



Part 4 | The Evolution of the Contact Centre

September 2021

A CCMA Research Initiative

Supporting Partner

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When every moment matters

Turning a corner

In August 2020, the CCMA started on a journey to track how the contact centre is evolving during times of real change. This is the fourth part in a series of research reports exploring the future of the contact centre with our supporting partner Puzzel.

The fourth report examines an industry with 18 months of experience working during a global pandemic. It documents what has been learned so far and the outlook for 2022.

As in previous waves this report is based on qualitative research comprising group discussions with some of the leading brands in the UK contact centre sector.

With thanks to

We invited eight contact centre leaders representing a diverse mix of vertical markets, contact centre types and experiences to a series of focus groups and interviews in July 2021 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.

Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency,
Click Travel

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations,
Swinton Group

Ketan Hindocha, Quality, Compliance &
Customer Resolutions Director, EE

Amanda Mullans, Chief Sales Officer, Connect Assist

Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

Sharon Oley, Customer Services Director, Sage

Anita Renyard, Head of Mortgage Services, TSB

Sarah Williams, Divisional Head, Westminster City Council

Foreword from CCMA

With 18 months of pandemic-induced intensive learnings under their belts, contact centres have become accustomed to operating in uncertainty. The industry has graduated from its crash course in remote working and is using the knowledge it has gained to evolve its operating model.

Even with restrictions in the UK mostly eased, significant challenges remain in the wider economy. International travel is still limited. There are shortages of essential supplies. Perhaps most significantly of all, record numbers of job vacancies and a chronic shortage of available candidates are putting huge pressure on recruitment. More than ever, the industry is seeking to address the causes for attrition and to implement ways to improve colleagues' engagement and welfare.

This, the fourth chapter in The Evolution of the Contact Centre series, documents an industry in search of stability in a world that continues to be unstable. We have gained experience in the trenches and the battle scars to show for it. We haven't reached the future yet, but we're turning the corner.

As the past year and half has demonstrated, contact centres have ample resolve and resilience to overcome the challenges it faces and is emerging stronger and more future-proofed as a result.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Foreword from Puzzel

The pandemic has given us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent how we work. And in this latest chapter of the Evolution of the Contact Centre, it's clear the future will be hybrid.

To succeed in this new era, organisations will need to create new policies and working practices to accommodate a more dynamic and dispersed workforce. Contact centres will need to consider how they can recruit, onboard and manage teams of remote and onsite staff. Agents will also likely require new equipment, technologies and workspaces to deliver customer interactions effectively. But the pay-offs will be worth it, with hybrid working shown to improve agent engagement, availability and quality of service. All leading to improved customer experience.

The pace of change in contact centres today highlights just how important they have been in

supporting businesses at a time when positive customer experience is paramount. This report finds contact centre leaders are continuing to contend with changes in customer demand patterns and channel preferences. There is also a greater need to build stronger relationships with other areas of the business to deliver seamless, end-to-end customer journeys.

While these changes can be challenging, they can be achieved with an agile mindset, a collaborative, business-wide approach to customer experience, and flexible technology that can support rich customer journeys. These are the keys to delivering smart experiences that lead to exceptional, memorable service.



Jonathan Allan,
Chief Marketing
Officer, Puzzel

Post lockdown: the jury is still out on remote working

The previous edition of The Evolution of Contact Centre series was published in March 2021 as the UK was just emerging from the depths of a particularly gruelling winter under lockdown. The Part 3 report reflected the difficulties of that period, the challenges that leaders faced, and the focus on colleagues' mental health.

In the six months since then, restrictions have eased and freedoms of movement and gathering have been mostly restored. Winter 2020-21 was a low point from which the industry is certainly bouncing back. The accumulated experience of 18 months living and working in a pandemic has provided considerable learnings and coping mechanisms.

What was already evident from the outset of the pandemic and is abundantly clear today, is that different organisations have had a different experience of remote working. Some contact centres have maintained or even increased productivity while colleagues have worked from home. Others are experiencing falling productivity and growing absences from home workers.

