



Part 2 | The Evolution of the Contact Centre

November 2020

A CCMA Research Initiative

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This is the second in a series of research reports exploring the future of the contact centre, thanks to our supporting partner, Puzzel.

The first wave of research (published in August 2020) explored how contact centres were responding to the first lockdown, rapidly ramping-up remote working and agile operations. This second wave picks up where the first left off and examines the outlook for the short and longer-term future.

As in Part 1 this report is based on qualitative research comprising group discussions with some of the leading brands in the UK.

We invited eleven contact centre leaders representing a diverse mix of vertical markets, contact centre types and experiences to a series of focus groups in October 2020 to explore how the industry is evolving. The CCMA and Puzzel extend their sincere thanks to these individuals for their generous participation in the study.

Gareth Brophy, Head of Customer Support, Halfords

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning
EMEA, Fiserv

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

John Devlin, CEO, Ascensos

Ceri Henfry, Head of Operations, Moneypenny

Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care UK,
Estée Lauder Companies

Steven Lee, Director of Business Operations
EMEA, LEGO®

Louise Locke, COO, GFM Holdings

Nick Williams, Director of Customer Care, Gousto

Helen Wilson, Head of Customer Service, Atom Bank

Foreword

In August 2020, the first wave of this in-depth research initiative lifted the lid on how contact centres were responding to the pandemic and uncovered a number of important trends that will influence the future of the industry.

As we go to press with this second report lockdown restrictions are in place across many parts of the UK, and protecting staff is still very much top of mind. With the benefit of several months' additional experience since our first wave of research over the summer, thinking has evolved and strategies have become more nuanced.

Furthermore with 2021 just weeks away, there has been a renewed focus on business planning and an onus on leaders to find the right balance of outcomes for both their people and their organisation.

This is a report comprised of two halves. As our research reveals, contact centre leaders across the nation are busy ensuring near-term operational success in light of sustained increased demand. They are also working against longer-term goals: building skills and career opportunities for their teams, and strengthening the role their contact centres play within their businesses, forging closer links with other functions and acting as the voice of the customer within their organisation.

This report has been designed to inform your own thinking as you plan for the short and the long term. I hope you enjoy reading it.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Contact centres have undergone considerable change over the past few months. They've faced extraordinary challenges – many never faced before – but have adapted, persevered, and innovated with impressive speed.

This second wave of research enabled us to explore how contact centres are responding to the latest challenges across the industry and how they plan to tackle the future. With coronavirus restrictions still limiting travel and social gatherings across the UK, organisations are asking how they can continue supporting their customers

while protecting and motivating their teams and maintaining productivity.

It is now more important than ever for contact centres to take the lessons learned during the early stages of the pandemic and use them to build stronger pathways forward, embracing their newfound status and agility to achieve success in the future.



Jonathan Allan,
Chief Marketing
Officer, Puzzlel

Section One: The near term

One of the big themes emerging in business from 2020 was the increasing demand on contact centre operations brought on by the pandemic. With 2021 imminent, this trend shows no signs of abating.

“Next year we’re probably going to be 20% busier than we were pre-Covid. We’ve got a really big workload pressure to come in. Unfortunately, it’s not easy for us to recruit people in. The role is complex and the lead time to competence is probably six to seven months. It’s likely to be unprecedented levels of challenge as we go into the next six months or so.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

“For online, it’s going to be massively different. We’re going to see [peak season] going on longer. My biggest worry is whether the carriers are actually going to be able to cope.”

Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care UK, Estée Lauder Companies

Contact centres offer customers and colleagues security during uncertain times

Sustained demand is at least in part attributed to the ongoing uncertainty that the nation is experiencing as England undergoes a second lockdown, Scotland and Northern Ireland live under tight restrictions and Wales emerges from its “circuit breaker”. During this period, customers have turned to contact centres for reassurance.

“There’s more uncertainty out there in the customer base. One thing we’ve learned to do better has been to keep our customers informed more, because of some of those higher anxiety levels.”

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

“The biggest driver of traffic is when people just don’t know what’s going on.”

Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care UK, Estée Lauder Companies

Contact centre leaders stress the importance of reassuring staff during this period of heightened uncertainty, of taking back control and providing strong and consistent direction and communication.

