



Breaking barriers and accelerating innovation in the contact centre

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Reap the benefits of innovation

How can contact centres benefit from being innovative? What does innovation look like in the contact centre environment? What encourages innovation in the contact centre, and what gets in the way?

Answers to these questions are contained in this report, a playbook for contact centre leaders wanting to inspire innovation and reap the benefits.

With thanks to...

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Foreword from CCMA

Innovation means different things to different people, but everyone agrees that it's a good thing. Constant innovation is essential for businesses to remain competitive and meet ever-changing customer expectations. Further, in today's labour market contact centres are seeking innovative ways to attract and retain people.

Everyone wants to be innovative, but what exactly does that mean? What are the outcomes of innovation and how do we achieve it? The goals of innovation may look very similar across organisations, but there are many different ways to get there. New tools, new technologies and new ways of working also bring opportunities for innovation.

For this research we set out to define the common themes and characteristics of innovation in the contact centre and share useful tips for the reader on how to be more innovative. While technology certainly has a role to play, this report is not about technology. It is about creating and nurturing a culture that understands how innovation can help make things better, and that inspires and rewards people that contribute.



Leigh Hopwood,
CEO, CCMA

Foreword from UJET

The success of a business in today's landscape can be attributed to many reasons: products, services, marketing, customer support, brand loyalty, etc. But if you look at who stands apart, you'll notice a common denominator: they embrace customer experience (CX) innovation.

When CX innovation is done well and revolves around the customer, it leads to sustainable innovation in products, services and business strategy, and provides your customers with personalised, successful experiences that differentiate you from your competition.

Whether chatting with a service bot online or messaging a customer service representative in-app, customers today rely on multiple channels to reach support agents and expect greater human interaction than ever before. They want you to know their needs, understand their problems, and help them quickly resolve any concerns they may have with your product or service.

Innovating the customer experience is different from improving the customer experience because it is forward-thinking and about exploring new experiences to add rather than updating and changing existing ones. It is pairing modern technology with processes that make your customers feel seen, valued, and connected to your organisation's core values.

CX standards sometimes revolve around how automation can increase return on investment in the contact centre, but as this report shows technology can only take an experience so far. Your investments should be paired with a new mindset and new operational ideas. Mastering technology and business process change opens the door to a whole new way of solving your customer's problem before they even realize they have one.

This report aims to better equip you with information on both technology and mindset, to look at compelling new ways to focus your investments and efforts on the areas that will return the greatest impact to you – and for your customers. We believe the insights and best practices identified in this research will show how contact centres are transforming into operational and customer experience gamechangers for organisations.

I hope you find this report and the information contained within to be highly useful to your organisation.



Vasili Triant,
Chief Operating Officer
UJET, Inc.

What are the goals of innovation in the contact centre?

The past few years have witnessed intense change in contact centres large and small. Huge strides have been made in offering alternative contact channels for customers. Remote and hybrid working, far from commonplace just three years ago, are now very much a reality.

Achieving change and discovering new and

better ways to work can be difficult and complex. Yet the problems that innovation helps to solve are simple to define. And regardless of the pace at which innovation and change happen, the underlying goal has remained and will continue to remain the same.

Innovation in the contact centre is aimed at achieving easier, quicker and cheaper ways for colleagues to help customers.

“Whatever we’re doing today, what does the next better version of it look like? Quicker for the person who’s using the system. Cheaper for the consumer. Cheaper for the business.” - Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

“Contact centres are a people business. The majority of your cost is in the people. So a lot of our focus is around how we can be innovative in

making those people more efficient at what they do. One way to achieve this is to encourage customers to self-serve where they are able and happy to do so. And for the jobs that your contact centre people are doing - how can you use technology to help them help their customers get from A to B as quickly and as easily as possible?” - Tracy Sheldon, Head of Continuous Improvement, Customer Operations, Ageas UK

For customers, start with demand reduction

Although innovation is commonly associated with contact channels, it actually begins much further upstream. Almost every organisation seeks to hone its core products and processes to reduce the need for customers to make contact in the first place. For some, the ultimate aim is no contact at all.

