CONNECTED BUSINESS

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Video communication as it should be

CONNECTED BUSINESS

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EMPLOYER BRAND

Why firms still overlook their employer brand

While it's important to build a brand with customers and clients, failing to communicate drive and vision internally can damage employee engagement and reputation alike

Cath Everett

The importance of creating a positive brand is well understood and a sophisticated industry to help businesses achieve this in the marketplace has flourished. But the idea of focusing on employer brand, through internal communication, is less well developed.

Lisa Pantelli, head of community at simplycommunicate, a group for internal communication specialists, explains: "There are two camps. Some organisations put it at the heart of what they do, how they operate, make business decisions and recruit and retain staff. But 'employer brand' has also become a bit of a buzzphrase, so senior leaders often say they want to go down this path without understanding what it really means."

The concept of employer brand is essentially the workplace element of the company's overall corporate brand reputation. It refers to the company's image and standing as an employer, which includes its employer value proposition (EVP) or the reasons people choose to work for the organisation. The EVP incorporates everything from benefits and rewards to company culture and the overall employee experience.

As Pantelli says: "There's a convergence, or blurring of the lines, with reputation management because what happens on the inside is reflected on the outside." Unsurprisingly then, employer branding is perceived in some quarters as being increasingly important in attracting, engaging and retaining quality staff.

Jenni Field, director of consultancy Redefining Communications and president of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, says: "People are starting to pay more attention as they realise they need to focus more on their employees after having forgotten about them for years. It's an area that's been around for quite a while now, so it's not in its infancy; it just hasn't matured yet."

But going down this route can provide undoubted benefits. Firstly, creating a positive employer brand helps organisations differentiate themselves from their competitors, which can make all the difference in industries struggling to cope with talent shortages.

Secondly, a clearly communicated employer brand and brand values strengthen staff loyalty. This is because alignment with the company purpose, as well as helping people to understand why their role is important and how they fit into the overall picture, is empowering. It enables staff to perform more effectively, which in turn helps boost productivity and retention.

Heightened levels of employee loyalty also enhance external brand recognition and customer loyalty, says Susy Roberts, founder of people development consultancy Hunter Roberts, as it means staff present the brand at a personal level, which in turn generates feelings of connection and familiarity.

In other words, a sound internal communication strategy is just as important for brand recognition as any external activity. As a result, it is vital the organisation's culture reflects what the brand stands for, thereby enabling employees to represent it effectively. For instance, if employee areas in the offices of a luxury brand are tatty and low quality, "people won't be going into the customer environment with the mindset to deliver a premium service", says Roberts.

"Everything about the customer journey needs to be mirrored in the employee journey, from the moment of recruitment to the point of sale."

For example, the core brand message of Brunelcare, a charity with more than 2,200 employees that provides housing and support for older people in the south west of England, is that care is at the heart of what it does. The aim, therefore, is to demonstrate this ethos not just among its client populations, but also among its workforce.

One way of achieving this goal is to take internal communication activities seriously as "keeping staff informed makes them feel more valued", says Stacey Byles, the charity's public relations and marketing co-ordinator. This includes recognising and writing about its unsung heroes, in the shape of housekeepers, chefs and receptionists, "who are the vital cogs that keep the organisation ticking", she adds.

Another approach includes extensive skills training for all employees, into which the organisation's brand messaging is embedded. Everyone is also encouraged to develop a pitch about what they and the charity do.

"It's important we answer the question 'so what do you do at Brunelcare?' with poise and confidence," says Byles. "We want people to be impressed, but also sense the passion from each and every person who works here."

To ensure employer branding activities work effectively though involves a four-step process, says Pantelli at simplycommunicate. The first entails talking to stakeholders, which includes employees and customers, to obtain a clear picture of how the organisation is being described and talked about.

The second is about understanding the common thread from such discussions as it is this theme that will form the basis of your employer brand. As a result, it is important to present your findings back to employees for feedback both to understand how representative they truly are and also to ensure staff feel involved.

The third, enablement phase focuses on developing and implementing the requisite business objectives, operational processes, policies and culture to make your clear and concise narrative stick. Ongoing internal communication is vital as is employee advocacy.

The final stage, meanwhile, consists of continual listening and measurement as "employer branding should never be taken for granted", Pantelli adds.

Roberts at consultancy Hunter Roberts agrees, but says ultimately success depends on a number of key factors, notably leadership commitment and the necessity of role-modelling the employer brand from the top down. Another is staff buy-in. ●

HOW BUSINESSES COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR EMPLOYEES

98% of large businesses worldwide communicate via email

Sierra-Cedar 2019

57% use surveys

15% use text message

What the connected business really needs

Customers are demanding more than ever from the brands they buy, but there's a widening experience gap as companies fail to deliver. Amid this, the chief experience officer is becoming an increasingly important voice in the boardroom

Rebecca Stewart

When Mastercard poached Donald Chesnut from SapientRazorfish to fill its first chief experience officer (CXO) role, a significant shift was occurring in the business world.

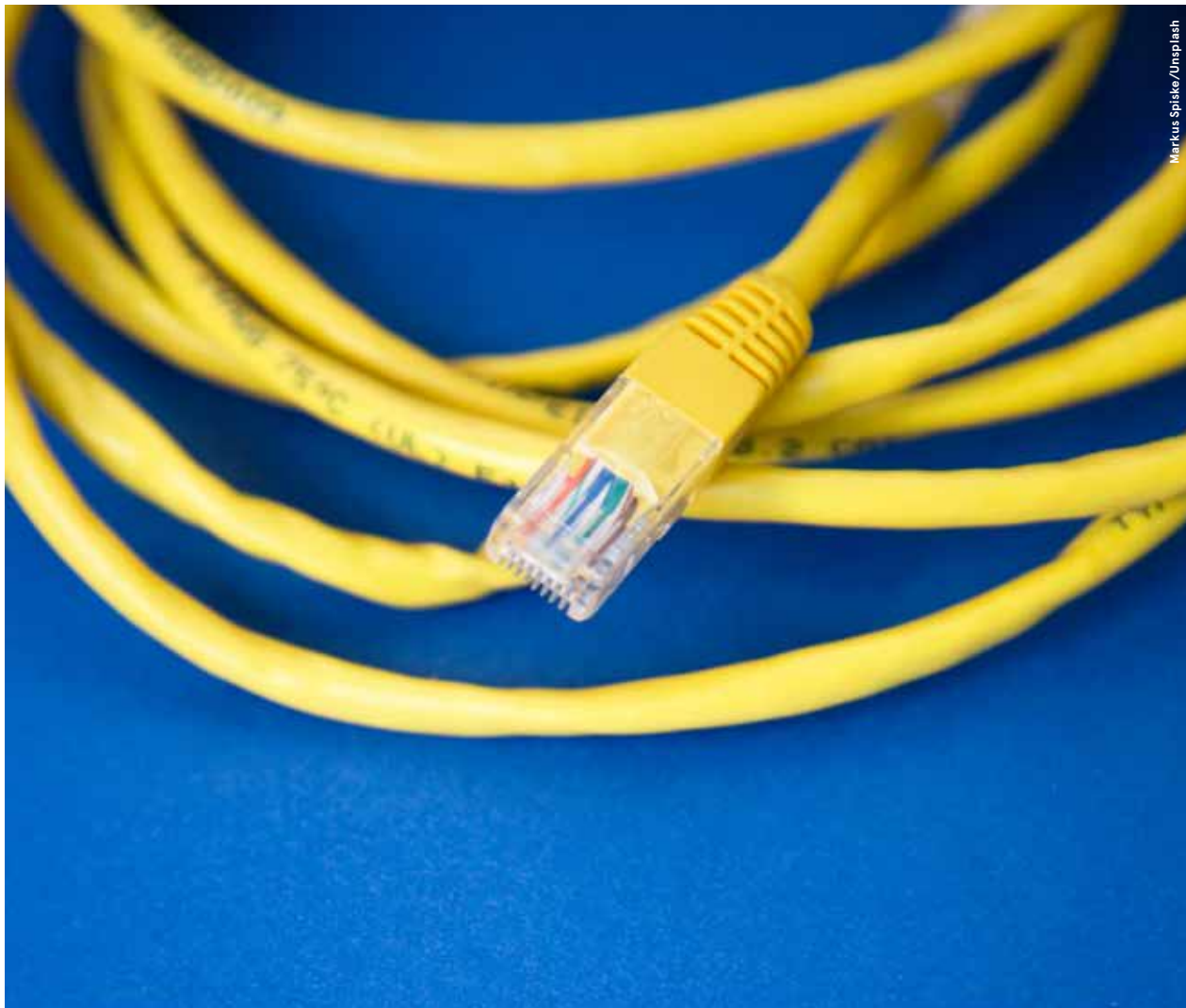"Providing customers with a clear, consistent and rewarding experience is what differentiates leaders from the rest of the pack," Mastercard's chief product officer Michael Miebach, explained.

Mastercard isn't the only business introducing a CXO into its corporate hierarchy. Carmaker Ford named Elena Ford chief customer experience officer in 2018. Elsewhere, hotel chain Marriott has just elevated long-time executive Peggy Fang Roe to global officer for customer experience, loyalty and new ventures.

As ever, those who influence the interactions brands have with their customers are also getting in on the act. Advertising holding group Engine Group and consulting giant Accenture have both hired experience bosses of late.

The companies filling such positions expect the CXO to act as a connector between multiple disciplines across their organisations.

Matt Holt, who leads the strategy unit at advertising agency Digitas, working with clients like Kellogg's and Honda, says CXOs have a key part to play as educators and internal enablers across marketing, operations, technology and other parts of the business that contribute to the customer experience.

"In the short term, the role of the CXO is to educate stakeholders and achieve organisation-wide consensus across diverse interests, for example convincing the chief financial officer that investing in experience delivers strong return on investment," he says.

So why is it only now that the CXO is becoming an increasingly important voice in the boardroom? And can a business really call itself "connected" without one?

A positive, fulfilling and even enjoyable customer experience has never been more important for companies as they look to drive profit and stay ahead of the competition.

The explosion of digital means brands are now overwhelmed by channels through which they can reach customers, be it Amazon, social media or in-store. In correlation, customer expectations have moved well beyond the provision of good service and aftercare.

Agile, technology-focused businesses are ahead of the curve with this trend. Airbnb, for instance, has been focused on building end-to-end travel experiences for tourists

using its app. Last year, Mastercard launched its first flagship Priceless restaurant in New York along with a Bistro at Rome International Airport, all part of a strategy it says is designed to "cut through the clutter" and link the brand to joyous sensory experiences.

However, though many enterprises are pivoting to a more customer-centric way of working, there is still a significant gap between the experiences customers now expect and those being delivered.

A 2018 global survey from digital experience firm Acquia found that while 87 per cent of brand marketers believe themselves to be adequately delivering customer experiences, less than half of customers agree.

The ramifications for businesses that fail to address this disconnect are huge and material. A US survey from Oracle notes that 43 per cent of consumers will blacklist a brand as a result of a bad experience. A further 34 per cent say they will never shop with a company again after just one poor interaction.

Inability to focus on customer satisfaction also has reputational consequences. According to Esteban Kolsky, head of CX strategy at SAP, 72 per cent of customers will share a positive experience with six or more people. On the other hand, if a customer is left unhappy with the service they receive, 13 per cent will go on to

share their experience with 15 or even more.

"In a commercial landscape where an increasing number of companies are purposefully engaging directly with their customer base, as opposed to going through retail outlets, the successful ones obsess about good customer experience," says David Indo, chief executive at management consultancy ID Comms.

"Get it wrong and your customer base will fall off a cliff, get it right and you've unlocked true competitive advantage."

One way for businesses to close this experience gap is to add a dedicated CXO role to their board.

Gartner's recent customer experience management survey indicates that an increasing number of companies are hiring for the role. In 2017, more than 35 per cent of US organisations lacked a CXO, chief customer officer or equivalent. However, in 2019 only 11 per cent and 10 per cent lacked one or the other role, respectively.

The significant growth demonstrates the emphasis firms are now placing on both customer centricity and internal connectivity.