“I think we’ve provided our people with a level of security and stability that the world isn’t giving them.”

Steven Lee, Director of Business Service EMEA, LEGO®

“To set that direction for your organisation and give people that certainty and control and for people to feel good about where that’s going, that needs to be driven by the organisation making their own decisions.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

Establishing flexible-working policies

Perhaps the most important area in which contact centres are working to establish consistency and control is the area of flexible working. The first wave of research published in August 2020 revealed how contact centres were able to quickly shift their operations off premises thanks to agile working and technology.

“A key tenet of employee well-being is around giving your people choice, certainty and control. Giving lots of options but no clarity around what people can and can't do within those is probably more damaging than having a more restrictive, less flexible thing that is absolutely clear. It's the difference between flexibility and uncertainty. Treating people fairly doesn't mean treating everyone the same.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

As restrictions eased over the summer and the opportunity presented itself for people to return to the office, contact centres have been working on policies that balance productivity with safety.

Some contact centres have continued to maintain a policy of full remote working, while others have re-introduced some office working to support the needs of colleagues as well as the business. Most of those who have invited colleagues back to the office have incorporated optionality and flexibility on an individual-by-individual basis.

“We've made a very clear decision that recruitment, training and onboarding will be done the old-fashioned way in the building, face to face. The first six months will be very much building based. And then after that it's about flexibility and giving people that opportunity to work from home, if it works for them.”

Ceri Henfry, Head of Operations, Moneypenny

For some contact centres getting the balance between the needs of the individuals and needs of

the business is not straightforward. Some contact centre leaders have observed that the rapid normalisation of remote working has created an expectation for certain staff that requires managing.

“As time goes on, it is likely that we could have staff that have not been in the office for 12+ months saying I'm not coming back in...this isn't my job to be in the office.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

“There was a view that getting everyone homeworking getting everyone out of the office was the fix for keeping people safe. But it may have created this limiting belief whereby office work is somehow now an exceptional thing, because we're in COVID. And the employee mindset is being in the office feels riskier.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

Having established it is perfectly possible to function with remote working, contact centres are refocusing resource planning on the needs of the organisation. While decisions on remote working will continue to be taken on a case-by-case basis with employee safety always top priority, contact centre leaders point out that remote working should not be viewed as the default option.

“Are we in danger of operating in the zeitgeist that says we've all got to find a home working solution? Or actually do we need to look at our operation and the work types that happen in there and ask: for this work type, this function, this group of people... is it right to be working remotely? Or is the right business outcome for that to be office based? And if it needs to be office based, how do we create a safe environment for that to operate in in the office?”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

“We did assessment days all online, and it worked really, really well. We recruited one of the best cohorts we’ve ever had. But I wouldn’t want to move to a model of totally operating online and recruiting people that never ever come to the office. The office is a place where we want to collaborate and drive forward the business together.”

Helen Wilson, Head of Customer Service, Atom Bank

“We’ve been good at responding when staff have initiated the triggers and we’ve caught it early. What we need to do better is focus on how we mitigate people actually getting to that point. And that’s really, really difficult.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

Looking after colleagues

Eight months after the onset of the first lockdown, some signs of fatigue are evident and mental health is a vital consideration for every contact centre.

“We’re seeing mental health related issues really increasing. The uncertainty in society is having a big impact and is a key consideration when we are supporting our customers.”

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

“It’s back again, even though it never went away. That’s how life is feeling for us. So operationally at all good. Emotionally and motivation wise, we’re on a downward trend.”

Ceri Henfry, Head of Operations, Moneypenny

Contact centre leaders are working hard to protect their teams, becoming proactive in spotting warning signs and taking action.

“We’ve been good at responding when people have initiated the triggers and we’ve caught it early. What we need to do better is focus on how we mitigate people actually getting to that point. And that’s really, really difficult.”

Mark Davies, Customer Contact Director, Bupa

When evaluating suitability for remote working, managers should keep in mind that some roles are clearly better performed on premises. These include people working in functions that involve high levels of systems and operational complexity; when operating over VPNs may not be optimal and there is a reliance on home broadband and maximum uptime is needed; roles that require a high degree of engagement with other people in the business; when working with sensitive data. Obtaining the required accreditations to process payments, for example, is much more difficult when working from home.

