

CONTACT CENTRES IN THE COVID-19 ERA

JOINT COUNCILS EXECUTIVE MONTHLY REPORT
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1. Introduction

Government contact centres worldwide enable citizens and businesses to access public services. Although contact centres have undergone transformation over the past several years, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has tested previously used technological approaches and tools. To meet the growing and changing demand of citizens and businesses, organizations around the world are rethinking their approaches and adapting quickly to provide service delivery in innovative ways.

What Are Contact Centres?

According to [Gartner](#), “A contact centre supports customer interactions across a range of channels, including phone calls, email, Web chat, Web collaboration, and the emerging adoption of social media interactions, and is distinct from telephony-only call centers. Although contact centers support more than one channel, they do not necessarily involve the use of universal queuing. Instead, they may support multiple channels but use separate systems and, in some cases, business processes to do so.”

Based on the data shown in Durham Region’s Contact Centre Transformation Roadmap, a well-functioning client contact centre include the following features:¹

- **Customer-centric design:** Developed from the client’s point of view;
- **Individualized:** The ability for customers to access services how and when they want. Based on their needs, they can customize communication;
- **Integrated:** The ability for customers to access integrated services (from various levels of government) at multiple locations; and
- **Seamless:** The requirement for customers to tell their story once (rather than multiple times).

Why Are Contact Centres So Important?

“The emergence of new technologies as well as enhancements to existing ones have created an environment where customers have come to expect several possible touch points with an organization. Armed with the latest smartphones, customers increasingly demand flexible, convenient and ‘always on’ types of customer contact.

As a result, the role and importance of the omnichannel customer contact centre has been elevated to unprecedented levels and many companies have found themselves reviewing their entire approach to customer engagement in a bid to be the best.”²

1. [“Contact Centre Transformation Roadmap” Durham Region](#)
2. [“Future Proof Your Contact Centre”, biziblmarketing](#)

2. Contact Centres: Innovations & Considerations

The contact center landscape is rapidly shifting due to innovative technology. Improving the customer service experience continues to be a top priority for public sectors worldwide in 2020. Some examples of key innovations in contact centres are highlighted below.



Artificial Intelligence (AI) & Chatbots

AI plays an important role to improve the customer experience in call centers. AI enables engagement through [chatbots/digital assistants](#)--intelligent, natural language virtual assistants. Some [Benefits of Chatbots in Call Centres](#) include:

- reduced customer call time
- integration with enterprise business solutions
- data insights that inform future software design
- The ability to trigger a sequence of events to enhance the client's digital experience



Omnichannel

An omnichannel contact center is an innovation to customer service. This strategy is focused on facilitating customers' access to contact organizations using their preferred method of communication.¹

Customers have access to multiple media types (email, chat, social media, etc.). These [omnichannel contact centres](#) are designed to allow a seamless experience for all.



Live Engagement

Customers expect quick responses, knowledgeable service agents and a quick resolution to any issues. To meet expectations, organizations are beginning to adopt live engagement tools that enable proactive communication and ultimately bolster the service experience.

According to an article featured in [Customer Think](#), "Seamlessly pivoting to a live agent (especially one who is aware of the customer's service journey) can surprise and delight customers and soothe whatever frustration that led them to you in the first place."

1. ["Moving From A Traditional Call Center To An Autonomous Omnichannel Contact Center", commbox](#)

3. Contact Centres: Accessibility Challenges

Due to the technological innovations in contact centres, governments have enhanced how they communicate with citizens. However, a significant portion of the population is unable to benefit from contact centres due to accessibility challenges. According to an article published in [Contact Centre World](#), “Each new technology creates a new group of people disadvantaged because they can't use it, can't get to it, can't afford it or it doesn't work where they live”.



Some [common factors that impact the accessibility of contact centres](#) and related approaches to address these include:

- Age**
 - Many [seniors often experience challenges when using technology](#). For example, it may be difficult to use a mouse, tap on small phone buttons, read small text, etc.
 - These challenges can be addressed through simple design considerations (i.e. clear number to call, high-contrast colours, large font, etc.)
- Language**
 - Clients may experience language barriers when accessing contact centres. For example, when a client speaks a different language than support teams, communication and accessing real-time support becomes difficult.
 - Overcoming language barriers can be achieved by offering [real-time chat translation](#) in live chat channels, multilingual websites, etc.
- Reachability**
 - [Clients expect services delivery to be seamless and convenient](#). Clients that are connecting with the public sector during the COVID-19 crisis want timely responses and speedy service.
 - Chatbots are useful to manage client expectations. Chatbots are able to answer frequent questions and guide clients through self-service options (often at any time of the day).
- Accessibility**
 - Accessibility includes [making it easy for individuals with health conditions and/or disabilities](#) to utilize contact centres. For example, clients who are deaf, hard of hearing, or visual impairments may experience challenges connecting with contact centres.
 - Accessibility can be improved by offering omni-channel services (ranging from telephone support, real-time chat, self-service options etc.).