However, Holt at Digitas expects that in the long term the CXO role will eventually be banished as enterprises take a more holistic approach to customer interaction.

"The hope is it will no longer be needed as everyone in the company begins to understand the importance of customer experience," he says.

"There are clear parallels here with preceding debate around the role of the chief digital officer (CDO). The best CDOs made their role redundant because stakeholders now all understand the importance of digital. And so it should be with customer experience."

Christian Polman, chief strategy officer at brand consultancy Ebiquity, agrees that not all companies need a CXO.

"However, all consumer-facing businesses certainly need to have a vision for the customer experience, along with a clear prioritisation of areas for investment, co-ordination and senior steering, and a steady flow of data and insights that help break down silos and ensure organisational alignment," he says.

Whatever the future holds for the CXO, one certainty is that investing in customer experience must become the new normal for brands, if they want to stand out from the rest. ●

> "Providing customers with a clear, consistent and rewarding experience is what differentiates leaders from the rest of the pack

WHERE DO CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE OFFICERS COME FROM

CXOs now more likely to have a commercial background than a marketing one

	2017	2018
Commercial	19%	28%
Operations	18%	25%
Marketing	41%	22%
Customer Service	7%	11%
Digital	6%	9%
Other	9%	5%

Talecco 2019

Unifying the customer experience

A consistent and quality customer experience across multiple channels builds brand loyalty

When looking at company-wide customer experience, brand loyalty is not as simple as buying that same bottle of tomato ketchup you always reach for in the supermarket. Obviously, if you like the taste of something, you'll keep coming back for more and because customers know they'll get the same experience every time, they stay loyal to a brand.

It's a little more complicated than ketchup for businesses offering a service because every interaction has the potential to be different and the experience a customer has with a service today might be entirely different to the one they have tomorrow.

However, the more uniform a service becomes and the more a customer can be guaranteed the same experience, the more likely a business is to create brand loyalty and generate returning customers.

After price, service is the single biggest factor driving customer loyalty, a fact highlighted by Zendesk's *Customer Experience Trends Report 2020*. Zendesk are a leading customer relationship management company for sales, service and engagement, so they are perfectly placed to look into the customer experience by using survey results and the *Zendesk Benchmark*, an index of product usage data from more than 45,000 global companies.

The report reveals that half of customers will switch to a competitor after just one bad experience and 80 per cent will leave after multiple bad experiences. The customer has always been king, but in a highly competitive marketplace, their level of power and choice is clearly at an all-time high.

As well as shining a light on customer attitudes, Zendesk's report highlights some of the most important service traits that are common to the most successful companies and signposts them to show how other organisations, regardless of size or industry, might follow their lead.

"We are in an entirely new era of customer expectations, and companies now need to earn and re-earn a customer's loyalty with every interaction," says Daniel Bailey, vice president, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at Zendesk. "To build a loyal customer base and truly differentiate themselves, companies need to consider the full customer experience and ensure they can provide an easy and frictionless customer experience."

The report says one of the most effective ways to give customers this experience is to ensure they feel they are having a continued conversation with the company. Customer frustrations have always come from fragmented conversations, being made to wait, and information not being passed on to the right people; but it has become even more crucial in a time when we carry connectivity around with us.
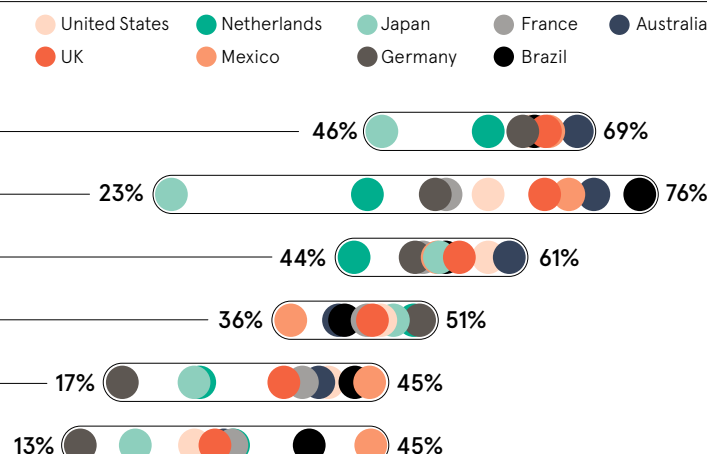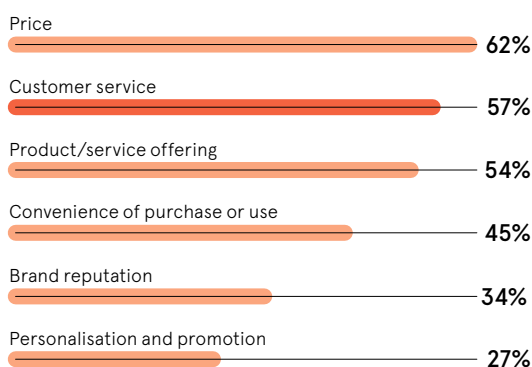
These days, as well as connecting over the phone, email and online, customers expect to be given the option to communicate over social media, social messaging and in-app alerts. When that option isn't serviced well, or is lacking entirely, they will simply take their business to a company that is doing it better.

According to the Zendesk report, the omnichannel approach is the one taken by the most successful companies that are able to boast satisfied customers who they know will return and the number of companies using Zendesk to take this approach has increased six fold over the past five years.

However, omnichannel is not an easy thing to deliver, as every customer journey is fragile and beset with moments where they can feel they're not being listened to or aren't being given the information they need. And that's when loyalty is lost.

"Customers don't differentiate between your marketing, service and sales departments. They want one connected interaction that can get them quick solutions," says Bailey. "It means businesses need to consider connecting information across departments, often across multiple systems, to have a full understanding of the customer's needs.

"We're seeing customers like Bloom & Wild, MADE.com and Trustpilot realise the benefits of offering support across a

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND PRICE ARE DRIVING LOYALTY

Which attributes make customers feel loyal toward a brand? Customer service second only to price

● United States ● Netherlands ● Japan ● France ● Australia
● UK ● Mexico ● Germany ● Brazil

Attribute	Overall	Low	High
Price	62%	46%	69%
Customer service	57%	23%	76%
Product/service offering	54%	44%	61%
Convenience of purchase or use	45%	36%	51%
Brand reputation	34%	17%	45%
Personalisation and promotion	27%	13%	45%

Zendesk

> **With a highly efficient omnichannel approach, you can create those positive interactions where the customer knows what to expect and keeps coming back**

spectrum of channels and often backing this up with self-service options as well."

The most successful organisations also seamlessly manage those moments when customer communication changes from one channel to the next.

For example, the changing pace of our lives means a customer can begin a conversation on instant message, switch to email and revert back to message if they're pushed for time. If the customer feels communication is convenient, quick and efficient, no matter how they've chosen to connect, it will almost certainly enhance feelings of loyalty.

The report found companies offering omnichannel support resolve issues with customers three times faster and cut the time a customer is left waiting for an agent to respond by 75 per cent.

Omnichannel also requires a company to adapt to emerging channels and over the past four years Zendesk has seen more than four times as many customers using chat to start a conversation compared to five years ago.

Phone support still remains one of the most popular methods of connecting, but the high performers are constantly adding to their communications spectrum.

In-app messaging, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp can all mimic live support, without the pressure of having to complete the entire conversation in a single sitting. This gives customers more choice about where they want to meet a company and by whichever method is the most convenient for them.

And its messaging apps that have the highest customer satisfaction rating, with the Zendesk report revealing successful companies are 22 per cent more likely to use messaging compared to companies which are underperforming.

"Customers want to connect with companies in the same way they communicate with friends and family, and many brands are recognising the opportunity to offer support through messaging apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger," says Bailey. "These channels can also offer rich personalised interactions beyond service, such as collecting feedback or offering additional product recommendations based on a customer's past behaviour."

And with a highly efficient omnichannel approach, you can create those positive interactions where the customer knows what to expect and keeps coming back. Proof that when it comes to brand loyalty, attention to customer service is something every business can benefit from.

For more information please visit www.zendesk.co.uk/cx-trends

zendesk

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Customers who say they would switch to a competitor following just one or more than one bad experience

● One bad experience   ● More than one bad experience

Country	One bad experience	More than one bad experience
UK	40%	80%
Germany	40%	75%
France	65%	80%
Netherlands	26%	51%

Zendesk

Connecting the customer experience dots

Thanks to new omnichannel approaches to customer experience, consumers can be supported in more ways than ever before, but brands must be careful not to simply opt for the cheapest channels

Ed Jefferson

The ways brands engage with their customers and the means they offer for customers to connect with them have changed radically in recent decades. What might once have been a simple support phone line or postal address has become an omnichannel customer experience. Customers seeking support can now be pushed towards live chat, online support forums and, increasingly, automated solutions such as chatbots.

But is this working? Is the drive towards potentially cheaper forms of customer support misguided, killing the customer loyalty that can come with the human touch?

When stacking the costs and benefits of chatbots versus humans up, the appeal of the bots is pretty clear: if you can intercept simple customer queries that might not require a human response, you free up more resources to handle more difficult matters.

Daniel Bailey, of customer service software firm Zendesk, cites the example of Dollar Shave Club that uses Zendesk's Answer Bot tool to "suggest self-service articles to members for simple, repetitive questions such as 'how do I pause my account?'" He reports that the tool manages 12 to 16 per cent of all inquiries that come in.

> ❝ **We are frustrated with bots that can't empathise... When the answer isn't black or white, bots can spit out a world of grey**

Tom Kirby, head of customer service at online cleaning booking service Housekeep, says they've achieved a 25 per cent reduction in human contact time through the use of automation. This allows his team to "focus on where we can truly add value to our user's experience and maintain personalisation and individual connection with the time saved". It's not hard to see why chatbots can seem like such a valuable part of the omnichannel customer experience, especially in terms of resource management.

But though that explains their rising popularity, it doesn't necessarily mean chatbots are all providing pain-free, seamless experiences. A 2018 report by PwC found that 71 per cent of US customers would choose customer service from a human being over that of a chatbot, while a Digitas survey found 73 per cent avoid a chatbot after a single bad experience.

A chatbot that can give you the answer you need might be faster than waiting to speak to a human agent on the phone. But being directed to a bot that can't help is only going to aggravate any negative feelings a customer might have when trying to contact a customer service department.

Rebecca Barker, of global branding and design agency Landor, says: "We are getting more frustrated with bots that can't sense our tone and can't empathise with our situation. When the answer isn't black or white, bots can spit out a world of grey." If the bot can't give the customer a clear answer, or leads them into a conversational dead end, it's back to the phones or a bricks-and-mortar store, feeling even less satisfied than in the first place.

A successful omnichannel customer experience requires

Henrik Sorensen/Getty Images

integrating the different channels, rather than simply funnelling customers towards the least resource-intensive channel and hoping for the best. Brands should ensure customers hitting frustration points with automated tools can be identified and transferred to human agents who are likely to be more capable of identifying solutions to complex problems. As Dave Pattman, of consultancy Gobeyond Partners, puts it: "Chatbots should not be viewed as a means to avoid speaking to customers."

Tech can come into play in other ways. Bailey believes artificial intelligence (AI) can itself be used to determine which tools are right for a given customer with a given problem, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

"Ultimately, if the AI tools detect the customer is likely to respond poorly to an interaction with a bot, based on prior experiences, businesses need to prioritise routing these individuals through to an agent, who has full visibility of past interactions, and can handle the situation delicately and appropriately," he says. AI can guide people into the correct part of your omnichannel customer experience, as well as being one of the channels.

The efficacy of tech-based customer service solutions are likely to improve. Barker points to work that's being done on voicebots, a new type of system that can actually "speak" to customers and will be able to sense tone and adjust how it responds accordingly.

Then there are "emotional chatbots, which produce factually coherent answers while also infusing the conversation with feelings like happiness or disgust", attempting to replicate the ideally empathetic tone of a human agent, she says.

While this might sound off-putting, research from Cornell University in America shows that 61 per cent of people preferred the emotional chatbot to a neutral version. And generational attitudes affect acceptance of new kinds of machine assistance as younger consumers tend to report better experiences with existing chatbots. Therefore, shifting demographics might increase the utility of new tech in customer journeys as much as the improvements themselves do.

