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Coming of Age for AI in the Contact Centre

> Getting on for a third of the way through the decade, the time is ripe to review artificial intelligence (AI) in the contact centre. Along with machine learning (ML) and neurolinguistic programming (NLP) the technology has helped transform the digital customer experience (CX). It's now enhancing the employee experience (EX) by ridding staff of repetitive tasks to focus on more interesting aspects of their roles. In so doing, it improves agent productivity while significantly contributing to the bottom line.

Is there more to do? Well, yes. Contact centre traditionalist are reticent about new-fangled stuff, but leaders are seeking to leapfrog the market. Yet both share the same problem: democratising distributed contact centre data to supercharge CX while managing IT infrastructure complexity. The prize for everyone – service providers, their customers, and their stakeholders – is stupendous. According to **IDC** the addressable AI software market, which includes contact centres, will reach nearly $600 billion by 2025.

Addressing the absence of relevant data

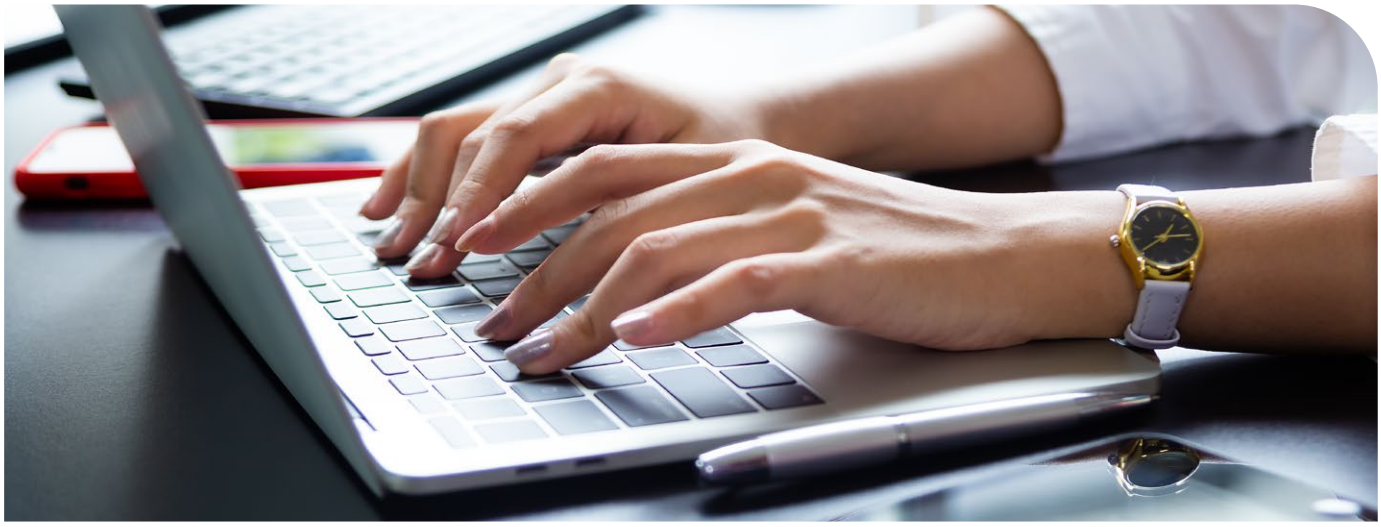
Among AI technology inhibitors in contact centres, the lack of availability of relevant data in the right place at the right time stands out. In a 2022 white paper on AI scaling cost, **IDC** identified a paucity of skilled personnel and lack of relevant self-generated data as among the top five AI implementation challenges. They're interrelated, of course. For example, getting the necessary skills costs big bucks.

Diverse data is essential not only because vast volumes are needed to continuously maintain the predictive performance of AI models, but also because ensuring unbiased results requires access to disparate data sets. In fact, successful AI disruptors are adept at designing neat ecosystems to drive innovation and transformation by exploiting the power of different data sources and types.

