

Top Five CX Trends for 2026

Drawing on surveys, reports and views from industry futurologists and thought leaders, this white paper examines the customer experience (CX) strategies and contact centre technologies likely to have the biggest transformational impact over the next 12 months.



Reflections

Every day's a school day in the CX world and 2025 was no exception. 82% of consumers globally said a company was only as good as its service, which is neither surprising nor very different from the previous year¹.

However, expectations for speed, convenience and personalisation have climbed steeply, increasing the gap in how customers judge the experience they receive. Which is another way of saying what was classed as 'good' service 24 months ago might not hold the same value in 2026.

To keep pace, CX strategy must continue to focus on delivering tailored, context-aware and emotionally intelligent interactions driven by real-time insights. Subsequently, investment increased in AI, automation and self-service increased with 37% of contact centres currently using speech and text analytics and/or bots².

This means many agents are handling fewer low-level interactions and more complex escalations that bots are unable to solve. These tough conversations often involve upset customers or stressful situations. In response, 41% of contact centres are using AI-assisted tools to better support employee wellbeing in an attempt to counter burnout and churn³.



The continual growth in tools and channels added further complexity for contact centres, making integration, data governance and quality control even more challenging.

Conversely, the quality assurance (QA) function is no longer being viewed as a compliance cost. It's undergoing a major transition: from checking whether agents follow rules to providing operational and CX insights that benefit multiple business stakeholders.

In summary, the overriding factor shaping how CX is being delivered – now and in the future – is the customers' unwavering desire to seek service through multiple channels, alongside CX leaders' continued move to the cloud and embrace of AI.

1. Transforming bot building and CX outcomes with agentic AI

Agentic AI has created an extraordinary buzz – and for good reason. Traditional bots were largely reactive, waiting for user inputs and following scripts. In contrast, agentic bots are proactive and self-autonomous. They understand context, plan steps and take action to achieve goals using human-like reasoning and initiative.

Think of agentic AI as a project manager who can find resources, schedule tasks and complete the entire job without waiting for step-by-step instructions – constantly learning and self-adjusting after every interaction. For CX practitioners, this opportunity offers attractive new [use cases](#) to consider.

2026 will be the year when AI extends beyond IT to truly excite and engage users across the business. Unlike before, they'll be able to design, test and manage agentic virtual agents without the need for technical expertise or the ability to write code. All they have to do is describe their goals using natural language or by uploading process documents.

That's not to say life won't also change for technical teams presently involved in bot self-service projects. It will.



The future looks brighter for anyone involved in the process: from designers, automation specialists and solution architects to data scientists, knowledge managers and business analysts. They all stand to gain.

| Impact area | From | To |
|-------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Design | Script-based. | Goal-based reasoning. |
| Learning | Static updates. | Continuous self-improvement. |
| Interaction | Rigid dialogues. | Natural empathetic conversation. |
| Action | Answering queries. | Full task execution. |
| Maintenance | Manual tuning. | Autonomous optimisation. |
| Ownership | IT-driven. | Business-led (low code). |

Figure 1. How bot characteristics change with agentic AI.

Whether they're creating a virtual agent to assist with order tracking, billing queries, appointment scheduling, internal helpdesk requests, technical troubleshooting or simply updating or improving FAQs.

Agentic AI will simplify and expedite bot building. For instance, it will reduce the manual effort currently spent on defining intents, hard coding rules, setting up integrations, testing flows and handling changes.



2. Realising CX and EX project benefits sooner

With CX leaders eternally under pressure to deliver fast results, embedding innovation into contact centre culture will become imperative over the next 12 months to maximise and accelerate return on investment (ROI). Organisations that do so are ten times more likely to be economic outperformers compared to weaker innovators⁴.

CX strategy must allow for experimentation if innovation is to truly flourish. People need to feel safe to speak up, challenge norms and sometimes fail. They should be incentivised and empowered to act as change champions, with their efforts recognised as part of an ongoing improvement programme.