"There were individuals that might perform better in the office than at home. But that was outweighed by the number of individuals that perform much better at home." Anita Renyard, Head of Mortgage Services, TSB

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group said: **"When this pandemic first hit we basically said to everyone, you've got to go and work from home. There was very little in the way of checking the environment that they'd be working in or their suitability to work alone. We're now seeing the effects of that in higher absence. The number of requests to come back to the workplace is growing."**

"We are also experiencing higher levels of absences and attrition. It's difficult to say if this

is the result of homeworking or something else. We're seeing a high number of distressed callers right now, which is affecting our people." Amanda Mullans, Chief Sales Officer, Connect Assist

While some organisations have officially expressed a preference to bring people back to the office, contact centre leaders called out the importance of having autonomy to make their own decisions on behalf of their teams.

"Businesses are looking at a one size fits all and thinking we will increase productivity and focus if we bring people back to head office. But it's up to us to turn around and say 'well, actually the contact centre is working fine. Let's not try and introduce the same rules for everyone, but rather make sure we're getting the best for each area of the business.'" Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

One of the lasting legacies of the pandemic will be a heightened focus on colleague well-being, including more frequent check-ins and communication.

"We've talked more as a team than we ever have. For some teams, there could be silos in the office between people who did different things. But now we're all on a group chat together. Everyone is talking much more as a team." Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

"I've have had more visible interaction with my teams across the country in the last 18 months, we've interacted a lot more with more people and more frequently than we would have if we're physically travelling. We've also done doorstep visits to our advisors when they've been working at home." Ketan Hindocha, Quality, Compliance & Customer Resolutions Director, EE

Given the fatigue that can result from the 'always on' nature of remote working, planned downtime has become a pre-requisite of colleague well-being.

“We’ve introduced a blackout hour across the business when you’re not allowed any meetings and you’re not meant to email anyone. It doesn’t quite work the same in the contact centre because the blackout starts when early shift starts. We can’t not talk to customers for an hour. The contact centre works differently as we schedule breaks and lunches daily. We do close all channels for one hour per week to have a business update and catch up.” Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group commented *“We used to be open till half eight. Now we close at six, because we don’t think it’s fair that some of our people might be working on their dining room table and they can’t have dinner with their family at that same table. Interestingly with signposting on our web pages, letters and IVR we have seen more customers adopt our digital channels and we’ve not had any negative feedback.”*

Sarah Williams, Divisional Head, Westminster City Council: *“Working for a local authority during a pandemic, people’s responsibilities tripled overnight. It was great that people stepped up and took on much more. We haven’t really taken a step back and said, ‘let’s get back to normal capacity now, let’s have some time in your diary where you don’t have a meeting for two hours’. We’re looking to get breathing space back. We shouldn’t be maintaining pandemic levels of workload just because we know people can work to that capacity.”*

Years into the future as we look back on the pandemic, it will mark a turning point in accelerating support for colleague welfare and resilience in the contact centre.

Hybrid models: still in experimental phase

Across the UK, the economy is bouncing back strongly but the future remains tinged with uncertainty. People in Scotland and Wales are

still being encouraged to work from home. The possibility of new lockdowns during the upcoming winter months cannot be ignored.

The vast majority of contact centres will adopt hybrid working permanently, but most have not yet finalised the exact details of their operating model. More testing and learning is still required, recognising that different colleagues respond to remote working quite differently, and with the aim of striking a balance between offering individuals flexibility but also enabling teams to spend time together. Naturally, safety reassurances are needed.

Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency, Click Travel: *“We haven’t mandated anyone come in yet. I think we will do for certain roles, like IT and we’ve got some roles that require putting things in letters. I don’t think we’ll go down that route, especially not full-time. I think most areas of the business will at least be offered hybrid.”*

“We call it purposeful presence. Are you going in for a purpose? We’ll be organising people in their teams, they’ll be coming in with their team manager with their coach or trainer on a particular day to have their team meetings, their one to ones or coaching sessions, so that they’re interacting and engaging with people when they come on site.”
Sarah Williams, Divisional Head, Westminster City Council

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group commented: *“Anyone who is struggling to continue working from home will be allowed back in the office, but generally we’re going to take it a step at a time. The aim is to have a group of people that are permanent office workers and a group that we rotate. We will determine the rotations rather than individuals choosing when they come and go. We’ll have teams that come in for a week together with their team manager, then out for a week, whilst another team comes in. We’ve discussed having permanent home workers but at the moment we’re going to restrict that. Using our flexible working request process, colleagues can request to work from home permanently for six months at a time.”*