Introducing empathy as an adjunct to AI

Sitting in front of the best AI-powered bots are people whose job it is to test the logic and avert (what can be comical) scripting errors. They also need human empathy trainers. A raft of new roles is being created to teach bots how they should perform. At one end of the spectrum, empathy trainers help NLP translators make fewer errors. At the other, they teach AI algorithms how to mimic human compassion and caring behaviour.

For example, In Brazil, one all-digital bank decided to build a whole new knowledge base. It spent 12 months teaching IBM Watson native slang and a more easy-going dialect recognisable by hyperconnected millennials. That investment saw the bank acquire 300,000 new clients within a year, 86 percent of who had not previously engaged before.



Extending data-driven AI models

Another key decision is where to deploy AI with relatively small risk and significant potential for best uplifts in C-SAT and NPS. A 2022 survey by **Call Centre Helper** shown in Chart 1 confirmed improving self-service was still ranked highest (42.8%) with capturing data from customer interactions (27.3%) and identifying intent and swiftly passing contacts to relevant channels (15.5%) also attracting significant attention.

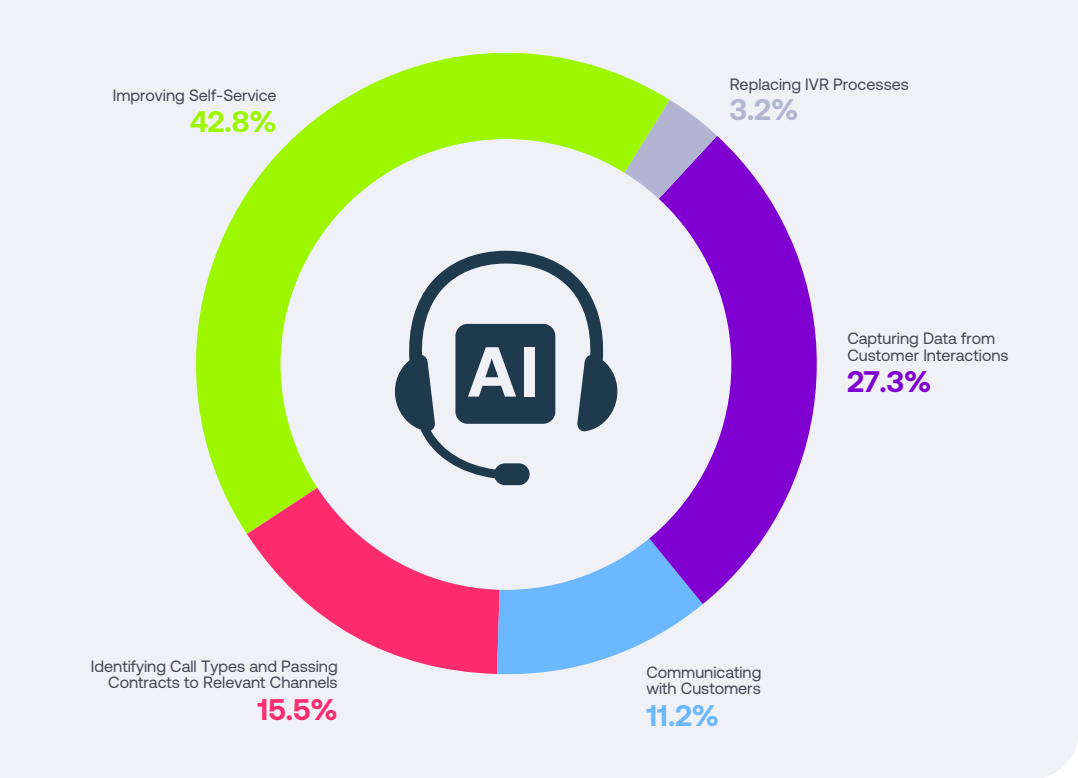


Chart 1: Most valuable AI uses in the contact centre

Within the contact centre, current AI deployments tend to focus around chatbots, voice bots, real-time translation tools, speech and text analytics (for transcription, topic spotting and sentiment analysis) and demand forecasting. A proven use case is to put a voice bot in place of an IVR to keep the latter simpler and reduce customer effort for basic requests and information. That way enquiries get solved faster, while live agents are released to better handle more complex issues.