Building a repeatable process and following a structured approach significantly increases the chances of success.

This method also establishes the right cultural tone, signalling that innovation is a deliberate, sponsored activity that is taken seriously by leadership. It invites employees to contribute and collaborate, knowing there is a platform for turning their ideas into reality.

The aim is to spark a wide range of initiatives that encourage frontline and back-office staff to contribute ideas, which in turn feed product, policy and service design. **For example, by establishing mini-project teams focused on:**

- Creating hyper-personalised experiences that increase CSAT and NPS scores.
- Improving queue management and resolving service friction points sooner.
- Reducing handle time and automating low-value tasks.
- Optimising training and personal development.
- Improving employee engagement and wellbeing.
- Building smarter scripts, self-service flows and processes.

The most successful transformation projects in 2026 will encapsulate experimentation, learning and bold new thinking – and there are several practical steps that CX leaders can [take now](#) to help embed innovation into daily operations.

Effective project management will also remain key. Contact centres that execute initiatives systematically can rapidly deploy transformative capabilities. Those that don't will face missed ROI targets, extended periods of managing operational issues and, ultimately, risk being left behind due to suboptimal CX and EX.



3. Building healthier contact centre teams

Contact centres are naturally pressurised places to work. Employees are expected to cope with high call volumes, emotionally charged interactions, unreasonable customer requests and increasingly demanding performance metrics.

However, they probably didn't sign up to feel overwhelmed. Neither should they have to deal with a constant barrage of irate customers. Yet, 67% of frontline customer service employees say their mental health has declined over the last 12 months because of it⁵.



Prolonged stress and exhaustion can lead to a range of health issues, such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and susceptibility to illnesses. Absence and attrition rates also rise when staff feel detached and underappreciated.

To head off these triggers, progressive strategists are deploying AI-assisted tools to create a more human-centric employee experience. Below are four practical steps to help safeguard agents and prevent them burning out:



1. Reduce anxiety levels

Guarantee agents only receive contacts that play to their strengths with **predictive routing**.



2. Increase job satisfaction

Implement timely support and eliminate tedious note-taking and wrap-up work with **agent copilot**.



3. Intercept stressful situations

Monitor emotional tone for interactions that should be escalated using **speech and text analytics**.



4. Improve reward and recognition

Introduce fun and make work more enjoyable with **gamification** tools.

When implemented correctly, these solutions ensure agents:

- Always stay within their comfort zones.
- Never feel out of their depth.
- Don't suffer cognitive overload.
- Are protected from threats and abuse.
- Exert less time and effort on wrap-up tasks.
- Take regular wellness breaks and exercises.

As a result, they are better equipped to handle stressful situations and emotionally charged conversations when they do arise.

The human and financial benefits are considerable, given that lost productivity alone currently costs the UK contact centre industry over £990 million annually⁶. That's on top of savings realised through the avoidance of recruitment and training expense, which, in the case of a 200-seat operation with a 30% attrition rate, equates to around £540,000 a year⁷.

4. Elevating service in real time with AI-steered journey management

Many customer interactions should never happen. 40% of contact centre professionals feel broken processes are still a key challenge⁸. Other issues that force customers to make repeat contacts include incomplete handovers, unclear information and delayed actions.

In today's omnichannel world, failure demand (contacts caused by things going wrong rather than a genuine need) can create a vicious circle. A classic example is when emails go unanswered, prompting customers to call. Later, the email is answered unnecessarily, impacting other live messages in the queue.



CX leaders must get better at removing the root causes of failure demand or prepare to watch customers switch to rivals who have.



Doing so doesn't only cut costs; it lays the foundations for highly personalised customer care and all the business benefits that brings (see Figure 2).

Released from firefighting mode and reactive conversations, agents stop being apologisers. They have space to listen properly, consider context and offer tailored advice. They avoid rushing to hit average handling time targets or to get to the next contact – another dislike that customers quickly pick up on.