“We’ve talked to team leaders about just looking for signs for example in a team meeting, making sure that you pick up on some signals of things that might not be quite right and making sure we follow up.”

Helen Wilson, Head of Customer Service, Atom Bank

Contact centres are working hard to ensure there are planned and spontaneous opportunities for human connection.

“We’re looking to rotate certain teams in, for example, one week, every four, to have people coming into the office to break up the pattern and keep physical connectivity.”

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

“We have a standing invite in everybody’s calendar which is called our Virtual Breakroom where people can just drop in and have a cup of tea virtually together.”

Steven Lee, Director of Business Service EMEA, LEGO®

Team building and organisational culture in the era of flexible working

As contact centres work to safeguard the well-being of colleagues in the immediate term, the policies and practices they introduce also serve to nurture team solidarity and the sense of belonging that is so important to contact centre staff.

Underpinning this aim lie profound questions: will remote working increase attrition? How to create differentiation as an employer when your staff work in the same location regardless of who they work for?

“Are people not as connected to the organisation when they’re working from home? And then, do they start looking at opportunities to work for other organisations?”

Helen Wilson, Head of Customer Service, Atom Bank

Contact centres are being more adept at deploying online collaboration tools to foster morale.

“We’re using Facebook as a social tool to make sure that people are having those kinds of social interactions that they would have had. I’m really encouraging the teams to use that in a professional way. But to talk about all the stuff that you would normally talk about when you were grabbing lunch or in the kitchen.”

Gareth Brophy, Head of Customer Support, Halfords

“I used to do a weekly email update with a general department and business update. Now I do it live on video through MS Teams. It is the point in the week where everyone connects together in one place – having over 150 people in the call gives a sense of togetherness.”

Steven Lee, Director of Business Service EMEA, LEGO®

“People work for people, their manager and their peers, the colleagues that sit physically or virtually alongside them. The one-to-one relationship is crucial. So all our investment is on making sure that managers are world class, that they’ve got the tools and the platforms in place to manage those individuals whether they’re sitting together or 300 miles away, spending the same quality of time that they would do in the office.”

John Devlin, CEO, Ascensos

Others are going over and above to recognise and reward staff and acknowledge the challenges that 2020 has brought.

“We’ve been thinking about how do we bring Christmas into people’s homes because Money Penny has been very much in people’s homes this year. So instead of a Christmas party we’ve got the turkey truck in the car park where Money Penny is buying everybody their Christmas turkey, or ham or nut roast. That’s our way of thanking a family for the fact they’ve given up space.”

Ceri Henfry, Head of Operations, Money Penny

“Contact centres have had to get creative over the past few months, finding new ways to support their customers and engage their agents as coronavirus restrictions continue to impact our daily lives. While many of the problems contact centres faced at the beginning of the pandemic have been solved – eg how to transition to remote working and scale to meet increased customer demand – new challenges have arisen in their place.

Customers are still turning to contact centres in record numbers, looking for reassurance and expecting regular updates on every change that may affect them. Many agents are also still working from home and are anxious

about returning to the office, challenging managers to find new ways to balance productivity with safety and monitor their well-being.

Those with agile contact centre solutions and practices have found success in enabling agents to work both at home or in the office when it’s convenient for them, maintaining both efficiency and flexibility. Integrations with tools such as Microsoft Teams have also helped keep agents connected, offering a vital channel for human interaction.

Jonathan Allan,
Chief Marketing Officer, Puzzel



Section Two: The longer term

“Contact centres are becoming more critical to the delivery of services. People who walk into our industry are going to have probably a real golden run over the next two or three years because there’ll be a huge degree of investment into customer facing teams. The roles we’re all in will become more important than ever.”

John Devlin, CEO, Ascensos

In Part 1 of our research, we uncovered how contact centres are becoming more strategic and closely connected to other parts of the organisation. We revealed how advisors’ roles are becoming more sophisticated and covering an increasingly wide array of customer journeys.