Today, many organisations have deployed (or are considering) AI internally. For example, to uncover learning at scale from myriad historic contacts. Or track agent performance and flag training needs. One **Norwegian company** identified over 200 different competencies and skills involved in resolving customer enquiries. Then, using learning algorithms, it pinpointed opportunities for increasing first contact resolution through targeted coaching. In the process it reduced call volumes by 30 percent.

Similarly, conversation automation solutions can boost revenue streams. They enable sales and marketing teams to use AI-powered virtual assistants and chatbots to automatically engage, qualify, nurture, and then schedule meetings with hot prospects. **Genesys customers** captured thousands of additional leads, resulting in new revenue opportunities worth millions of dollars. Hundreds of qualified meetings were scheduled using virtual sales assistants, saving thousands of hours in manual qualification and follow-up work.

Extending data-driven AI models

In the IDC white paper over half the organisations surveyed reported they lacked the data volumes and quality necessary for winning AI implementations. One of the biggest challenges is getting the data onto the contact centre platform in the first place – readily available and in the right format. This is a problem endemic in any organisation that allows data storage to grow in an unmanaged manner (and there are many of them). The result is the curse of data siloes; unpicking them can be an IT architect's nightmare.

So, transformative impact can be realised by accessing previously unavailable data to improve the accuracy of the organisation's derived AI applications. For example, basic demographic data provides a rough sketch of the person. If one adds more context such as marital status, education, employment, income, and preferences like music and food choices, a more complete picture appears. With additional insights from recent purchases, current location, and other life events, the portrait really comes to life.

Unfortunate then that as the IDC report shows, while organisations use a wide range of structured data, external data sources and unstructured internal data are largely untapped. Plus, as shown in Chart 2 below, much internal data continues to be siloed. That makes them difficult to access. Also, the potential use of external data in AI applications may introduce security and compliance issues, which would need to be addressed.

	Structured data (internal within contact centre)	Unstructured data (internal but outside contact centre)	Structured data (external but may be readily available)
Examples	Previous contact history	Sales and product service logs	Electoral register and other public records
Characteristics	Negative attitudes also recorded	Siloed and in different formats	Designed with tools to be readily searchable
Availability	Built into contact centre system	Part of organisation's IT architecture	Online and/or paid-for
Possible Issues	May not take account of channels	Budget or sovereignty under GDPR rules	Security issues preclude certain data

Chart 2: Structured and unstructured data types and their accessibility

Infrastructure optimisation for AI scaling

As use cases proliferate and more and more data are added to the mix, AI-powered apps must be able to handle increased business demand. If they don't or can't scale, bottlenecks can lead to lost business and missed revenue opportunities. For example, if a customer doesn't get a timely response to an online product enquiry, they'll be less likely to come back while, equally, delays can result in abandoned shopping carts.

When scaling AI systems to avoid such pitfalls, organisations should anticipate potential technical problems. The shopping list includes infrastructure optimisation to guarantee processing performance and elasticity, and interoperability through the judicious choice of low-code or no-code software.

The importance of AI strategy

Today, enterprises are confronted with complex business challenges, such as the need for shared data strategies to truly derive value from AI. Enterprises are transforming application portfolios through ML, NLP, and advanced analytics to supplant traditional apps with AI-powered replacements. These enable automating transactions, bringing more data into the equation so customers and staff can make better decisions.

Depending on the size and nature of their business, organisations need an AI data strategy to accelerate innovation and time to value and enjoy sustainable competitive advantage. The advice is to ensure a cross-functional process across IT, procurement, legal, compliance, and security to:

- Build a talent pool of industry domain and technical experts like data scientists and ML engineers.
- Get employee buy-in and trust for the data strategy with inclusivity and transparency, while ensuring the flexibility of support for chosen programming languages.
- Design a secure and governed data platform with accommodation for all data types to support the entire AI lifecycle.
- Create a workflow for bringing third-party and/or new data sources into the organisation including seamless integration with existing internal data sets.