Whether every new approach succeeds or not, tech can and will play a crucial part in helping omnichannel customer experience meet consumer expectations. But it isn't always as simple as replacing human agents with bots and watching profits rise.
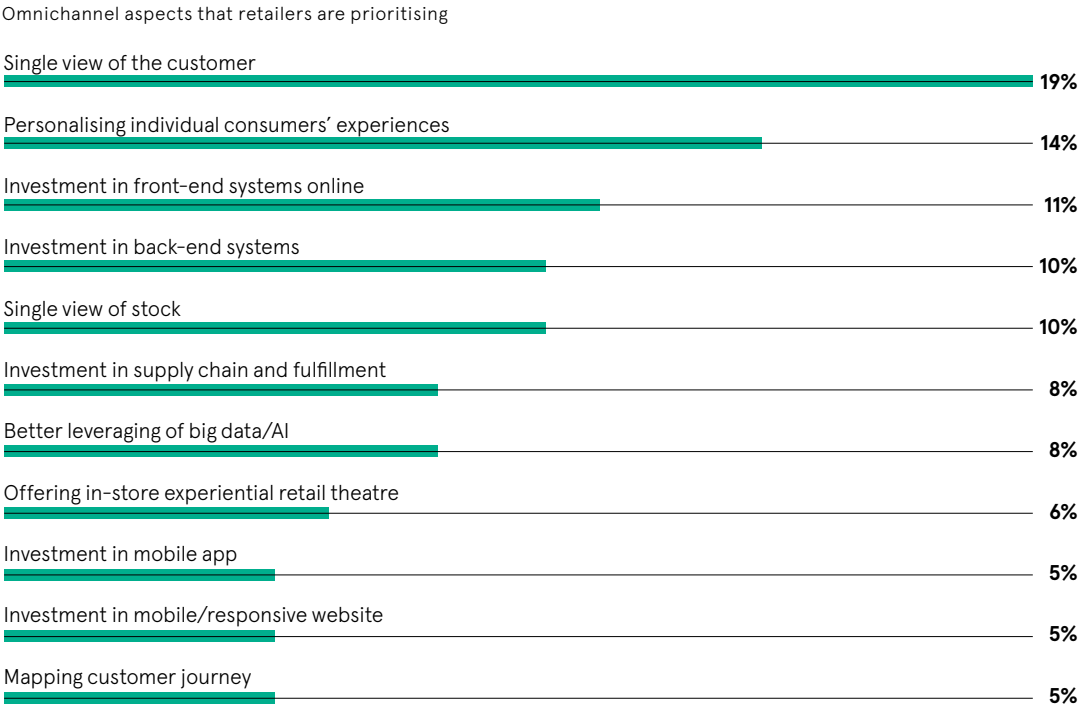
An overall customer service approach that succeeds will identify where and when technology can be best be applied. The opportunity for better, seamless and more tailored customer service is present, but at least in the short term is not so much a case of chatbot v human as letting customers reach the kind of intelligent assistance they require, whether that intelligence is artificial or not. ●

HOW UK RETAILERS PLAN TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Omnichannel aspects that retailers are prioritising

Single view of the customer	19%
Personalising individual consumers' experiences	14%
Investment in front-end systems online	11%
Investment in back-end systems	10%
Single view of stock	10%
Investment in supply chain and fulfillment	8%
Better leveraging of big data/AI	8%
Offering in-store experiential retail theatre	6%
Investment in mobile app	5%
Investment in mobile/responsive website	5%
Mapping customer journey	5%

Retail Week 2019

Commercial feature

How to enable a remote workforce using Webex

A single unified platform, which pulls together every communication medium, unites home workers and allows business to continue better than before.
A conversation with **Sri Srinivasan**, senior vice president and general manager of Cisco Collaboration

The way we work has forever changed. As social distancing measures have led the entire world to work from home, organisations across industries and sizes are learning in real time how to enable a remote workforce using unified communications. But let's be frank – "unified communications" is a bland bit of jargon. But behind this phrase lies a universe of stunning developments that have the power to change the way we work. I'm talking about artificial intelligence (AI). Machine learning. Even the power to silence a barking dog.

When I show people how they can transform their company's entire work culture, their eyes light up.

It begins with a philosophy: that however you work, and wherever you work, there should be continuity.

Let me explain. In any given workday you may use your mobile first thing in the morning, then arrive at the office and work at a desk, collaborate with 15 colleagues in a meeting room, and maybe leave the office to visit clients. You'll use dozens of apps and devices to get work done.

Right now, each act takes place in its own isolated world. Email is email. Voice calls are voice calls. And meetings exist in a parallel universe, with many being incredibly unproductive. In Silicon Valley, we have a "two pizza rule" to help keep the number of participants manageable: only invite as many people as two pizzas are able to feed. Even then, it's quite possible that everything discussed in a meeting is quickly forgotten the moment everyone heads for the exit. And meeting notes are usually incomprehensible to anyone who wasn't physically there.

There is a radical solution: a single unified platform. It pulls together every communication medium – calling, meetings, messaging and video devices – into one experience for everyone regardless of where they are located. Our tool is called Cisco Webex Teams. It is a platform designed to enable collaboration across communication media in a single, integrated, secure place. It is technology for the workplace of the future, which happens to be now.

One click initiates video calls to your colleagues. Want to add team members to the chat? Again, it's just one click. Sharing documents? It's all done through the same platform. This ends the obsolete concept of emailing out versions to attendees and hoping you are all looking at the same version.

And what about meetings? Something that annoys us all are those who hijack conversations, especially during a meeting that has both virtual and in-person attendees. They get to stand around a physical whiteboard and control the agenda; virtual attendees don't get a look in.

A single platform approach completely reinvents meetings. A digital whiteboard is now the centrepiece of discussion where all participants, virtual and physical, can see the same whiteboard with perfect clarity. It's possible for everyone to contribute: to add comments, introduce new documents, even draw with touch-screen technology.

And a single unified platform guarantees continuity. All communications are captured in a perfect digital record. This means new team members can be added to the project and get up to speed super-fast. It's an inclusive,

We are helping companies improve and transform the way they work, while enabling business continuity during this unprecedented time

ultra-productive way to work. When companies run meetings this way, they immediately realise how superior it is to the old-fashioned, analogue approach. There's no comparison.

Of course, the modern work environment is complex. There are so many tools to consider, but your single unified platform needs to include them all. Cisco Webex Teams is built to work with an incredible array of third-party solutions that employees rely on to get their job done, such as Google Cloud, Service Now, Trello, Asana, Salesforce, Jira, Microsoft 365 and so many more.

When the challenge is to bring the entire work world together no application can be left out.

So far, we've only scratched the surface of what's possible. Cisco is passionate about research and development, and we love offering busy professionals new secure collaboration tools to make their working life so much more productive. We use AI and machine-learning to optimise the working day. Our technology is able to learn the habits of each worker and make proactive suggestions such as which meeting room is free and suitable.

AI powers our voice assistant. Like Siri or Alexa, it understands instructions via voice or chatbot. Workers often use tools like this at home so the workplace should be no different. AI can even improve call quality. We offer the ability to mute background noises in a video call. That barking dog I mentioned earlier, woofing away in the background? Gone.

The proof of how companies benefit is found in the real world. One of my favourite examples is an Australian firm called Transurban that moved into a new purpose built office. Transurban

runs toll roads around the world and used the office move to embrace digital collaboration.

Transurban now runs office life around Webex with more than 2,000 staff enrolled. Meetings take place using our virtual whiteboard, so physical staff can work with colleagues thousands of miles away. Transurban sends nearly a million messages a month through our platform, ensuring all information is housed in a single location.

Webex runs in the cloud, so staff can work from home or on the road using the same tools and apps and remain perfectly in sync with colleagues. Transurban even uses Cisco AI services, such as real-time translation and transcriptions during meetings. Overall, it's a fantastic demonstration of how work life can be optimised.

We at Cisco use our own tools, of course, as we have a large employee base who work remotely. I can reveal Cisco Webex Teams has improved employee engagement by 16 per cent. We've realised $490 million in operational efficiencies and have seen $811 million in estimated value in

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THE FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF A REMOTE WORKFORCE

Webex drives real estate and operational savings

18%
increase in remote workforce

36%
decrease in real estate portfolio

260
buildings closed

$490m
realised in operational efficiencies (USD)

Cisco 2019

Q&A
Expert tips on remote working

Lorrissa Horton, vice president and general manager of Webex Teams, advises on how work is what you do and not where you go

Q What are you most passionate about?

A I am passionate about enabling people to work anywhere and anytime. In today's world it's actually possible to get just as much done with a globally distributed team as a group of people who physically work together in the same office. Mobile devices and the app ecosystem have changed our expectations of what we can do from the palm of our hand. I now expect to be able to do anything from my phone that I used to only access or accomplish at work from nine to five. With the help of new devices, my team is able to do distributed whiteboarding sessions and engage in such high-quality audio and video interactions that we don't feel the need to be in the same physical location, instead we all connect from the comfort of our homes. When our daily lives are back to a new normal after COVID-19, mobile apps can help us get so much more done while we're in transit, like in the car, on the way to the airport, in the airport and even on the plane. Work becomes what you do and not where you go, and that's a real game-changer.

Q What are the benefits of remote working?

A Clearly, there are several benefits, but I'll start with the most relevant ones given the global crisis of COVID-19. When employees cannot physically go into the office due to illness or the spread of the virus, remote working creates a safe and flexible option to get work done. It keeps work moving outside the walls of a corporate facility to ensure business continuity while also becoming a huge competitive advantage. Jon Townsend, chief information officer at the National Trust, says: "It's important that our people have that same seamless experience wherever they are, if they're working at home or in partner locations." A healthy workforce and culture are essential for a thriving business. Speaking of wellbeing, there is the added benefit of work-life balance that can be achieved from remote working. For me personally, remote work empowers me to do what I love in life. I lead the global organisation that is responsible for Cisco's Webex Teams. At the same time, I'm a wife and a dedicated mother of two young children. One of the biggest advantages of remote working is the vast expansion of the talent pool that is now available for you to hire across the globe. As a leader I no longer have to compete for local talent, I can seek the best talent around the world and quickly integrate them into my team. As you can see, there are multiple benefits of remote working for both the organisation and employee.

Q Is Cisco doing anything to help businesses respond to COVID-19?

A Yes. As the global leader in meetings and video solutions, we have put together several programmes that enable businesses to quickly expand their collaboration footprint for remote workers for free. We also developed a Cisco Webex Business Continuity Resource page to support them in the process. These resources help IT admins quickly set up remote work, and end-users easily transition to remote work and the new way of operating from home. All this information is readily available on Webex.com.

Q Aside from COVID-19, what are other drivers for remote working?

A As the millennial workforce has continued to grow, we are finding the deciding factors for being able to hire the best talent is not only based on the best salary, but the companies that will enable workers to produce their best work in the most flexible ways possible. Being ready for remote work means you have the infrastructure to ensure anyone can get their work done, at any time, from anywhere, making it easier to attract this talent pool.

Q What can businesses do now to enable remote working?

A First off, believe that productive remote work is possible. Prior to Cisco, it was hard for me to imagine getting as much done in my home office as the office I commuted to every single day. To enable this remote productivity, you need to make an investment in the right applications, devices and platform that will set your teams up for success. It's absolutely necessary to invest in laptops, high-quality audio and video-conferencing, messaging and good headsets. The tools need to be easy enough to use that users don't need a lot of support, while still providing the compliance and security needed to run your business. Another important aspect of remote working is taking the time to build comradery within your team so you can build trust and overall a high-performing team. When you don't see each other every day in person, it's necessary to communicate things that were previously easy to see like, being out for lunch, busy on a call or just taking a quick break. Lastly, don't forget to celebrate your accomplishments as a team, even if you're not altogether. At the end of the day, it's about modernising the work experience so employees can get work done anytime and anywhere, making work what you do and not where you go.

incremental productivity. We've also been named the number-one best place to work in the world by research organisation Great Place to Work, out of 8,000 corporations.