Sharon Oley, Customer Services Director, Sage added: *"We're experimenting with three days in the office for full time, pro-rated for part time. What we didn't want is for people to decide completely for themselves when to come in. We've said that we'd like full teams to come in together."*

Ketan Hindocha, Quality, Compliance & Customer Resolutions Director, EE: *"We're trialling two self-selected smart working options. The 'light' option will be used by the majority of our colleagues who will work predominantly in the centre but will have the flexibility to work from home when needed. The 'max' option will be for colleagues wanting to spend more of their time working from home but still have the connection to their site where they will come regularly, on the days they spend in the office we'll prioritise activities like team meetings, training and engagement."*

Urgent company-wide communication can be difficult to achieve when working remotely. There is still work to be done to replicate the ease of office-based communication in a virtual environment, such as when colleagues must be rapidly mobilised to deal with sudden fluctuations in demand.

As Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency, Click Travel, points out: **"We are nowhere near as effective doing real-time management. If there's a queue on the phones, you could tell everyone in the office to drop what they were doing and answer the phone. How do you do that virtually? Another thing is getting messages across – things are changing so quickly in the travel sector. We have to put out a blog and tell everyone to read it. Some people might not be in shift when it comes out. Some people might not have spoken to their manager for a few days, A week later and still not everyone has seen the message. In the office it's much easier."**

The coming Christmas peak will pose another litmus test for the hybrid working model. It is not surprising that many leaders are continuing to wait and see before announcing permanent plans.

Customer anxiety has not abated

As well as establishing the operating model, staying on top of changing customer demand patterns continues to be top of the priority list for contact centre leaders.

Last year The Evolution of the Contact Centre research identified growing customer anxiety as an emerging theme. In Q3 2021 this has not abated, and in sectors such as travel this has become ever more apparent due to changing rules.

"People need a lot more reassurance. It's not necessarily enough anymore to give the customer a specific piece of information if it doesn't come from a human. People want to call and double-check things. Shorter lead times are also making our life more difficult. Everything is urgent now because people are leaving it to the last minute to book. The work is coming through is much more time-sensitive and emotional to the customer." Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency, Click Travel

Ketan Hindocha, Quality, Compliance & Customer Resolutions Director, EE commented: *"We've done a lot on mental health and well-being, more so now than ever because of the anxiety people are having around the lockdown easing. We're seeing it coming through on calls. We equip our people to deal with it personally and their teams, but also for customers as well."*

Following 18 months of furlough, government grants and high-profile public debate around mental health, contact centres are experiencing a growing willingness on the part of customers to reach out for assistance. The lowering of social stigmas around asking for help, and the growth in awareness of how to support vulnerable customers are also positive outcomes to emerge from the pandemic.

Channel management continues to be a hot topic

With many contact centres continuing to experience high demand, the need to steer each customer and query to the correct channel has never been more important.

The hard yards put in by contact centres to optimise their channel strategies since the start of the pandemic are now starting to pay off. Self-serve and live text chat are growing and are beginning to take demand away from phones and email.

"I joined the business a few months prior to the pandemic. Email and phone were our main contact channels and there was a lot of repeat contact. What became a big factor in how we managed over the last 18 months is the direction we sent customers. This time last year we didn't have as much control over how a person contacted us. We changed our AI provider and we've now got our online Help Centre to a really good place. We can forecast and manage things better. When we started to push live chat and stopped promoting our phone number, we found there was no impact on customer feedback. Chat is now our second most popular channel. Social is third and phone calls last. We've got a much better view of the customer and can see one true version of the customer experience." Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

"Live chat usage has gone through the roof. Email has moved to live chat. I don't know if it's the pandemic or the fact that people are less likely to phone at work these days." Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency, Click Travel

"A lot of our legacy customers are not necessarily tech savvy and when we first went into lockdown it was a challenge to handle all the phone demand. We managed to convert a lot of our customers into being more familiar with other channels available and were able to do it in a way that was acceptable to all our stakeholders. We had a duty to protect our colleagues in the contact centre." Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group

During earlier lockdowns, some organisations with retail outlets that were forced to temporarily close were able to redeploy retail colleagues into the contact centre. The benefits of this strategy are now evident as staff have returned to stores with enhanced knowledge gained from their time in the contact centre.