So, embrace an intelligent data grid that helps automate and enforce universal usage policies across multicloud ecosystems. Then agree how data is discovered, catalogued, and enriched, while automating how to access, update, and unify data spread across distributed cloud landscapes without the need for data movement or replication.

Not alone the prime driver of superlative CX and EX, AI is also becoming ubiquitous across all functional business areas. Companies adopting the technology as part of a digital transformation become more agile, innovative, and scalable. Successful AI-first enterprises will cross-fertilise from lessons learned in the contact centre to better understand relationships between knowledge islands, apply learning to business problems, and deliver insight at scale for decision-support and automation.

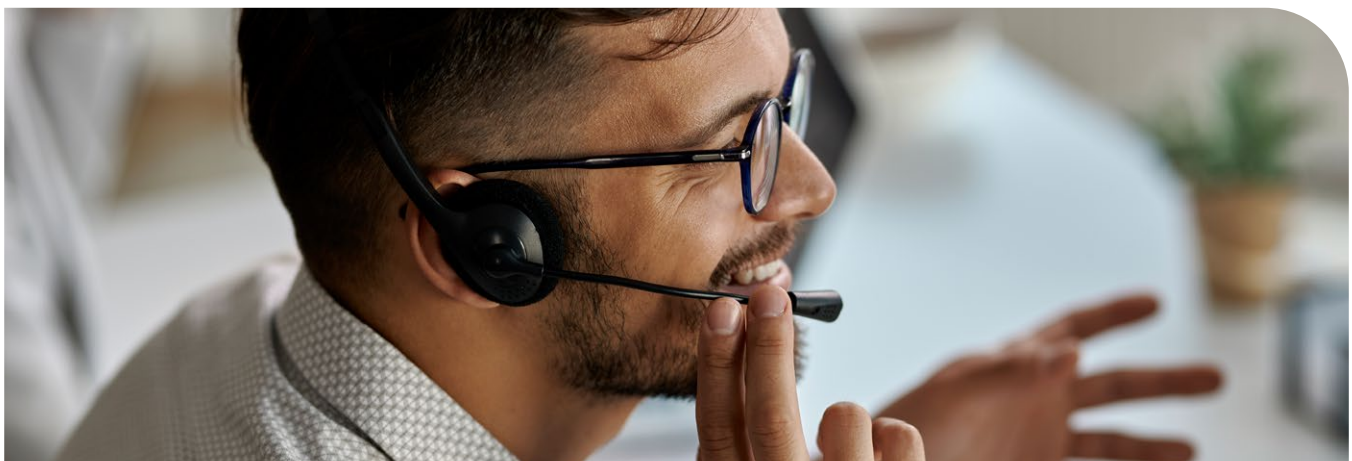
Making AI more explainable

Finally, a **McKinsey Quantum Black AI** report from 2022 pressed the need to make matters more explainable. People use what they understand and trust. This is especially true of AI. The businesses that make it easy to show how AI insights and recommendations are derived will come out ahead, not only with their organisation's AI users, but also with regulators and consumers. And in terms of their bottom lines.

The issue being that, to avoid complicating matters, different consumers of an AI system's data will have diverse needs for explanation. For example, a bank that uses an AI engine to support credit decisions will almost certainly need to provide consumers denied a loan with a reason for that outcome.

Equally, loan officers and AI practitioners might need even more granular information to help them understand the risk factors and weightings used in rendering the decision to ensure the model is tuned optimally. And the risk function or diversity office may need to confirm that the data used in the AI engine are not biased against certain applicants.

Regulators and other stakeholders will have specific needs and interests as explainability helps organisations mitigate risk. AI systems that run afoul of ethical norms, even if inadvertently, can ignite intense public, media, and regulatory scrutiny. Legal and risk teams can use the explanation provided by the technical team, along with the intended business use case, to confirm the system complies with applicable laws and regulations while aligned with internal company policies and values.



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