Not only is the workplace transforming, it is also evolving. By 2025, three quarters of the workforce will be millennials and 91 per cent of millennials say they expect to stay in a job for less than three years. A remarkable 82 per cent say workplace technology would influence their ability to accept a new job. In other words, if you don't offer a modern collaboration experience, you risk losing the war for talent. The return on investment for modernising the workplace is superb. Research by MIT shows the payback of investing in the employee experience as profits increase by 25 per cent and customer satisfaction is doubled.

This is why I choose to work in this field. We are helping companies improve and transform the way they work, while enabling business continuity during this unprecedented time. Individuals become teams, able to collaborate across time zones and geographies. Projects move faster and meetings are productive, no matter how many people participate, or how complex the subject matter. That alone is worth celebrating.

The tools to enable your remote workforce are ready and waiting to be deployed. The real hurdles to overcome are mindset and the cultural shift that goes with it. Companies that are still running separate, isolated applications are now understanding why that is not enough. I urge you to listen to companies that have made the leap and join them. Once you experience what is possible, there is no going back.

For more information please visit webex.com/UK-remote-work.html

CISCO Webex

❝ For me personally, remote work empowers me to do what I love in life

SOFTWARE

Adapt or fail: navigating employee enterprise tools

New technology has made remote collaboration and communication easier, but being constantly contactable can come at the expense of productivity and connection

Rachel Muller-Heyndyk

O nce seen as a way to cut down on endless meetings and give us better control of our time, email is now looking a little antiquated in the workplace.

From project management tools that can plan our day by the minute to instant messaging platforms connecting colleagues across departments in seconds, enterprise software has offered businesses a far more sophisticated, agile and efficient means of communication.

But if businesses are looking for a fundamental way to improve employee engagement and people's working lives, there's no guarantee enterprise software will provide the answer.

The world is becoming increasingly dominated by social media and technology that gives instant access, but is this what employees want in their working lives? Or is employee enterprise software just another distraction from creating good work?

As many thousands of workers move away from their office to work from home during the coronavirus crisis, more than ever we need tools that help us communicate with our colleagues quickly, efficiently and sensitively.

A report from Gartner, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak: long and short-term actions for CIOs*, highlights just how vital enterprise software has become. One of the company's recommendations is that employers must expand its digital workplaces and access. Identifying potential risks to security, updating policies and access training, and providing new technological capabilities, such as video calls, messaging and collaboration tools, all play a role.

"This really should be a wake-up call for organisations that spend too much time focusing on daily operational needs at the expense of investing in digital business and long-term resilience," says Sandy Shen, senior digital analyst at Gartner.

"There's also an opportunity for CIOs [chief information officers] to get to the top of the table with this, through working closely with human resources. You need to come up with a technology-enabled business plan. In these situations, WhatsApp and Facebook Work and other platforms can be helpful, but you have to take every step to ensure it's secure and used properly."

Long before the rates of home-working skyrocketed, there were already many clear, profitable benefits to introducing this kind of tech.

The theory behind the use of Slack and other enterprise software is similar to that of an open-plan office. It is designed to make communication far more open, to erode hierarchies and give teams a better sense of connection. Putting this into practice, however, isn't so simple.

For example, RescueTime, which provides time management advice and tools, noted that out of the ten hours employees spend sitting at their screens each day, half of those are on chat messaging apps like Slack, Teams and Workplace. Notably, it also found that employees had not spent less time communicating with each other than they had done six years ago.

"The aim of these apps should be that people are spending less time on communicating, but if we look at the impact these tools are having, it can be a lot less impressive than we'd like. We need to think really critically about how we use these tools," says Robby McDonnell, chief executive at RescueTime.

There's also the issue of constant messaging breaking up flow or focus. Getting 45 to 50 messages a day can make it much harder to get the intense periods of focus employees want.

On average, information workers spend three minutes on any single task before being interrupted or switching to another, according to a Microsoft study shared with Recode, which used wearable sensors and computer-tracking software. Multitaskers can experience a 40 per cent decrease in productivity, according to Microsoft.

This kind of multitasking means there's a risk that instead of doing one thing well, you could actually just be switching between activities and doing them all poorly. As McDonnell sums up: "Just because you have a lot more of something, or it's a lot faster, doesn't necessarily make it better."

As well as avoiding an influx of communication through enterprise software, businesses might need to look at exactly how they monitor its use.

It's often said that businesses should focus on technology and the workplace experience through looking at consumers. As people would expect instant streaming services for entertainment and a quick way to connect with family and friends, it's not unreasonable to expect the same experience at work.

But the Economist Intelligence Unit found these sorts of systems can lead to discrepancies and occasional upset in workplace communication as some 31 per cent of millennials use instant messaging to communicate with colleagues and clients, compared to just 12 per cent of employees over the age of 55, for example.

The research suggests this can have serious implications for workplaces as poor communications can lead to stressful work environments,
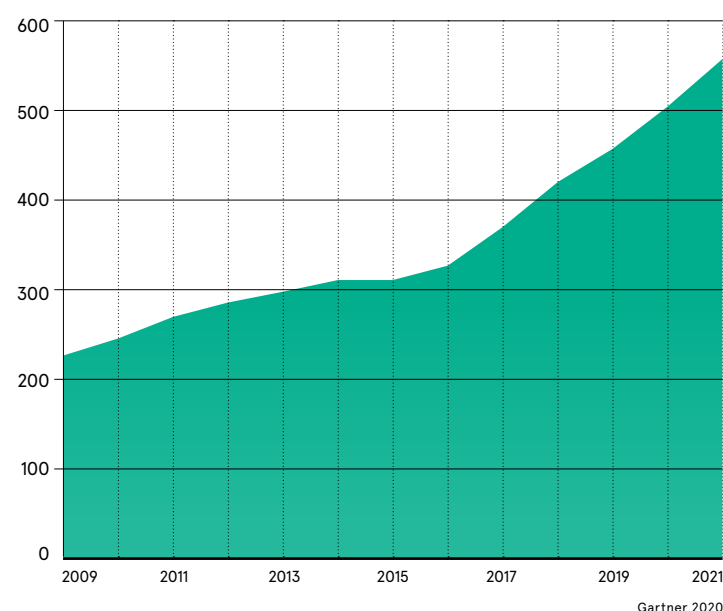
66

This really should be a wake-up call for organisations that spend too much time focusing on daily operational needs at the expense of investing in digital business and long-term resilience

ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE SPEND CONTINUES TO SOAR

Global IT spending on enterprise software ($bn)

600
500
400
300
200
100
0

2009 2011 2013 2015 2017 2019 2021

Gartner 2020

stalled careers, missed performance goals and lost sales.

But Adrian Furnham, principal behavioural psychologist at Stamford Associates, says these fears might be exaggerated: "For so many, instant messaging has become the primary way of communicating; think about how many people would rather get in touch via a text than a phone call?

"There's perhaps a risk that older people might struggle, but even they're catching on a lot more quickly to technology with some encouragement."

Better internal communication should be more about carefully communicated targets and feedback. Furnham concludes: "The best thing to focus on will always be outcomes. It's best just to make clear what needs to get done and explain if there's a problem. How you get there doesn't matter." ●

freestocks/unsplash
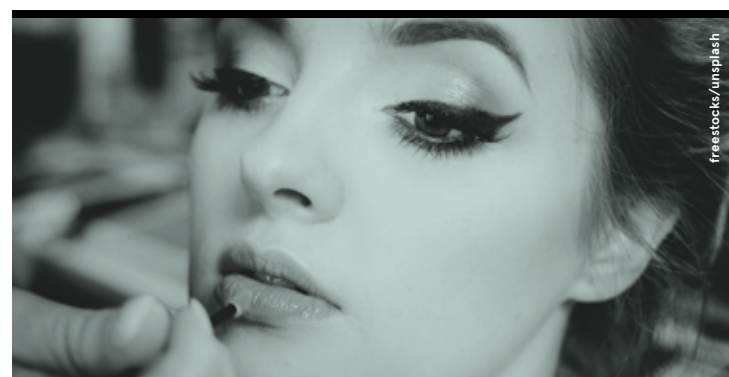
Clarins UK Group

As many as 84 per cent of Clarins UK Group employees work remotely on retail beauty counters all over the UK. With such a geographically dispersed team, there was a clear need to provide a solution that could connect them, give them a voice and enable information exchange to underpin future growth.

While head office and field management teams were using email to stay in touch, there was no way to connect frontline retail employees, apart from the traditional cascade from management teams. This meant frontline employees didn't have the same level of access to internal communication as everyone else.

James Deren, internal communications manager at Clarins UK Group, says since using the Workplace from Facebook collaboration tool, employees have felt as though they've had a greater sense of purpose and employee voice.

"Workplace has given everyone at Clarins UK Group a voice," he says. "Two-way communication and engagement is now more agile and there is great collaboration with shared content across brands that inspires innovation. After just five months since deploying Workplace, we saw a reduction in employee turnover by 2 per cent and we believe Workplace is a contributory factor."

Deren also found that Workplace's use of employee recognition badges had helped to give frontline staff feel as though they're efforts were being both noticed and rewarded. "We're excited about developing a recognition strategy beyond the traditional channels that incorporates the use of badges to acknowledge exceptional performance," he says.

Flawless audio is central to future collaboration

Virtual meetings are already an essential business function and are only set to grow in prominence during the years ahead, however companies are consistently beset by audio issues

The world's remote workforce has grown enormously in recent years, fuelled by globalisation and the proliferation of cloud-based IT solutions. Nearly a quarter of Britain's employees now work flexibly across different locations, according to Lloyds Bank. This figure continues to rise as companies embrace benefits, which include cost-savings, greater agility, higher staff satisfaction and enhanced information-sharing across locations, not to mention connecting with previously hard-to-reach customers.
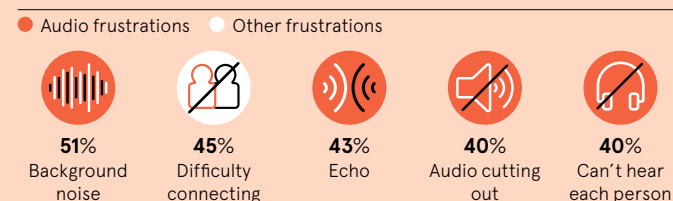
The increasingly dispersed workforce has accelerated use of virtual collaboration tools as an alternative to face-to-face meetings, with employees now using an average of five different tools to do their jobs. Seven in ten meetings are already virtual and nine out of ten employees say they're imperative to the success of their organisation, according to a survey by Illuminas, commissioned by Shure Incorporated.

In a business landscape currently affected by the need for staff to work from home, virtual meetings become even more important; vital, in fact, to business continuity.
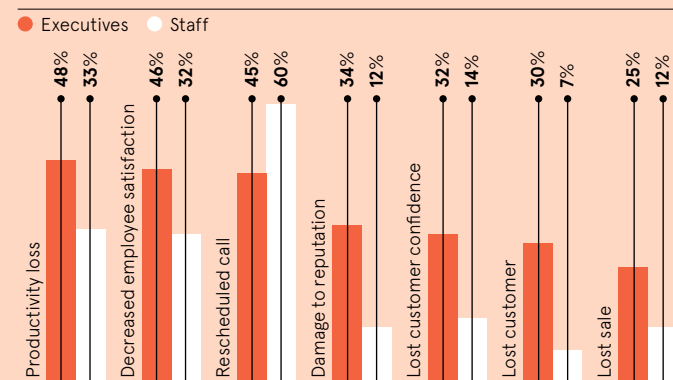
However, the same study found that 96 per cent of professionals are frustrated with their virtual meetings and four out of their five main frustrations relate to audio: background noise, echo, sound cutting out and not being able to hear the other meeting participants. As a result of technical issues, 82 per cent said they have experienced negative consequences, including rescheduled calls, damage to brand reputation or loss of customer trust.