"Prior to lockdown people in the shops were quite dependent on us in the contact centre to answer questions. They seem to be less dependent on us now." Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

"We're in a much stronger place with our retail colleagues. The pandemic helped because they all got trained in support roles. We've managed to get a nice hybrid model working between our stores and contact centres." Ketan Hindocha, Quality, Compliance & Customer Resolutions Director, EE

This hybrid resourcing model allowing colleagues to rotate between stores and contact centres is proving especially prescient given the current recruitment crunch.

Recruitment and training during a nationwide talent shortage

According to the Office of National Statistics in May to July 2021 there were an estimated 953,000 job vacancies in the UK. This is a record high and has grown by 44% (290,000 jobs) compared with the previous quarter and is 21% (168,000 jobs) above its pre-pandemic level (January to March 2020).

The period of low attrition briefly experienced in 2020 and early 2021 now feels like a distant memory, with contact centres today facing not only growing staff turnover but increasing competition for candidates. Indeed, the implications of staff scarcity across the economy are being felt in every sector and are becoming visible to consumers, an example being food shortages due to a lack of lorry drivers. Leaders

planning for the annual Christmas peak are understandably concerned.

"It will become a challenge when I get to October/November when I'll need to look for an additional 30 people for three or four months for peak periods. We had lots of applications last year. I don't think it's going to be the same this year."

Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

One strategy in the war for talent is to offer flexible hours and remote working.

"The job market is now buoyant. It's very competitive. We're going after people for whom it's more convenient to work in a contact centre. For example, where homeworking might be a benefit for them, such as people who need to do the school run in the morning then again in the afternoon or cannot travel far." Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group

Anita Renyard, Head of Mortgage Services, TSB commented: *"We've got an active advert live for remote working. And we've had about five times as many applicants compared to those roles that would be office based."*

As a result of the talent shortage, the idea of recruiting people from outside of the traditional geographical catchment to work remotely for the contact centre is gaining traction. However, several of the leaders we interviewed called out the difficulties in recruiting, training and managing colleagues that are fully remote.

Anita Renyard, Head of Mortgage Services, TSB continued: *"We're trying lots of different things, including one group being 100% remote, with the view that if it works, that opens roles up to new talent that we could recruit from further afield."*

"I'm interested to see if that's a reality or if it's harder than it sounds. We don't do a Bring Your Own Device arrangement. We like to provide staff with equipment so we need to manage the logistics of that." Amanda Mullans, Chief Sales Officer, Connect Assist

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group explained: *"We also have challenges with kit. Quite often people need to come back for a day to get their kit fixed on the network and they can go back home the next day. If we decide to venture out to recruiting people who are not in arm's length, we need better infrastructure and a way of remotely dialling to fix things centrally."*

"I have a strong opinion around junior people and training remotely. I don't think it works. We've previously had great success with new employees fresh out of education, turning them into really good colleagues. I don't believe that's possible remotely." Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency, Click Travel

"Those people who are brand new have struggled. We've never recruited and trained people from home before. The grad base are the ones who come in five days a week, if they're happy to do so." Sharon Oley, Customer Services Director, Sage

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group said: *"There's a lot of interaction built into our training and it's hard to get that interaction virtually. When colleagues are new they benefit from the conversations across the desk and tips they pick up sitting next to an experienced 'buddy'."*

"That unwritten stuff which happens across desks which Daren refers to, is the 20% where the really good service delivery comes from, and which is hard to replicate virtually." Amanda Mullans, Chief Sales Officer, Connect Assist

In the early days of the pandemic contact centres moved quickly to embrace emotional intelligence, empathy and resilience within their training programmes, topics which are now becoming a core training fixture.

As Ketan Hindocha, Quality, Compliance & Customer Resolutions Director, EE, puts it: *"We've just launched a way of working called 'Here For You'. It's here for you as an employer, and here for you as a customer. The first two issues that we're*

working on are financial hardship and mental health, and asking our advisors to share their personal stories. We then link these stories to leader training. We want leaders to be embracing these experiential sessions with our advisors."

Soft skills have by now taken their rightful place on top of the training agenda, with recognition that they contribute not only to colleague well-being but also their ability to interact effectively with customers.

A more collaborative approach to customer experience

Since the pandemic the work of the contact centre has become higher profile and higher priority. Furthermore, whereas contact centres may have historically operated separately from customer experience groups, customer service and customer experience functions are converging, and silos disappearing.