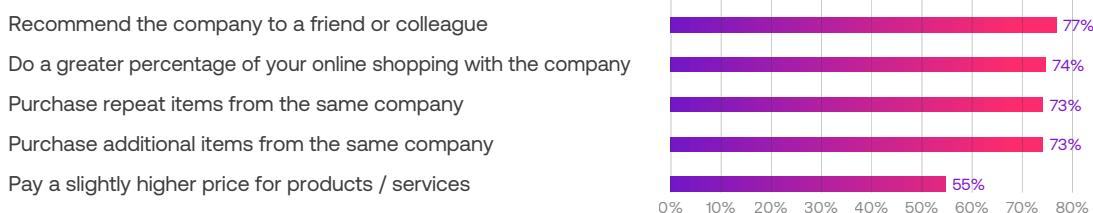


Figure 2. Actions consumers would likely take when receiving consistently personalised service experiences⁹.

One way to reduce failure demand is through agent copilot solutions that surface relevant data based on the caller's identity and intent. At the end of the interaction, the agent receives a transcript summary, recommended next best actions and suggested wrap codes. All related data is automatically recorded in other systems – consistently and correctly – thus reducing the risk of unnecessary calls and irate customers.



Other effective strategies and key building blocks for deploying AI-steered journey management include:

- Unifying event and interaction data from past and live contacts across all channels (voice, web chat, email, text, social and so on).
- Journey analytics and visualisation tools that help identify bottlenecks, anomalies and drop-off points.
- Predictive online aids that monitor browsing behaviours for moments when customers may be struggling, allowing agents to intervene with friendly web chat assistance.
- Embedded service orchestrated actions, such as routing contacts to a specialist, triggering a self-service bot, sending a proactive message or escalating to a supervisor.
- Sentiment analytics that reveal how customers feel, rather than just what they say, by exposing hidden pain points that traditional QA and KPIs may miss.

5. Evolving QA from agent policing to a CX control tower

Propelled at scale by AI and analytics, modern QA (see Figure 3) has become a mission-critical CX control tower – not just for managing traditional KPIs, but also for addressing previously hidden influencers such as customer effort, loyalty, churn risk, sentiment and emotional trajectory, root causes of avoidable contacts and digital containment success.

| Traditional QA using manual sampling, checklists and retrospective scoring | Modern QA using AI-driven interaction analytics, sentiment and journey insights |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reviews only 1–3% of interactions. | Analyses 100% of interactions. |
| Checks scripts, greetings and compliance steps. | Uncovers previously undetected customer sentiment, intent and friction points. |
| Focuses on agent errors, not root causes. | Identifies process, product and journey failures. |
| Produces monthly pass/fail scores. | Provides real-time coaching and insight. |
| Reactive, punitive and narrow in scope. | Predictive, supportive and improvement-driven. |
| Insights stay within the QA team. | Data serves multiple stakeholders: sales, marketing, operations, product, digital and compliance. |

Figure 3. Old and new QA model characteristics.

In addition, by integrating QA and bot development activities, contact centre leaders are making faster pivots and smarter decisions when it comes to self-service improvements.

However, in making this transition, they must avoid creating a situation where supervisors end up drowning in data lakes and dashboards – to the point where AI overtakes human judgement because decision-makers can't see the wood for the trees.



AI pragmatism is the order of the day. It's vital that modern QA activities remain clearly linked to customer and business outcomes while ensuring employees don't lose empathy and critical thinking skills.

This means stripping away the noise and selectively putting AI-enhanced analytics to work where it matters most, making data concise, actionable and immediate. In turn, this will fuel better product, compliance and experience decisions in the boardroom.

Conclusion

The five top trends described in this paper present a practical path for bold contact centre leaders looking to stand out from the crowd and secure fresh competitive advantage. While AI continues to divide opinion, the biggest risk is implementing it poorly with a disruptive roll-out that alienates customers. Over the next 12 months, analytics, along with AI-assisted agent support tools, will be pivotal in building the high-performing contact centre.



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