These technical issues are happening so frequently that four in ten employees are escalating them on a weekly, if not daily, basis, regularly requiring the time and assistance of more than half of IT professionals. Executives are twice as likely to worry about the consequences, with more than 40 per cent of them feeling personal

TOP 5 VIDEO CONFERENCING FRUSTRATIONS

● Audio frustrations   ○ Other frustrations

| 51% Background noise | 45% Difficulty connecting | 43% Echo | 40% Audio cutting out | 40% Can't hear each person |

BUSINESS IMPACT OF TECHNICAL ISSUES

● Executives   ○ Staff

	Executives	Staff
Productivity loss	48%	33%
Decreased employee satisfaction	46%	32%
Rescheduled call	45%	60%
Damage to reputation	34%	12%
Lost customer confidence	32%	14%
Lost customer	30%	7%
Lost sale	25%	12%

disappointment and embarrassment, which means they report experiencing technical issues even more.

According to the research, poor audio quality affects a third of virtual meetings. Flawless audio quality is four times more important than video to meeting attendees.

"Audio is often the most overlooked element of a successful virtual meeting because typically you don't get the feedback, know how you sound from the other side or have a good perception of how that conversation is going," says Rob Smith, senior director at Shure Incorporated, which has more than 90 years' experience developing best-in-class audio products that provide high-quality and seamless performance and reliability.

Shure's diverse product line includes wired and wireless microphones, networked audio systems and signal processors, conferencing and discussion systems, earphones and headphones.

"Many people just accept that poor audio quality in video conferencing is the way things are, but the reality is there are far better options out there," says Smith. "When installing video conferencing systems, companies need to ensure audio is thoroughly thought through and part of the overall solution. By investing in technology from the likes of Shure, you can enable an almost face-to-face experience for your remote workforce and customers.

User behaviour should drive technology, not the other way around.

"Video conferencing is most effective when it's frictionless. It just works. That's what we enable with our world-class audio products. It's time to put an end to poor audio quality."

As organisations increasingly look to embrace smart technologies and innovations such as artificial intelligence and machine-learning in their collaboration strategies, it's crucial they are first able to achieve a flawless audio experience.

Shure advises companies to provide training for users on existing tools so they can use them more effectively, and to embrace technology and equipment that make it a user-friendly environment. The future of business will no doubt be dominated by virtual meetings, but laying the foundations must start with prioritising investment in the area that will make the biggest difference to productivity: consistent, seamless and quality audio.

To download the full Illuminas/Shure report please visit everyvoice.shure.com

" It's time to put an end to poor audio quality

TALK TO THE BOT

They can boost customer loyalty, streamline routine communications and enhance employee productivity, but are chatbots really who we want to be talking to? Does the fact that users are twice as likely to use them for retail as for financial services point to a lack of trust in chatbots, or are we simply not used to them yet?

$800m

market revenue for call centre artificial intelligence in 2019

Markets and Markets 2019

$2.2bn

forecasted size of global chatbot market by 2024

Zion Market Research 2018

HOW CHATBOTS ARE ALREADY HELPING BUSINESSES

The business areas where executives have implemented conversational bots to date worldwide

1. **77%** After-sales and customer service
2. **54%** Customer relationship management
3. **40%** Sales and marketing
4. **11%** Audit, finance and accounts
5. **8%** Human resources
6. **8%** Finance
7. **5%** Supply chain
8. **3%** R&D/product development
9. **3%** Manufacturing
10. **3%** ICT
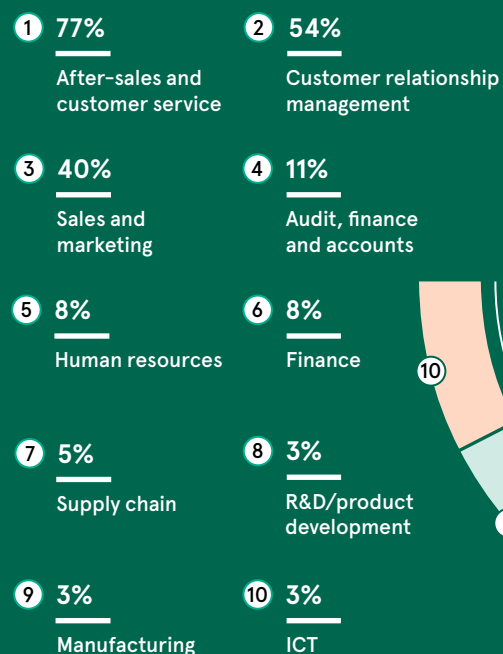
Accenture 2018

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHATBOT CHALLENG

What adults in the US say they don't like about chatbots

51% Keeps me from a live person

48% Too many unhelpful responses

40% Redirects to self-service FAQs
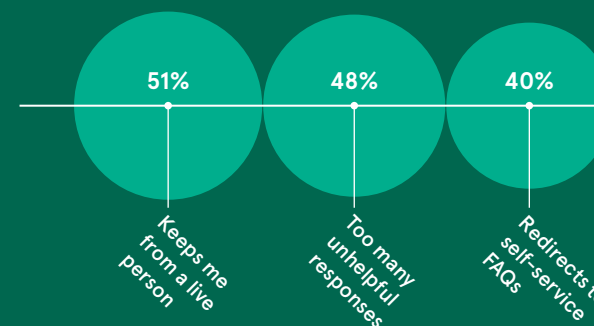
WHERE CONSUMERS ARE REALLY USING CHATBOTS

Share of consumers who have used chatbots to engage with companies, by industry

Industry	%
Retailers	40%
Healthcare	22%
Utilities	21%
Entertainment	20%
Financial services	20%
Vacation/travel	16%
Software	14%
Government	9%
News media	9%
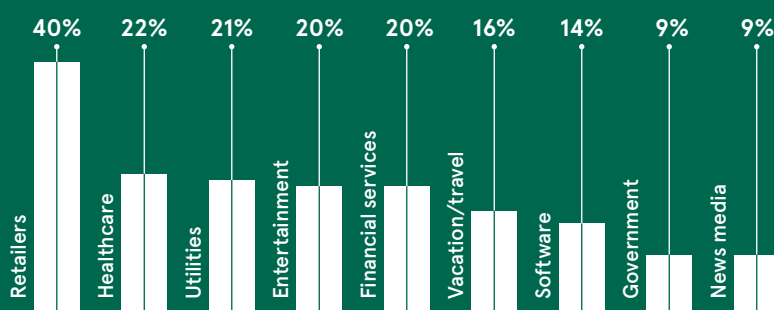
Drift 2019

HOW DO ORGANISATIONS USE CHATBOTS?

Global customer service agents and decision-makers on how they are currently using AI chatbots

	%
Self-service in simple scenarios	78%
Gathering initial information about a service case before handing off to an agent	77%
Providing agents with guidance and recommendations as they handle cases	71%
Greeting customers when they call	67%
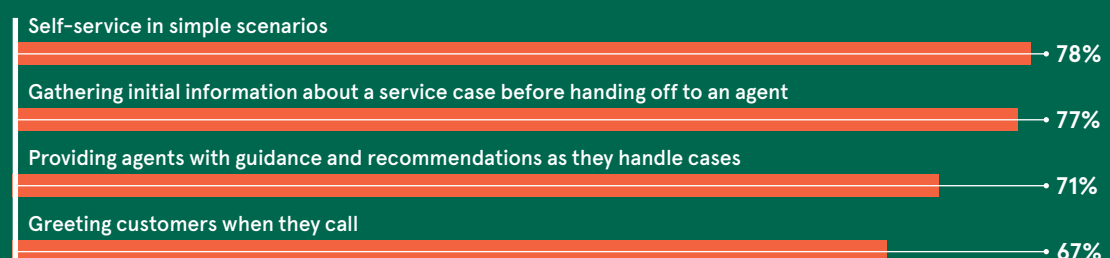
Salesforce Research 2019

THE POWER OF CHATBOTS

How executives expect conversational bots to help their organisations

	%
Enhance employee productivity by automatically following up on scheduled tasks	61%
Improve ability to handle client queries by networking with other bots	60%
Deliver personalised attention to clients/visitors to the website by being more conversational	57%
Facilitate more effective communication within the organisation	57%
Improve customer acquisition/retention by guiding web/tele-calling customers through the order process	54%

Accenture 2018

A GOOD CHATBOT EXPERIENCE CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Consumer responses to positive experiences with voice/chat assistants worldwide

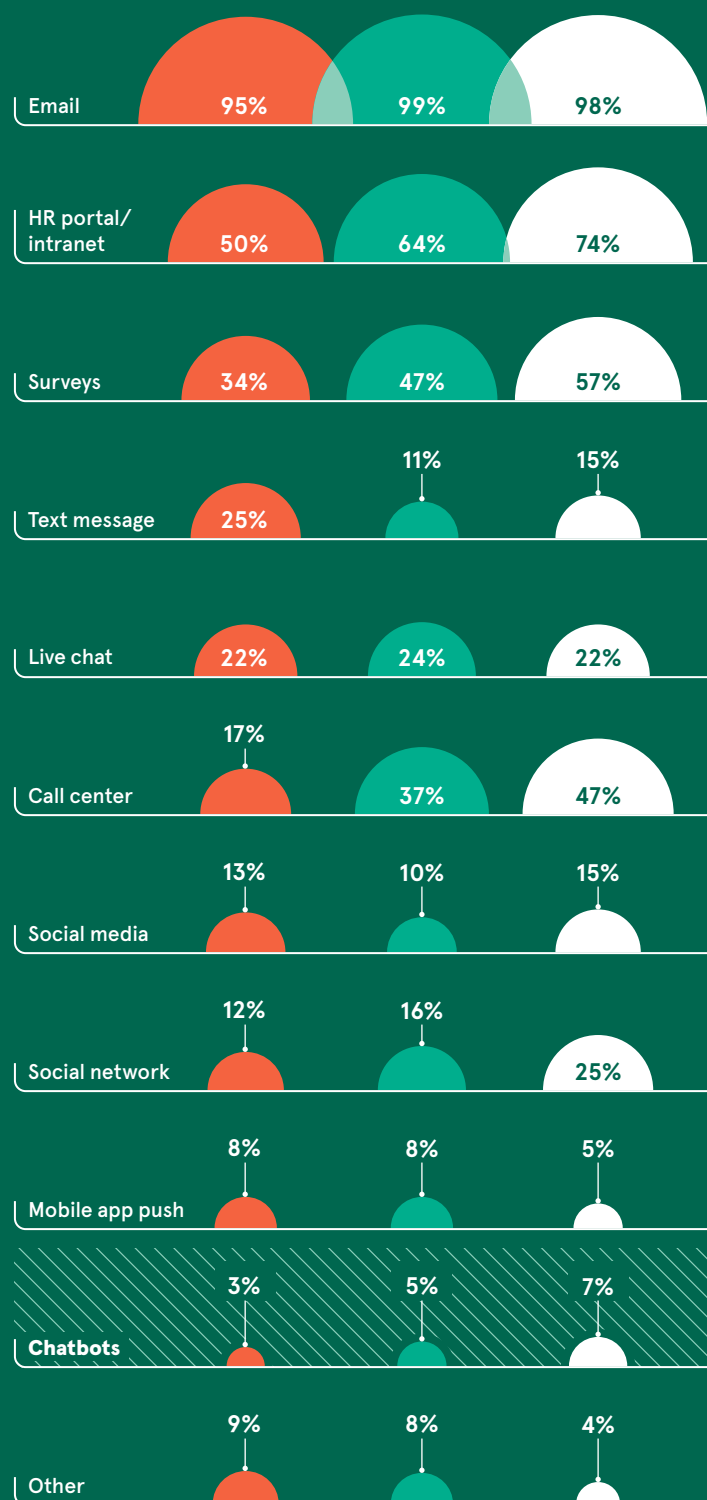|	%
Place higher trust in the company	72%
Share positive experiences with friends and family	71%
Provide high ratings for the brand and shared positive feedback on social media	64%
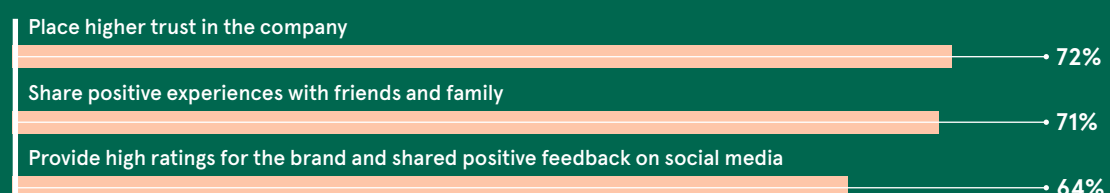
Capgemini 2019

