into a customer's situation and previous interactions. That means no more "siloed" contact centers – every agent should be able to manage interactions across all channels.

Automation is essential to making this feasible. Both the agent and the customer need tools that they can use to streamline that customer journey. For the agent, automation can handle a lot of mundane processes – such as collecting information from customers or even responding to simple inquiries – which frees up agents to focus on more complex problems.

From a constituent's perspective, the less time they spend interacting with a contact center, the happier they are. Many people prefer to start with a self-service option, and deal with an agent only if it becomes necessary. And if it becomes necessary, they prefer to keep the interaction as quick and efficient as possible.

Increasingly, automation is being driven by AI and machine learning. AI makes it possible to automate more complex constituent interactions, further alleviating an agent's workload. AI also can assist agents as they interact with constituents – pulling up background information (e.g., previous interactions with a constituent), suggesting responses and recommending next steps.

"Think of it as like my own personal virtual assistant as an agent," Petramala said. "Not only do I get the contextual information, but as the conversation's going on, based on the topic that we're discussing, it can feed relevant articles or content to me based on the data that it's tapped into."

Cloud is the only way to deal with these challenges quickly and cost-effectively because it provides scalable services that support automation and AI, he said. By going to the cloud, agencies can outsource work to experts in the field and subscribe and pay only for the services they use. "They could right-size their cost and scenario," Petramala said.

Best Practices in Addressing Contact Center Needs

Use contextual intelligence to give customers a warm, fuzzy feeling. For example, if customers have interacted with a virtual agent before, it remembers them and treats subsequent engagements as friendly conversation, plus it can begin to anticipate what questions they will ask. Also, that relationship gets passed to a live agent.

"When I call in, I know that the health department, [for example], is concerned about me. They know I called last time about my COVID test and they're asking me relevant questions," Petramala said. "From the agency, that contextual data that you're gathering is important because you can make the call more effective [and] more successful."

Build on that with sentiment analysis. This technology studies an interaction in real time to gauge the customer's level of satisfaction. For example, it could determine that someone is getting frustrated with a chat bot and escalate that engagement to a human agent.

Use a bot that can understand common English and respond in a way that doesn't sound robotic, using natural language processing. It also lets callers dictate the flow of the call, unlike traditionally used interactive voice response, and it increases agencies' deflection rates as customers find information themselves. When they can't, the system can automatically connect them with a live agent. "Natural language processing is the game-changer," Petramala said.

Find the right agent to respond to a question or problem using AI The more data a contact center collects, the easier it is for virtual and live agents to do their jobs. "The AI is tapped into the data that you provide, so the smarter you make it, the better it can be in terms of efficiency," he said. "Not only can I pass along all that contextual information, but I can look at the data profile of the agents themselves, based on when they logged in, to know ... that agent will have all the relevant information so we can have the most successful interaction at that moment."

HOW AVAYA HELPS

Avaya provides agencies the ability to layer in innovation without investing in infrastructure technology, even if they are not already Avaya customers. The company delivers its services as an over-the-top layered innovation that is elastic and burstable. Avaya reimagines digital communications with innovation that defines the future of work and CX.

"Avaya will not only consult on what's required, based on the current [environment], we'll help implement, scope and do even the AI," Petramala said.

To learn more, visit: avaya.com/en.

Conclusion

For many people, contact centers are the face of government. While elected officials might dominate the news, the contact center is where people turn throughout their lives to seek help with taxes, apply for retirement benefits or request a building permit. Their experience in these interactions often defines their perception of government.

Using cloud-based automation, contact centers can meet these needs by transforming from siloed points of entry to seamlessly processing customers' requests. With the relevant contextual information before answering a call, live and virtual agents can provide friendlier interactions. AI monitoring those interactions can pick up keywords to begin searching for and pushing out the information customers need in real time, plus it can detect sentiment, signaling when it may be time for the engagement to level up.

ABOUT AVAYA

Avaya is shaping what's next for the future of work, with innovation and partnerships that deliver game-changing business benefits. Their cloud communications solutions and multi-cloud application ecosystem power personalized, intelligent, and effortless customer and employee experiences to help achieve strategic ambitions and desired outcomes. Together, they are committed to help grow your business by delivering Experiences that Matter.

For more information about this report, please reach out to avaya.com/en.

ABOUT GOVLOOP

GovLoop's mission is to "connect government to improve government." We aim to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.

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