“Our innovation is focused on the reasons why customers are getting in touch, because for us that is pure failure demand. I’ve set out to have the smallest contact centre that I possibly can. I love to see data showing that demand has dropped. It keeps me motivated.” - Helen Wilson, Chief Operating Officer, Atom Bank

“Amazon isn’t perfect, but I use them a lot and I’ve never had to contact them. In the retail space, that’s the model we should probably be looking at. They probably spend less in the contact centre per customer than most other places, because they’re getting the customer experience right.” - Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

“Speech analytics is fantastic because it helps you understand and fix the root cause of failure demand.” - Tracy Sheldon, Head of Continuous Improvement, Customer Operations, Ageas UK

Innovative ways to engage colleagues have never been more valuable

With salaries and attrition rising at rarely-seen-before rates, finding new and better ways to attract and retain people is top of the agenda. Colleague experience is finally taking its rightful place at the same level as customer experience on the priority list.

“Before we can start seriously thinking about more cutting-edge online solutions, we need to get the basics right. We need to first address the root causes of failure demand. For me, being

able to deliver innovation requires being set up for success, recruiting the right people and using agile ways of working to deliver the ever-changing needs of a contact centre.” - Andy Holbert-Rolls, Senior Continuous Improvement Manager, Ageas UK

*“We’re in a period of wage inflation. We’re having to be innovative around how we treat staff.”
- Michael Pollock, Managing Director, Interact CC*

Finding innovative ways to engage colleagues, operate effectively in a hybrid environment, train and on-board are all top priorities for contact centres for the foreseeable future.

Where does the inspiration for innovation come from?

The impetus for innovation and change can come from a wide variety of sources: colleagues, customer feedback, organisational strategy, external consultants, peers.

Inspiration can come from examining what other operations are doing, either through informal activities via membership associations and networking or as some organisations have established, a structured benchmarking programme.

“There’s always someone to learn from. Going on CCMA visits, taking snippets and ideas. Everyone’s always trying to improve, everyone’s always trying to get better.” - Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

“We’re very conscious that we don’t know everything. We’re looking at other companies around the world for inspiration on how we can do better.”
- Kate O’Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

The front line is consistently cited as one of if not the most valuable source of innovative ideas. In addition to feedback from advisors, bringing senior leaders to the front line and exposing them to customer feedback can be a powerful tool to catalyse awareness and action.

“Getting directors down here regularly, listening, doing sit-bys on the phones, makes a big impact in driving change.” - James Blackwood, Head of Contact Centre, Eurostar

“We are inviting our exec and heads of into the contact centre to sit side by side with our people. We expect that one day of sitting side by side with one of our team will have as much impact as our monthly Customer Insight Pack.” - Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

“Quoting customers is powerful. And people are quick to tag the CEO when they complain. I think that’s healthy.” - Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

The power of engaging the front line

One of the strongest advantages of working in the contact centre over other departments is that colleagues are closer to change and are more likely to see their ideas being incorporated into action.

“Most of our good ideas come from the team. It’s a real differentiator as we see the end-to-end customer experience. In the contact centre everyone can influence change and make a difference to the customer experience. That helps us retain people and keep them engaged.”
- Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

“We want frontline agents to know that they’re the closest to the customer, and therefore theirs should be the biggest concerns that we have.”

“We’re looking to set up a virtual board for them to provide suggestions.” - Kate O’Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

Soliciting feedback from colleagues is not as straightforward as simply inviting input from all. Just as ‘closing the loop’ is a core principle of customer management, the same applies with team members. Colleagues who submit ideas and feedback but see no evidence of these being taken on board are at risk of being disillusioned. As such, organisations must ensure to close the loop with colleagues and be careful not to become overwhelmed with too much feedback.