CHATBOTS ARE STILL NOT COMPANIES' COMMUNICATION METHOD OF CHOICE

Examining communicated methods of HR shared services worldwide, segmented by company size
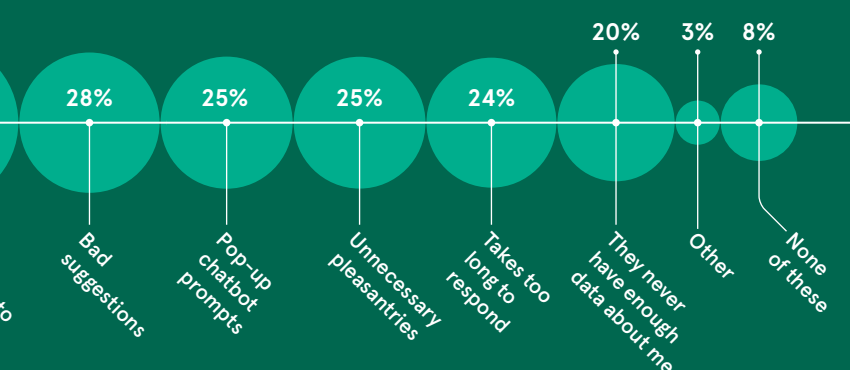
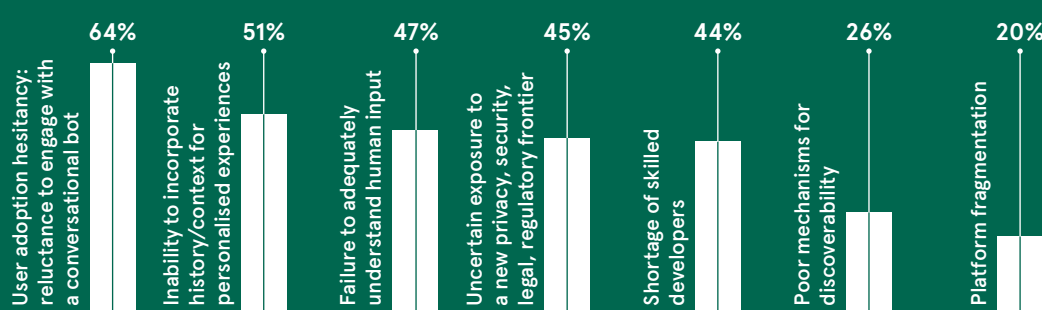● Small business ● Medium business ● Large business

Method	Small business	Medium business	Large business
Email	95%	99%	98%
HR portal/intranet	50%	64%	74%
Surveys	34%	47%	57%
Text message	25%	11%	15%
Live chat	22%	24%	22%
Call center	17%	37%	47%
Social media	13%	10%	15%
Social network	12%	16%	25%
Mobile app push	8%	8%	5%
Chatbots	3%	5%	7%
Other	9%	8%	4%

Sierra-Cedar 2019

...ES?

Propeller Insights 2018

	%
	28%
Bad suggestions	25%
Pop-up chatbot prompts	25%
Unnecessary pleasantries	24%
Takes too long to respond	20%
They never have enough data about me	3%
Other	8%
None of these	

NOT EVERY ORGANISATION IS SOLD ON CHATBOTS

Accenture 2018

Reasons cited by executives as to why their companies are not planning to implement chatbots

	%
User adoption hesitancy; reluctance to engage with a conversational bot	64%
Inability to incorporate history/context for personalised experiences	51%
Failure to adequately understand human input	47%
Uncertain exposure to a new privacy, security, legal, regulatory frontier	45%
Shortage of skilled developers	44%
Poor mechanisms for discoverability	26%
Platform fragmentation	20%

Commercial feature

How to get serious about CX and EX

A single communications platform can transform and improve both customer and employee experience

THE COST OF PROVIDING POOR OR BAD CX

41%
of customers stopped using product/service after having to repeat themselves over and over

41%
stopped using product/ service after being passed from rep to rep

88%
hate having to repeat themselves when going through multiple channels/contacts

GETTING TO THE ROOT CAUSE

● Agent-customer interaction   ○ Agent-co-worker interaction

Facing customer resistance to communicate via what mode agent is using
70%

Constantly toggling between applications to resolve customer needs
74%

Making customers go through longer-than-needed service times
77%

Difficult to navigate across platforms to answer customer queries
70%

Have to leave app being used with customer to communicate with co-workers
71%

Have to put customers on hold to query co-workers when help is needed
78%

MAKING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN EX AND CX

● When communications are disjointed   ○ When communications are integrated

Negatively impacts employees
90%

Negatively impacts customer satisfaction and the bottom line
89%

Negatively affects workflow and job satisfaction
88%

Would improve customer satisfaction scores
92%

Would make it easier for employees to keep customers happy
92%

Would improve both the employee and the customer experience
92%

Cyberpunk author William Gibson once said: "The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed." All companies know that improving employee experience (EX) and customer experience (CX) is critical. But cutting-edge companies are already demonstrating what is possible.

One forward thinker is Pharmacy2U, which helps 240,000 people manage their NHS repeat prescriptions. The company faced sky-rocketing demand and each customer had raised expectations of how they would be treated.

"We are adding around 7,000 patients per week, which is the equivalent of 16 new high street pharmacies opening each month, and our aim is to allow people to contact us using the method that suits them best, whether that's by phone, email or webchat," says Andy Williams, director of customer care for Pharmacy2U.

The problem with the old system was fragmentation. A conversation via email was independent to a talk over webchat. Text messages were isolated from voice conversations. There was no single customer record. As a result customers repeated themselves as they moved from one channel to the next. Pharmacy2U wanted to re-engineer processes to deliver a new level of CX. It needed a system that combined all channels into one. So it opted for a cloud-based communications platform by RingCentral.

RingCentral enables customers to contact Pharmacy2U via any channel of their choosing: voice, chat, SMS, email and more. Intelligent voice-routing and self-service ensures calls are connected to the right person first time. Pharmacy2U have also been able to shift to a complete remote-working model due to the flexibility of the cloud-based solution from RingCentral in response to the current government guidelines to stay at home.

"With RingCentral, we have an innovative and industry-proven platform that will allow us to deliver a truly unified communication experience and continue to deliver the highest levels of customer service while driving efficiency across the business," says Williams.

The deployment reveals the power of a unified communications system. CX is transformed. But it's worth noting how a unified system also improves the live of employees.

The daily experience of a worker can be filled with a plethora of tiny annoyances. Chief of which is the necessity to flick between apps all day. In every company there's a suite of apps: email, team messaging, voice, video-conferencing, customer relationship management (CRM) and so on. Companies want to improve EX and addressing this fragmentation is a critical place to start.

BMJ, a leading UK medical information company, faced exactly this challenge. BMJ says: "With so many international and flexible working staff, and an ever-increasing number of communication tools to support them, we needed a centrally managed, easy-to-deploy, global cloud communications solution."

The company installed RingCentral Office to fuse all working apps together. "RingCentral Office enables our team to communicate using any device, across any mode of communication, from anywhere. Choosing RingCentral was a unanimous decision from our executive board as it meets all of our criteria and the company shares our key values of openness, transparency and trust, which is a vital part of our business culture," says BMJ.
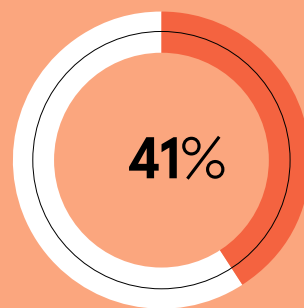
For example, phone-calling, HD video-conferencing, contact-sharing, file-sharing and team messaging are now integrated across applications. A worker can start a video conference with a single click from within Salesforce, or start a call using contact details stored in G Suite or Outlook, or anywhere else. Comms tools are now universal across apps.

File-sharing is seamless. RingCentral team messaging means files can be shared with colleagues with a click, no matter which application it's stored in. The days of leaping from app to app are gone.
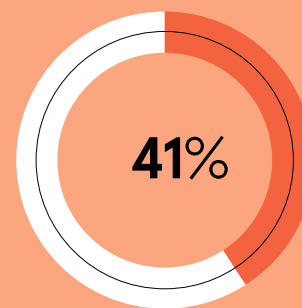
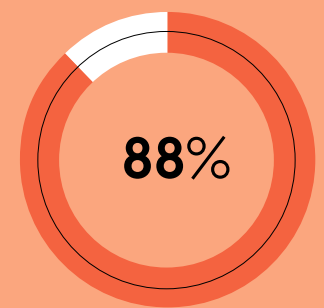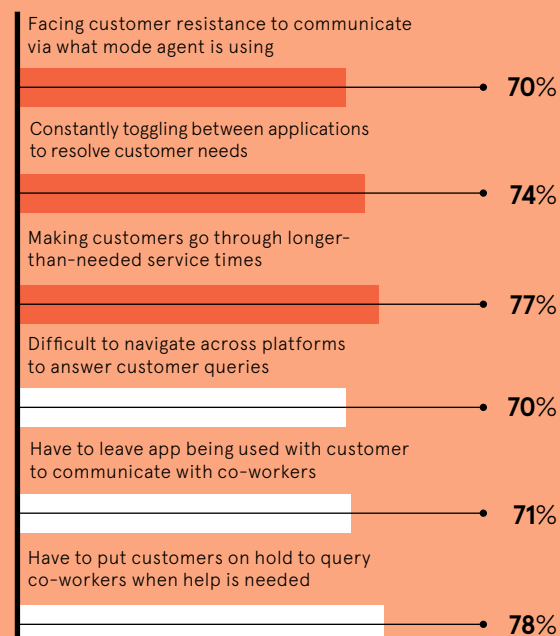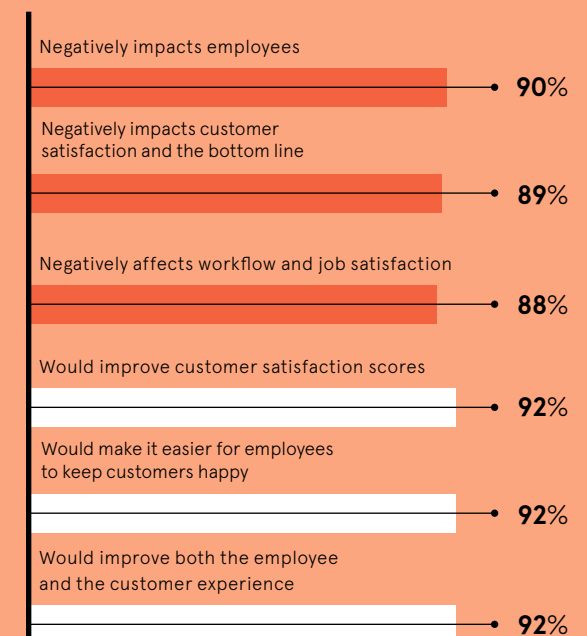Survey data reveals how important the issue of fragmented tools is to employees across business: 74 per cent say they toggle between apps to resolve customer issues; 88 per cent say disjointed apps lower productivity and job satisfaction; and 89 per cent say broken workflows impact the bottom line. These concerns are solved with a unified communications platform.

There are extra EX benefits. RingCentral is a cloud-based system. So generating new telephone numbers in more than 80 countries can be done in seconds via a web interface. A new employee can be up and running with their own number the moment they arrive on day one.

As a cloud-hosted solution, RingCentral works equally well across PC, laptop, mobile and tablet. Employees can now decide where to work, at home, in a café or anywhere in the office, while remaining connected to colleagues. Another EX enhancement.

Companies of all sizes can benefit. For a mid-sized company such as Naked Wines, the online wine retailer, a new platform from RingCentral changed the way their team works. And being cloud based, it was simple to install.

"Not having to worry about the telephones means I can get on and do IT work and the phones just work," says Derek Hardy, chief technology officer at Naked Wines.