4. The Future of Contact Centres Post-COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing organizations to rethink and radically change their service operations in real time. Previous technological approaches and tools used in organizations have been put to test, forcing unprecedented change.¹



Migration to Artificial Intelligence and the Cloud

Prior to COVID-19, many organizations functioned on traditional, on-premise call centers. The pandemic forced a shift to a remote agent workforce, with organizations looking to move contact centres towards [artificial intelligence](#) and [cloud-based](#) systems.



Working From Home for the Long Term

Globally, [contact centres will likely be operating under shelter-in-place protocols](#) for an extended period. It is unlikely that there will be a rapid move back to centralized locations, as the rules for opening offices are challenging to implement in many contact centre environments. In this context, it is important to keep in mind the [needs of Working From Home contact centre agents](#).



Interaction Volume

The disruption has resulted in [increased pressure on contact centres](#) in the public sector. This is caused by a dramatic increase in demand for services and related support. The net result is long wait times for clients. According to a report published by the Injixo Blog, some [methods to respond to high call volumes](#) include:

- Setting up interdepartmental crisis meetings;
- Creating mass client communications;
- Documenting and anticipating client concerns; and
- Educating staff about how to answer crisis questions.

Learn more about how chatbots are helping local governments through to COVID-19 outbreak [here](#).

1. [“Assessing COVID-19’s Enduring Impacts on Contact Centers”, Sheila McGee-Smith](#)

5. Success Stories: Contact Centres Amid COVID-19

Canada

(Note: Below are some examples of success stories in Canada)

Charlie the Chatbot: The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) is experimenting and innovating with new technology to assist Canadians in getting the information they require in real time. The first pilot of [Charlie the Chatbot](#) was in March 2019 with a second pilot in March 2020. Since its launch, Charlie has answered over 1.69 million questions and has had over 509,000 conversations with visitors on Canada.ca.

Service Canada:

- In response to COVID-19, the Government of Canada launched a [dedicated CERB Response Benefit call centre](#) after receiving more than four million applications in less than a month. After complaints of being unable to get ahold of the call centre staff, Service Canada redeployed 3,000 additional staff (in addition to the 2,500 already working) from other “less critical activities” to deal with the EI and CERB applications.
- [Chatbot Pilot for Passport Canada:](#) Passport Canada first tested a hybrid chat service in March and April 2019, and re-activated it on a 24/7 basis from November 2019 until present, on [Canada’s main passport service page](#); it has the following key features: i) automatic and operator-assisted modes; ii) supports organizational change management; iii) hybrid, open source tech that is content agnostic; and iv) uses instant messaging.
- [Chatbot Pilot for My Service Canada Account \(MSCA\) Registration:](#) The MSCA chatbot is a fully automated chatbot service, launched in February 2020 on [Canada’s three main MSCA pages](#). The chat helps users navigate the MSCA registration process and helps explain changes. As of September 6, more than 2 million questions have been answered.

Global

Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (DLT): In early March, [Rhode Island’s Department of Labor and Training \(DLT\) website](#) experienced 10 times the typical volume of unemployment insurance (UI) applications and continuing claim certifications, putting stress on its 30-year-old system. DLT was incentivized to replace their outdated legacy system and transitioned from overwhelmed systems to high-functioning UI processing in less than two weeks.¹

Los Angeles Unified School District: The Los Angeles Unified School District is the second largest K12 school district in the US. In order to [transition 700,000 students to remote learning](#), the school district established a [call center to field IT questions, provide remote support, and enable staff to answer calls](#). They proceeded to also open an additional phone hotline dedicated to helping students and families manage stress and anxiety related to COVID-19.

Other global government agencies have opted to be [early adopters of AI powered chatbot technology](#) to ameliorate service delivery efficiencies, as well as better internal workforce management.

1. [“Chatbots and call centers: Connecting with citizens during critical times”, Amazon Web Services](#)



For further reading

- [4 ways 'Chatbots' support the Local Authorities to provide better services](#)
- [Architecture for public service chatbots](#)
- [The Future Of The Contact Centre Post COVID-19](#)
- [Chatbots in Call Centers](#)
- [Reinventing the contact center](#)
- [How COVID-19 has changed the way customer service leaders think about contact centers](#)

Other noteworthy articles:

[Digital transformation is not just about technology](#)

[COVID-19 and the future of public sector work surveillance](#)

[How 20 years of digital transformation made? Estonia a model for dealing with international crises](#)

[Cloud technology is transforming public services. This is how](#)

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Trends in the Daily Newsletter



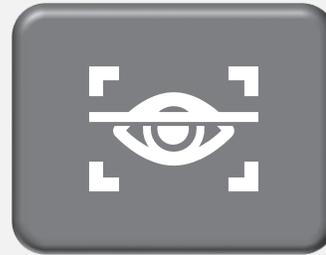
Future of Work

The pandemic has resulted in many changes in the world of work. [Firms are choosing to automate and digitize](#), and they're turning increasingly to remote and casual work.



Cyberattacks

The [Canada Revenue Agency reported](#) it was forced to temporarily suspend its online services after a series of [cyberattacks](#) that compromised the usernames and passwords of thousands of accounts.



Digital Identity

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, public sector agencies that offer assistance and support programs to citizens are progressively using a [strong identity strategy](#) to streamline, improve and proactively deliver services. Such ID programs have been [successful in many jurisdictions](#).



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