"In Westminster the contact centre and the customer experience team recently came together. This has allowed us to review our approach to UX – now we are very much now taking an evidence-based approach to design our services." Sarah Williams, Divisional Head, Westminster City Council

"Within an organisation, you can tell the ones that take the customer experience seriously by looking at the members of their customer experience governance committee. All areas should be there: pricing, marketing, IT and so on. I clearly have a place at the table because we provide most of the touchpoints for customer interaction, but this is just part of the overall experience. This is easy to see in our NPS scores. We can get great feedback about the interaction our rep has given, but if they get to the end of that journey and we give a price that's way out then the experience has been a poor one. The experience is a whole package of which the contact centre is a part." Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group

This integration of contact centres within customer experience is driven by a growing awareness of how UX and product/service design directly impacts the demand going into the contact centre. It also reflects recognition of the practical insight that frontline colleagues bring to product, design and marketing discussions.

Anita Renyard, Head of Mortgage Services, TSB comments: *"We have a portal for frontline partners to share feedback from customers. Our service enhancements team look at that and direct it wherever it needs to go."*

"We use our speech analytics tool to really understand what's driving repeat calls, using this insight to help shape our services." Sarah Williams, Divisional Head, Westminster City Council

Amanda Mullans, Chief Sales Officer, Connect Assist confirmed: *"We do quite a lot of breakout sessions with advisors. We always involve them in user acceptance testing. When we design a new IT solution, we'll ask advisors, 'would that solve the issue?'"*

"We have a team that examines the channels and the interactions and works with product teams. What do we need to do to make things easier for customers? What else do we need to do in product help? Can we put chat into the product?" said Sharon Oley, Customer Services Director, Sage

Involving the user in product and experience design is well established as a CX mantra. It could equally be said that involving customer-facing colleagues forms part of best practice.

Priorities to the end of 2021 and beyond

As we enter the final three months of another tumultuous year, contact centres are doubling down on efforts to cope with ongoing high volumes, fretful customers and colleagues' expectations for flexible working arrangements.

There is much still to be done, but Part 4 of The Evolution of the Contact Centre sees an industry turning a corner and emerging stronger, more single-minded and more resilient than ever before.

Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry: *"Planning for Christmas. Recruiting people and planning for a possible lockdown. Contingencies for the next six months to make sure we can deliver against the peak demands. How do we take our technology a step further? I want to develop WISMO (where's my order?) to get that working really well for customers rather than them having to contact us. The other one that we're really keen to do is becoming more proactive and moving into assisted sales. If we start showing that we can increase conversion, that we can increase basket size and pay for ourselves, people start to think of customer service in a different way."*

"Our hybrid model is a massive priority for the rest of the year. Looking at our pilots, working out what actually works. We've changed our minds a million times over the last year and a half about what good looks like. So that's going to be a key one for us." Anita Renyard, Head of Mortgage Services, TSB

Daren Homewood, Director of Operations, Swinton Group adds: *"Increasing capacity or reducing demand to bridge the gap is right up there as a number one issue. Attrition has been excellent for 12 months, but it's now spiked, at the same time the number of candidates in the market has dropped and alternative employment is buoyant. How much further can we push customers online? If we can't cope with the demand through people, then we've got to find an alternative."*

Tom Davis, Director of Compliance & Efficiency, Click Travel: *"WhatsApp is really high up on my list. I think it's a no brainer, because you can service it the same way you do live chat, customers can talk to us in the same place they talk to their friends and family, its used for business more and more as an internal tool and there's not much overhead for us to add. It's a quick win."*

Sarah Williams, Divisional Head, Westminster City Council said: *"We are defining the new operating model, and how we can be better than others. We don't just want to be the best local authority in the UK, we want to be the best of the best. How can we transform our customers' and our visitors' lives."*

"Become more consultative rather than just customer services. We're not in a break-fix environment, we're helping customers to get more out of the products and services that they've paid for to help them to run their business more smoothly, save time, money and energy. If we do this then customers will be more sticky and less likely to churn. Being technicians and educating customers, not just helping customers with queries, is a big focus." Sharon Oley, Customer Services Director, Sage.

"It feels as though there are fewer things that are obvious now, which makes strategic planning more tricky. The most successful organisations are going to be those that can pivot quickly to take advantage of that revised awareness or knowledge, and are able to adapt." Amanda Mullans, Chief Sales Officer, Connect Assist



0333 939 9964 | www.ccma.org.uk

@ccmataalk | info@ccma.org.uk