The company now enjoys a feature-rich platform for a fraction of the cost of a traditional phone system. For example, RingCentral Live Reports offers real-time performance analytics, so the Naked Wines management team can rebalance staff members on call queues. Hardy says: "Live Reports really helps us shine a light and get visibility into what's coming our way and proactively plan our staffing based on these patterns and call volume forecasts."

Naturally, achieving truly unified communications is a technical feat. The variety of tools used by companies is significant. It is necessary to include applications from enterprise resource planning systems such as NetSuite, CRM packages like Zendesk and Oracle, marketing tools including Mailchimp and Built.io. A pioneer in the field such as RingCentral offers integration with these and more as standard. Custom integrations are possible via cloud application programming interfaces and software development kits.

"We offer carrier-grade telephony," says Sahil Rekhi, managing director, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at RingCentral. "Our service-level agreement is five nines [99.999 per cent] uptime. AT&T, BT and Telus offer a RingCentral branded product, and we are partners with Avaya, Atos and Fujitsu to name a few to provide unified communication solutions to their customers. So when we say we are the world leader, this is simply a reflection of the market."

CX and EX are critical to the success of all companies. Employees want the productivity gains. And customers increasingly expect a slick experience, no matter what channel they use. A unified communications platform lies at the heart of both.

"When we say we are the world leader, this is simply a reflection of the market

To find out more please visit ringcentral.co.uk
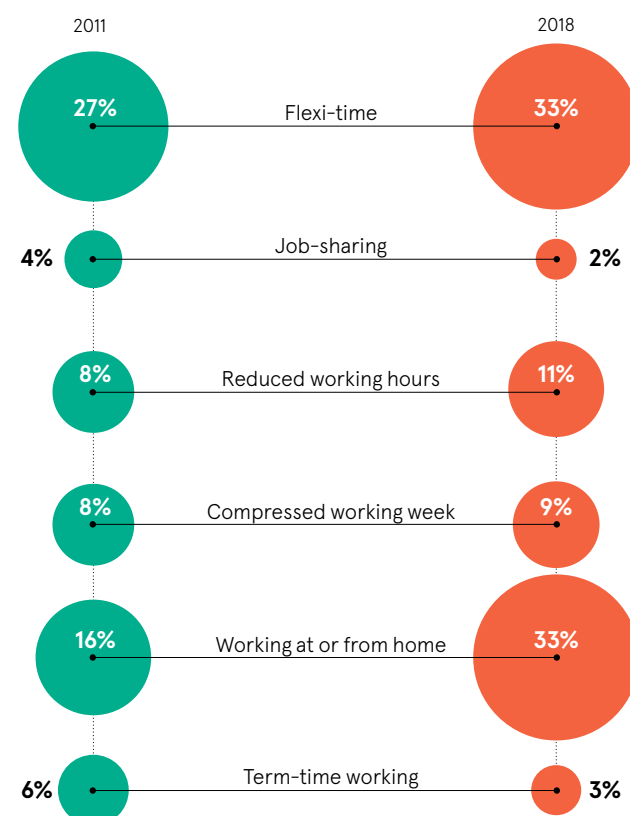
RingCentral®

Cavan Images/Getty Images

UK WORKERS MAKING MORE USE OF FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICIES THAN EVER BEFORE

Percentage of employees with job tenure of 12 or more months on the available flexible working arrangements they have used

	2011	2018
Flexi-time	27%	33%
Job-sharing	4%	2%
Reduced working hours	8%	11%
Compressed working week	8%	9%
Working at or from home	16%	33%
Term-time working	6%	3%

CIPD 2019

There's no workplace like home

As the coronavirus spreads across the globe, forcing more people to work from home, has the outbreak kickstarted the world's largest workplace experiment?

Alex Wilson

The Chinese capital of Beijing is a famously awful place to commute. For Eva, who has recently had to start remote working, the change has largely been a welcome one. A business development manager for a local business accelerator, she has been able to keep in touch with her team through a schedule of regular video meetings and feels if anything her workday has become more productive. But the boundaries between work and home life are becoming increasingly blurred.

While people across the UK began working from home, many for the first time, in mid-March, millions of Chinese workers have been encouraged to stay away from the office since the beginning of the year in a bid to contain the COVID-19 virus. The result? The world's largest experiment in remote working. So what can we learn from this unprecedented event and is the world of work really about to change forever?

For Chinese employees, the experience of remote working has been mixed. Cassie, a marketing manager based in Shanghai, says one major positive has been spending more time with her children. Since starting to work from home at the beginning of February, she's now able to read them a bedtime story every night, something that was rarely possible before.

For Daft, a software project manager based in Shenyang, working remotely has been difficult. His work requires expensive specialist equipment, such as virtual reality headsets, which he is not able to access at home.

His girlfriend Mandy, a computer programmer working on software for a major international car manufacturer, has also struggled. For security reasons, she has not been allowed to remove her work computer from the office. Instead, she has had to use a company VPN to control it remotely from her laptop at home. The comparatively low internet speeds available have made this process slow and frustrating.

While other firms have struggled, Eva believes her employer has managed the crisis well because it has reacted uncommonly quickly. As soon as awareness of the virus became widespread, the company's management began working on a detailed plan for how employees could complete their daily tasks from home.

This included specifics such as what collaboration tools teams should use and how best to divide tasks among individuals. During the first week of remote working, staff participated in online training courses on how to use the company's remote working tools and were tested on their understanding.

A factor helping Chinese companies is the already widespread use of workforce communication tools, such as WeChat Enterprise. Many companies have also turned to the productivity app DingTalk, which has become the most downloaded free app in China's iOS app store. Workers have been using Western programs, such as Microsoft Lync, to communicate with colleagues and clients overseas. Similar communication tools, such as Slack, Zoom and Microsoft Teams, exist outside of China, although the scale of adoption across Western companies varies wildly.

Due to China's hierarchical work culture, many managers in the country demand that workers clock in and clock out, and require regular check-in meetings to ensure staff are not shirking their responsibilities.

However, employees say this damages staff morale and is ineffective; some workers admitted waking up to digitally clock in, only to immediately go back to bed. Instead, they feel managers would be better off trusting workers and allowing them flexibility, appraising the quality of their work, rather than being concerned about when the work was done.

The experience of workers in China shows that physical work spaces are unlikely to become a thing of the past. Offices allow companies to develop relationships and cultures that are difficult to replicate digitally. In cramped and expensive cities, many workers will also not have access to the space, facilities and equipment they take for granted in the office. Working away from the office full time also increases the risk of loneliness and other mental health issues.

The most likely long-term change is that for some workers there are more opportunities to work remotely for some of the time. The COVID-19 outbreak presents managers with an opportunity to see which parts of the business remain effective during a period of remote working. For jobs and teams whose performance is largely unaffected, bosses are likely to be more open to arrangements that see employees work part of the week in the office and part of the week at home.

As remote working becomes more popular, companies will also have to adapt their physical spaces to the needs of workers who might only use them for part of the working week.

"If people want and are able to stay home more, then what is the office for?" asks Claire Stephens, strategy director for Greater China at Gensler, a design and architecture firm. She believes offices will exist for a remote workforce as "a place to connect with company culture and collaborate with colleagues, clients and partners". But they will also be a place "to go and focus and get work done if employees face distractions at home".

For most offices, this is likely to mean fewer work stations and more space devoted to meetings, events, training and socialising. It is also likely to mean a reduction in space overall.

Encouraged by the way they've adapted to the coronavirus crisis, Eva's company plans to move to a part-time remote working arrangement, which will see employees taking turns to work from home for part of the week. The company sees this as a way of reducing the amount of office space they need to rent and also a way to help working parents better manage their family lives.

Eva says she hopes this new model will be effective, but harbours doubts whether a shift to more remote working will be sustainable in the long run. She is unlikely to be the only one asking this question over the coming months. ●

> **Offices allow companies to develop relationships and cultures that are difficult to replicate digitally**

Simplifying control in the back office is key to transformation

Organisations are eager to transform their business to keep up with rapid changes in the marketplace, but they are being held back by visibility and complexities in the back office

WORK@HOME BY THE NUMBERS

1/3
of companies expect the independent workforce to rise over next five to ten years
Deloitte

84%
of companies view people analytics as important or very important
Deloitte

115%
increase in the number of full-time telecommuting employees since 2005
Global Workplace Analytics

>60%
of executives believe they are behind with digital transformation

Only **52%** rate their digital IQs as strong
McKinsey

Compared with non-resilient operations, resilient operations grew TRS by... **150%**

...and EBITDA by... **15%**

M arket forces and competitive pressures facing businesses have accelerated drastically in recent years. Customer expectations are evolving and the mechanisms through which people want to interact with companies are expanding. Meanwhile, lower barriers to entry are enabling startups to disrupt marketplaces, driven by an agility they are born with in the cloud, and regulations cause further complexities.

All the additional pressure on organisations is placing an alarming strain on back-office operations, which are often not agile enough to adapt in this fast-changing business landscape and respond to new risks and challenges. As a result, companies are increasingly realising they urgently need to transform and simplify their back office.

"It's hugely important because fundamentally it's where the rubber hits the road," says Richard Jeffery, chief executive of ActiveOps, a provider of digital operations management solutions. "As companies embrace digital transformation, they can promise the world, but ultimately they have to be able to execute. The back office is the point at which all those things come together and have to get done. The ability of an organisation to exploit its back office to deliver advantage will determine its future success."

Businesses that can be nimble because their operations are flexible and adaptable to changing specifications have a huge advantage in the digital age. However, it is common for large organisations to lack the visibility, efficiency and agility they require across their back-office operations to enable that nimbleness. Many have built up their workforce management toolkits over a long period and the strategies they have for controlling performance in their business were built in the 19th or 20th centuries.

These strategies, systems and protocols are no longer fit for purpose and companies are increasingly discovering that the controls they have in place don't work anymore because they can't operate at the speed or precision the business now requires. Back-office operations that lack agility and visibility will produce more waste and will struggle to respond when customers expect. According to ActiveOps, most organisations carry an average of between 14 and 20 per cent wasted capacity in their operations.

"That's the consequence of having the capacity locked into teams," says Jeffery. "However, back-office operations management has always been an amateur sport; it's not something which typically has been systemically addressed. Each different function has its own lingua franca for control. The demands of digital are requiring that to change and this is why so many companies are struggling. There's nothing wrong with their ability to implement new business processes, but they can't control them."

ActiveOps is a systemic solution for managing work capacity and simplifying the running of operations. Within most organisations are numerous localised or siloed ways of managing work, which result in inefficiencies and a lack of productivity. Workware+ from ActiveOps (operations management technology) provides the metrics and method for balancing work capacity. It is a simplifier in a world of growing business complexity, enabling organisations to act on their data quicker and control their operations more effectively regardless of the work location.