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"We've experimented with different ways to engage the contact centre in change – for example asking consultants to visibly share their ideas by pegging them to a 'washing' line in the contact centre, which is great for initial engagement. However, it is more challenging to then deliver on a high volume of ideas of varying quality and working out how to prioritise them. If you don't deliver timely, positive feedback, the engagement very quickly goes the other way. If ask people for their input, they want to see an outcome." - Andy Holbert-Rolls, Senior Continuous Improvement Manager, Ageas UK
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"It's demotivating if you don't get feedback that tells you 'this is what's happening', or 'this is why we're not doing it at this point in time'. You can't action all the ideas. It's a balance." - Helen Wilson, Chief Operating Officer, Atom Bank
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"Colleagues respond really well to our external benchmarking. But we're trying to figure out how to close the loop. What's the so what? We learned all that, but what are we doing about it as British Gas?" - Kate O'Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas
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When done well, inviting colleagues to offer input and closing the loop accordingly is an effective engagement strategy that brings teams along the innovation journey.
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"Make sure that teams are aware of what's coming down the track, of what we're trying to achieve, work on and build. When people start to see that change landing, you get the buy in. It creates a continuous improvement loop. The challenge comes when it stops or slows down or you get an incident and it knocks you back a little bit."
- Helen Wilson, Chief Operating Officer, Atom Bank
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What are some of the barriers to innovation?

Do you recognise these barriers?

Reverting to pre-pandemic thinking

Focusing on the wrong KPIs

Reliance on third parties

Cynicism due to previous failed initiatives

Systems fragmentation

Our leaders cited various roadblocks which can impede innovation in the contact centre.

Reverting to pre-pandemic thinking is being witnessed in some quarters as memories of lockdown recede and cost pressures threaten to roll back the momentum for innovation that has been achieved during the last couple of years.

“There’s a tendency to flip back towards pre-COVID behaviours. Channels which have opened up, we’re being asked to cut back on. Some organisations don’t want to offer live chat as it’s more difficult to forecast. They want to go back to voice and email. That’s not consumer focused, it’s not CX, it’s just about pounds and pence. They want a fixed budget and a fixed forecast.”

- Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

Cynicism due to previous failed initiatives can occur among experienced colleagues who have seen different strategies and different leaders come and go over the years without sufficient evidence of progress.

“Tenured staff might think change isn’t going to happen or it’s not going to work, so it’s not worth embracing. Sometimes people who’ve been there a long time become cynical.” - Kate O’Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

Focusing on the wrong KPIs is still a reality in some contact centres which lack a strong emphasis on

customer experience. Too much of a focus on operational metrics without checks and balances runs the risk of driving the wrong behaviours.

“Instead of looking at AHT [Average Handle Time], look at other things. For example, why wrap is so high after a call, and reduce that instead of call length. We don’t always have to have a shorter interaction. Maybe our customers want to speak to us for longer. Maybe it’s a complex query. If I could choose the measures, I’d just use customer satisfaction and nothing else.” - Kate O’Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

“Trying to remove AHT is like squeezing a balloon. You move it out of one element of a call and it just pops back out as longer wrap.” - Tracy Sheldon, Head of Continuous Improvement, Customer Operations, Ageas UK

“If you move away from things like AHT to focus on the customer experience measures, first contact resolution, things like this helps drive the right behaviours.” - Helen Wilson, Chief Operating Officer, Atom Bank

Systems fragmentation is a fact of life in most organisations. Larger teams and contact centres which operate multiple channels are especially prone to fragmentation. Even when this is not visible to the customer, it causes stress for colleagues who must switch between multiple platforms and screens in the course of handling a query.

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"We've got lots of systems. CCMA published a report that said that people get frustrated if they're working with more than six applications day to day. We've got 17. We don't get too much negative feedback, but the future for me is about creating simplicity for customers and simplicity for our people in the background." - Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry
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"Way too many systems that don't talk to each other. Organisations try to simplify by only offering one or two channels. Which isn't the point." - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO
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Reliance on third parties is a reality for most organisations, for example delivery partners in retail or technology partners in insurance who provide the backbone platforms that customers interact with. There are many good reasons why organisations are moving away from trying to do everything themselves to embracing partnerships, but this can create issues due to lack of control or even visibility.