As 2021 approaches, these trends are accelerating at pace. As customers have turned to contact centres for reassurance during uncertain times, the contact centre has become pre-eminent as a primary brand touchpoint and as the face of the organisation. More and more customer insight

is being captured in the contact centre and is being deployed strategically elsewhere in the organisation.

While contact centre leaders tackle ongoing operational challenges in the short term, there is a tremendous amount of optimism about the longer-term future. One positive side-effect of the difficult macro-economic environment has been a growth in the availability of high-quality talent. Mobility between departments is on the rise, as opportunities are created for people coming into the contact centre from elsewhere in the organisation.

“We brought quite a few people across from our stores. If someone is passionate about bikes, they want to talk to people about cycling and they want to engage with the customers and are really good at upselling. They’re just naturally trying to help that customer out.”

Gareth Brophy, Head of Customer Support, Halfords

Building skills and career progression

Capitalising on the growing availability and quality of talent into the contact centre, leaders are redoubling efforts on strategic resource planning and workforce management. In addition to enhancing resource planning and mobility, this helps to create more robust career paths for staff.

Improving job opportunities is seen as a priority to proactively mitigate attrition, which is anticipated to rise once the pandemic is under control. By creating specialisms and competencies with formal roadmaps and performance benchmarks, supported by training and evaluation, every team member is able to receive personalised career plans built on individual skills and aspirations.

“We try and skill everybody to handle all workflows and all channels other than social media, which we see as a bit more of a specialism when it gets into the public domain. We have various progression steps and we have subject matter experts who specialise in different workflows. It might be marketing, logistics, operations, tech, and they will fulfil the function of being a conduit between the wider team of agents and for example the tech team to provide that feedback loop. This can provide career progression and the added value to justify higher salaries for agents.”

Nick Williams, Director of Customer Care, Gousto

“You might have three levels of an agent, let’s say empathy, or influencing, depending on how much you engage with that skill. And you will move up as you develop in that skill. Your remuneration based on that level will be then changed and reflected. So people feel they don’t need to change jobs to actually get more exposure to a skill.”

Louise Locke, COO, GFM Holdings

“We set up a skills matrix with expectations and descriptions and training and coaching [to support]. We mapped everybody then had one-to-one conversations. It’s very driven by the agents because they want to progress and increase their salary. We find people proactive at coming to one-to-ones with the evidence around their skills.”

Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care UK, Estée Lauder Companies

“You can map demand on a matrix. Is it something we want to automate, simplify, or eradicate? Or is that something that is really valuable to us so we want to put the right resource behind it? Map those things into a matrix against those four quadrants then create a series of actions against each of those quadrants.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

In addition to training and progressing advisors in customer-handling skills, some organisations are offering opportunities to specialise along content lines.

“We’re getting rid of the advisor title, and we’ll have cycling specialists, audio motoring specialists, who are specialists in their field that want to talk to customers and help them.”

Gareth Brophy, Head of Customer Support, Halfords

Talent exchange also goes in the other direction, as contact centre professionals are increasingly moving into valuable roles elsewhere. Awareness is growing that the contact centre is a training ground that breeds people with strong people-leadership capabilities and a natural affinity to customers, traits that are in demand across any organisation.

“The pride of place of our teams are behavioural skills, problem solving, empathy and getting stuff done. That’s the lifeblood of any organisation. I think [advisors] can fit into virtually any role subject to their natural preference.”

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

“We have seen lots of our team progress their career within the company, moving into roles such as account management and business analyst. There is also a lot of progression within our department covering roles such as social engagement, training, WFM, editorial and more.”

Steven Lee, Director of Business Service EMEA, LEGO®

“It’s easier to train products and process than it is to train good customer service. [Many] of the junior buyers that we’ve got currently have come through customer service, because they’ve got the customer knowledge they understand what customers want and need, and they foresee problems that come with products.”

Gareth Brophy, Head of Customer Support, Halfords

Elevating the contact centre

Mobility of talent to and from the contact centre and other parts of the organisation goes hand in hand with the rapid rise of the contact centre as a pivotal function that brings value to many aspects of business. Contact centres are becoming well versed in demonstrating the value they bring, and in doing so their status is becoming elevated.