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"Customers purchasing online are using courier and tracking services. There are lots of different systems but we've limited control over how they work together. It would be great to have a system that bridges that gap between us and the delivery services that we use, not just a communication tool but an end-to-end e-commerce and logistics solution." - Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry
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"The links that we have with third parties aren't strong enough. If we could fix the 'where is my order?' and 'what happened to my order?' that would make a lot of difference. In retail, that's the bulk of demand." - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO
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"Where you work with a third party for policy administration, there can be very high costs involved to make changes to their system. You can sometimes end up relying on things like RPA (Robotic Process Automation) to bridge the gaps to delivery efficiencies rather than address the root causes." - Andy Holbert-Rolls, Senior Continuous Improvement Manager, Ageas UK
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What differentiates innovative contact centres?

Every contact centre strives to be innovative, but some are more successful than others. Some of the characteristics of innovative contact centres include the following:

Which of these applies to your contact centre?

Organisational vision

Fresh thinking from new people

Understanding the business case

Ability to plan for the longer term

Organisational vision creates confidence in planning for the longer term and riding out bumps in the near term. Strong will and direction from the top provides the north star for contact centres, against which a roadmap can be developed and priorities set. It also helps to ensure a culture in which innovation thrives and is rewarded.

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"We have a very clear strategy in terms of where we are going. That helps you remain focused in terms of the things that are important, the direction we're heading as a business and where we want to invest our time and effort." - Andy Holbert-Rolls, Senior Continuous Improvement Manager, Ageas UK

Fresh thinking from new people is one of the most common ways of injecting energy and creating momentum for change. (With the caveat that it can also cause cynicism as referenced earlier, should there be the perception of a revolving door without meaningful forward progress.)

The contact centre sector is seeing more directors and heads coming from non-traditional backgrounds, for example people with marketing and/or customer backgrounds who are bringing in expertise and learnings from other disciplines, helping to overturn obsolete practices and drive change.

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"Invariably companies who are innovating have had new joiners at senior level." - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

Understanding the business case happens intuitively in cultures which are naturally customer orientated. In organisations which are operationally minded and cost-driven by choice or necessity, the ability of the contact centre leadership to make the business case is instrumental in encouraging change.

Within organisations that recognise contact centres not simply as cost centres but value generators, innovation tends to flourish.

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“Finance people have had their fingers burned for the last two years. That’s leading to thinking about customers as numbers, not consumers. Rather than thinking about repeat business, it’s all about how much it is costing to serve.” - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

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“Quite often we’ll have to write a business case for due diligence, but now that revenue is coming in again it’s easier to get funding. Eurostar has always had a very strong focus on customer experience. If there’s a tangible benefit to the customer, then it will normally get over the line.” - James Blackwood, Head of Contact Centre, Eurostar

Ability to plan for the longer term is a universal ambition, but very difficult to achieve. The ‘fire fighting’ nature of the contact centre environment naturally drives a focus on the day to day. Furthermore, ongoing uncertainty of the wider economic outlook means that forecasting for the longer term is exceptionally hard.

Nonetheless planning for the longer terms is an aspiration for leaders. Innovation thrives when given time, and big problems require big solutions. Expecting immediate returns is not always realistic.

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“We need to get better at not just fixing an issue with right now, but also looking at the future. We can sometimes get too focussed on the next 12 months. I’m trying to look at the next five years.”
 - Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

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“I think it’s really brave of any business to try and look further than 12 months. I love the idea of looking forward five years. But it’s really difficult because what you want to be doing versus what the business might allow you to do can be a million miles apart.” - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

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“You don’t know technologically what’s around the corner beyond the next 12-24 months. Also, customer expectations change so fast. I had a discussion with some of our directors on whether to move to video chat. We don’t know with certainty, but we need to be prepared.” - James Blackwood, Head of Contact Centre, Eurostar

Ingredients to successful innovation in the contact centre

Regardless of the extent to which innovation may or not reside within a given organisation's DNA, there are best practices every contact centre can employ.

Some areas to consider when striving for innovation

Identify the problem up front that innovation will solve

Beware of 'shiny thing syndrome'

Maximise existing resources before spending on new ones

Innovation can come from incremental gains, not only huge leaps

Make sure to engage stakeholders

Be creative but don't let this be a rod for own back

Identify the problem up front that innovation will solve. A clear understanding of the problem is a good place to start. It can be tempting to bring in solutions in search of a problem.

"Innovation is not about shiny things for the sake of shiny things. You've always got to be goal-focused. What problem are we trying to solve? What difference are we trying to create?"

- Tracy Sheldon, Head of Continuous Improvement, Customer Operations, Ageas UK

Beware of 'shiny thing syndrome'. It's easy to become distracted or dazzled by the plethora of vendors offering big promises. Or for the priorities of technology leaders within the organisation to become separated from those of customers and/or colleagues.

"It doesn't matter what problem you think you have: somebody will always have created a technology solution for it. There will be a lovely presentation about the solution that will be very

compelling. It's possible to get carried away with enthusiasm, so it is important to sit back and reflect. Does this solution solve a big enough problem? Or are there other ways to get to the same end goal that don't require spending hundreds of thousands of pounds?" - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

"The person tasked with innovation wanted to bring new things that we didn't necessarily need, while the things that we actually needed weren't being prioritised. There can be a mismatch between the operations teams and the tech teams. What the customer is saying versus what the tech team think people want." - Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

Maximise existing resources before spending on new ones. Throwing money at a problem may not always be the most efficient way to solve it. The raw ingredients for the solution may already exist.

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“Innovation is about how we use insight that’s already there. There is so much data in the contact centre that can help us to innovate.” - Kate O’Loughlin, Effectiveness Manager, British Gas

Innovation can come from incremental gains, not only huge leaps. It’s tempting to visualise innovation as comprising a satisfying big bang. But as Sir Dave Brailsford, the coach of the British cycling team Olympic champions describes it, it more often resembles marginal gains which over time accumulate into larger, visible improvements.

“A lot of what we do is just focused, deliberate ‘bread and butter’ work. The exciting, ‘sexy’ things that people think of as innovation are few and far between. A lot of the innovation in contact centres comes through creative problem solving, as there is always more than one way to solve a problem”
 - Tracy Sheldon, Head of Continuous Improvement, Customer Operations, Ageas UK

Be creative but don’t let this be a rod for own back. Creativity and innovation come quite naturally to contact centre colleagues, for whom resourcefulness is an integral part of the job. Sometimes this innate resourcefulness delays fixing the root causes.

Make sure to engage stakeholders. Executive sponsorship greases the wheels. Identifying other departments which need to be involved, engaging them with a structured cadence and frequently sharing progress updates maintains awareness and momentum.

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“You need an ongoing working party that includes every department, even going as far as your facilities team. Not everyone has to be involved in everything. But so many times I’ve seen a blocker thrown up at the last minute because X department wasn’t engaged.”

- Stuart Aris, Customer Support Lead, ManyPets and former BPO COO

“We have a monthly CX group for an hour and a half. All the customer facing areas of the business, updating each other, looking at what’s in the pipeline and making sure there is alignment.”

- James Blackwood, Head of Contact Centre, Eurostar

“It needs to be backed at a senior level and this can be challenging as everyone has their own priorities. We are lucky as our CEO started in store. When I speak to him about customers, you can see it resonates. He’s told me stories about dealing with challenging customer situations himself. Our COO started in a contact centre. Having those senior people in the business means that other people have to pay attention.”

- Alan Mullen, Customer Services Manager, Superdry

5 characteristics of innovative contact centres

Innovation comes in many shapes and forms. It can comprise a huge leap or the aggregation of marginal gains. It takes inspiration from customers, colleagues and leaders. Technology upgrades may or may not be involved. There is no guaranteed formula for innovation, but every contact centre that manages to be consistently innovative shares five core characteristics:

- 1 Starts with a clear definition of the problem(s) to be solved.
- 2 Understands the business case.
- 3 Has the right KPIs in place to drive desired behaviours.
- 4 Not only listens to colleagues, but keeps them updated on how their feedback has been used.
- 5 Regularly and effectively engages across the organisation to secure buy-in and collaboration.

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There is no better time to join us. The industry is changing and we are giving our members more opportunities to learn, to network and to support each other.

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