“We want to move away from being just the problem-solving piece and actually be – we are here to give you a great experience. An experience that is an extension of what you would get in a store or on one of our flagship websites.”

Tracy Kellaway, Director of Consumer Care UK, Estée Lauder Companies

Contact centres that are able to capture and extract value from the data collected through customer conversations are already seeing the benefits in terms of investment and recognition.

“There’s huge interest [from other parts of the organisation] in terms of data coming through [in the contact centre]. That’s how you put the customer at the heart of the organisation - through analysing data, learning from that, and taking action from it.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

“We can show [our] value through customer retention. Showing the impact the department can have gives you more scope and influence within the business. And then we have Op Ex specialists now in customer care that work with stakeholders and resolve problems at root cause. And that’s a career path for agents.”

Nick Williams, Director of Customer Care, Gousto

Of course, the ability to collect and work with data varies hugely between organisations. Established firms operating legacy systems have a much harder job than younger, digitally-native businesses.

“The aspiration is a dynamic, proactive customer database that is our store of everything we know about the customer. And at the right time in an automated fashion, that information is presented to your frontline agent in a way that helps them use that to add value to the conversation they’re having with their customer.”

Helen Wilson, Head of Customer Service, Atom Bank

“It’s the integration of those technologies and overlaying that on to our existing platforms in a way that works. We’re not at that stage yet.”

Ceri Henry, Head of Operations, Money Penny

“The challenge with all of this stuff is federating your data into a receptacle so that information can be easily digested and presented. We’ll continue to see leapfrogging in sectors where new entrants come into the market, unburdened by legacy platforms and legacy data or issues that are more freely available to accelerate when on a greenfield platform.”

Simon Butler, Director of Resource Planning EMEA, Fiserv

As the responsibilities of the contact centre evolve and grow, so does its wider significance. In some organisations the contact centre now has full and official ownership of all inbound customer interactions, encompassing both operations and marketing, revenue generation and customer service. There can be little doubt that over time this will become the norm.

“If you take the evolution of the service agenda over the last four or five years, and that is only accelerating, to the point that senior exec roles that tended to come from marketing, from finance, from business schools, actually now they’re coming from service. We’ll see more and more of this because of the value we bring into the organisation of hearing and seeing it from the customer perspective. That is the key differentiator.”

Jonathan Cowie, COO, Vivid Homes

“ Contact centres are now operating as the face of their organisations. They're more strategic and more closely connected with other business functions – from marketing to sales – than ever before. Boardrooms have shown huge interest in the data that can be produced in contact centres and the value it can bring to businesses. It's placed enormous importance on having the right tools and systems in place to measure, track and report metrics such as response times, contact volumes and customer satisfaction.

This increased focus on contact centre operations has also opened up new career paths for agents. Contact centres are now offering more opportunities for agents to up-skill as well as specialise in certain channels and services, fast-tracking their careers and enabling them to provide superior customer service. Exciting times ahead. ”

Jonathan Allan,
Chief Marketing Officer, Puzzel

Five critical questions as we look ahead to 2021

Our second wave of research reveals an industry that is working hard to protect and safeguard customers and colleagues during a tumultuous period in history. At the same time, contact centres are paving the foundations for longer-term success and growing in importance and stature.

This research surfaces important questions that all contact centres should be asking as attention turns to the new year and beyond:

1. How can you protect your team and provide them with the certainty, consistency and control they need to stay motivated during the remainder of the pandemic period?
2. How will you balance the needs of the individual and the organisation when planning resources and flexible working arrangements?
3. How do you anchor remote working colleagues around the values and purpose of an organisation?
4. Are you offering upskilling and progression pathways to mitigate attrition and facilitate mobility to and from other parts of the organisation?
5. Are you effectively capturing customer insight in your contact centres, and enabling other departments to act on this intelligence?

Coming next...

With a vaccine on the way, 2021 is anticipated to be a breakthrough year when the world opens up again. In the Spring, we will continue with our research into the Evolution of the Contact Centre to consider how operations have stabilised, what their priorities have become and how contact centre leaders have protected colleagues and sustained the move towards the contact centre being a strategic function in business.

You can find all the reports in the series online at: www.ccma.org.uk/insight/evolution-of-the-contact-centre/

...to be continued



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