This simplification and control allows organisations to enhance their customer experience, improve their employee engagement and drive greater results for the business as they are able to respond faster to both challenges and opportunities in the marketplace. Through reducing all the complexity across the back office, ActiveOps has found that its platform can boost productivity by more than 25 per cent.
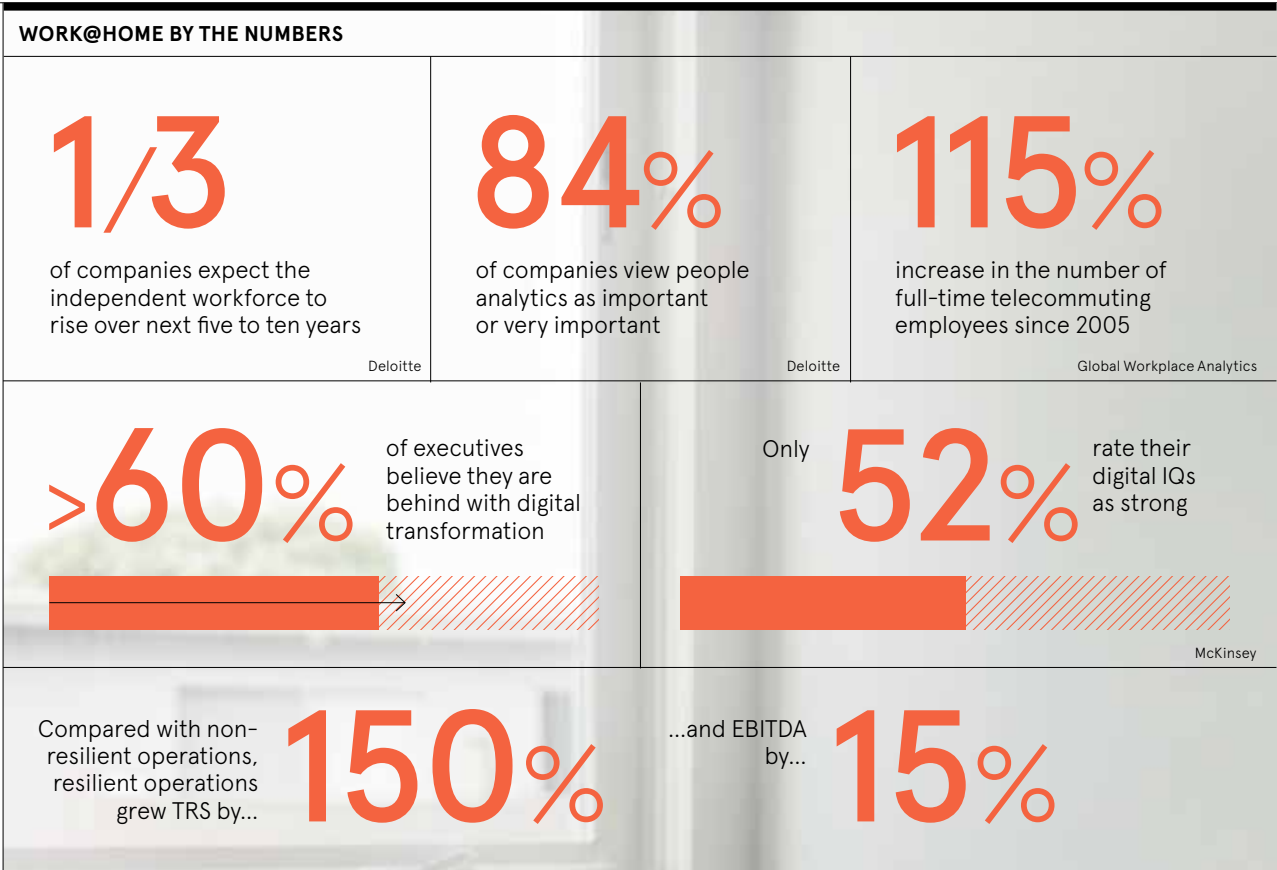
Organisations that achieve this and regain control in their back-office operations also achieve efficiency through better use of time, quality from staff having the time to complete tasks to the best of their abilities, and even a greater sense of wellbeing because employees know what is expected of them and can celebrate their successes.

"This manifests for customers because they get the products and services they want and can interact with companies through the channels they desire, and it also manifests for other stakeholders because the business is in control," says Jeffery. "As any psychologist will tell you, the biggest cause of stress is feeling out of control. By deploying ActiveOps, organisations, teams and individuals can better determine outcomes by knowing what's going to happen and being able to execute on that."

As the trend of self-service moves the function of business operations closer to the customer, the need for expertise at the centre of the organisation is only going to increase. This means the value of the resources in the back office will go up too, and the effectiveness of those resources and the ways organisations are able to deploy them will become more difficult to consolidate because expertise is required in different places.

When resources are dispersed, as they increasingly are in businesses, the control and visibility that ActiveOps provides becomes crucial. ActiveOps offers significant advantages to distributed work environments, particularly home workers, enabling businesses to operate seamlessly no matter what challenges they face.

If it's uneconomic to employ someone for a task that requires only half their time, companies need the visibility to allocate them to other tasks. They also need to be able to take advantage of the revolutionary artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic process automation tools in the market. Indeed, AI bots will power 85 per cent of customer service interactions this year, according to Gartner. But it requires systems that allow leaders to interpret and act on data, not drown in it.

"In the old world, you had a whole disparate bunch of systems where your people were working," Jeffery concludes. "Those will continue to be buried under the surface while getting more diverse, more complicated and more complex. ActiveOps provides the interface that enables operational and business leaders to simplify that. The control over those devices is the differentiator, not your ability to pay for a new mainframe."

For more information please visit activeops.com

> "The ability of an organisation to exploit its back office to deliver advantage will determine its future success

ActiveOps
Manage Differently

Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

GENERATIONAL WORKING

Making tech work for all ages

Workforces now often comprise up to five generations, each with different approaches to technology. Simply writing off the older generations is a mistake

Peter Crush

When equity partner David Jones recently led a management buy-in at Glaisyers Solicitors, he was acutely aware that the firm's age profile, from 16-year apprentices through to septuagenarians, would impact his plans for the organisation.

He had decided to introduce a cloud-based customer relationship and case management system that would transform the way some people worked. "We couldn't not do it. But for some of our older workers, the change probably hastened their retirement," Jones concedes.

For many chief executives, the parallel emergence of five generations in the workforce, plus the need to implement technological change, will inevitably see stereotypical views about the age of workers and the way they respond to technology rise to the fore.

And you don't need to look hard to see the reams of data that purports to prove it: how a fifth of workers aged 25 to 34 regularly use WhatsApp and Skype at work, but just 5.6 and 6.8 per cent of those over 55 do, according to Maintel report *Bringing order to communications chaos*. While the *Gen Z UK* report by Nintex finds Generation Z are extremely familiar with artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, and 62 per cent believe it enhances the workplace. But only 18 per cent of baby boomers say they feel informed and confident about new technology, according to a YouGov report on multigenerational working.

Stereotypes like these would matter less if they didn't then become self-fulfilling prophecies, but evidence seems to suggest they do. The same YouGov report finds half of companies do not have policies, particularly technology-based ones, that confront how different age groups collaborate.

Rufus Grig, chief strategy officer at Maintel, says: "Technologies are entering the workplace creating the potential for truly connected businesses. However, demographic differences can make it difficult for organisations to implement the most appropriate technology for communication and collaboration." So are businesses really at a crossroads?

"It's naive to think younger people don't consume technology differently," says Jenny Perkins, former non-executive director at Investors in People, now head of engagement at transformation consultancy Cirrus. "But as a coach to older executives on how to have digital mindsets, the stereotype that older people can't collaborate through technology often isn't right. I poll them and find senior people often have more apps on their phones than younger people because they're taking what they already do into the digital space.

"Where I think a problem does lie is in the fact there is still a lag in mindset. Older generations in the workforce tend to think tech is harder than it really is to deploy. It might have been in the past, but isn't now. They also want it to be 'perfect', while younger people are more willing to run with imperfect technology and just get on with it."

An often-ignored fact is younger people need just as much tutoring. Stephen Isherwood, chief executive at the Institute of Student Employers, which looks at how young people transition into workplaces, says: "The technology people find at work is often much different to the slick consumer tech they've been used to growing up. Where there's sometimes a disconnect is that employers expect new – young – entrants to be more tech savvy than they actually are."

For this reason, enlightened employers go for a more nuanced approach. Jones at Glaisyers Solicitors says: "What we actually found is that change, at any age, is difficult. We've realised that it's only when technology is allowed to stagnate that it becomes an issue, because it requires greater adoption. Staff here in their 50s, who've witnessed incremental change, were much more able and willing to adapt when we brought new collaboration technology in."

Fear of technology, and fear bosses might show hesitancy towards them with it, is something older generations do genuinely seem to feel though. Jon Addison, vice president, Europe, Middle East and Africa enterprise sales, talent solutions at LinkedIn, says: "Our *2020 Opportunity Index* finds age is considered the number-one barrier to job opportunity by UK adults. But, while the 50s are experiencing more change in the workplace than any other generation, 78 per cent say they are willing to embrace it, which is an attitude much greater than Gen Z and millennials, according to the data."

Perhaps they do so because they feel pressure to prove their adaptability. "I think older people feel stigmatised that if you say they're rubbish with tech, they will be," says Jones.

It's a view shared by Helen Matthews, chief people officer at Ogilvy UK. "It's perhaps pressure they might put on themselves, to show they're not being left behind," she says. "We're going through a transition to Microsoft Teams because ultimately we do believe technology has the power to create connected businesses and connect the generations."

Employers simply need to be more understanding. "Older generations will be more entrenched in their working styles. I still default to email when we are moving away from it. The key is providing information about why and not assuming everyone will find it easy," says Matthews.

Steve Haworth, chief executive of new company 99&One, which helps businesses get the most from their technology, says tech can absolutely be the bridge between generations in the workforce. But firms too often take it for granted that learning and development is needed. "Thirty-five per cent of people we polled aged 55-plus do use cloud-based team collaboration tools, compared to almost half (49 per cent) of those aged 25 to 34. But when asked if they have received any additional training, 47 per cent of those aged 55-plus said not," he reports.

There's one crucial message many appear to be in agreement with. Brian Kropp, Gartner's chief of human resources, says: "The key thing here is to think less about 'how' older generations in the workforce adapt to new technology, but 'when'. It's not that older folk won't adapt, but that they do so at different times.

"The real issue is when different generations use different platforms, like young people using Slack and older people using Messenger and so on, that's when people won't respond to each other's messages. There's an argument here for rolling out a single platform all at once to nullify this."

And whatever technology is introduced, it must be simple. As Simon Aldous, global head of channels at Dropbox, concludes: "The future of the intergenerational workspace must be one that adopts emerging technologies, such as AI and automation, but which gives us more time to focus on impactful work."●

> ❝
> **There is still a lag in mindset. Older generations in the workforce tend to think tech is harder than it really is to deploy**

anandaBGD/Getty Images

SOFTWARE

Putting agents' experience at the heart of your business

Customer service has one of the highest employee turnover rates, but implementing the right technology and putting agents' needs first could transform the industry

Rich McEachran

Meet Ryan. He's a customer service agent for an insurance company whose role is to act as a first point of call for customers who are abroad and require assistance with their travel. As well as having to adhere to regulatory guidelines and verify policies using internal software, he has to remain calm under pressure.

The nature of the job means that for the 640,500 people like Ryan working in customer services in the UK, a thick skin and resilience are required. Meanwhile, the challenge for employers is to keep staff morale high.

Customer service has one of the highest staff churn rates. Research released at the beginning of the year by quality assurance improvement platform EvaluAgent showed that roughly 40 per cent of people employed in customer services are likely to look for a new job in January because of a seasonal slump in engagement and motivation.

The research also revealed the financial implications can be quite significant. For example, Ryan's job pays £21,000 a year and, if he were to quit it, would cost his employer at least £6,300 in lost productivity and recruitment expenses.

So how do you maintain a high level of staff morale? The answer isn't to throw money at it. Salary increases and cash bonuses may motivate some agents in the short term, but they won't necessarily reduce staff turnover in the long term.

There needs to be a mixture of both financial and non-financial incentives, argues Jaime Scott, EvaluAgent's co-founder and chief executive. "In our experience, disengagement becomes a particular problem when companies don't

> **"** Regard for others is an essential attitude for agents to have as they need to be genuinely concerned and interested in their customers

invest enough time and effort in their people," he says.

"It's easy for companies to become too focused on customer outcomes alone and view any time spent coaching, developing, supporting and training agents, and not servicing customers, as an unnecessary cost to the business."

More than half of customer service agents surveyed by EvaluAgent cited regular feedback as a way to motivate them and improve the employee experience.

"Tools that allow agents to view their feedback and monitor their performance can be extremely useful," says Scott. "They can help to ensure both agents and team leaders track development, identify skills that need to be improved, and document next steps."

For example, Ryan may be efficient at adhering to regulatory guidelines, but the conversational side of the job may not come naturally to him. With help from call analytics software powered by artificial intelligence (AI), real-time insight can improve his call performance.

Having quality-control managers sit in on a random sample of calls to make sure service is consistent is effective to an extent. Speech analytics, on the other hand, gives contact centres the ability to analyse scripts to identify tone, topics and problem areas that come up again and again, says Chris Marron, director of competitive and market intelligence at 8x8, a provider of integrated communications and analytics solutions for contact centres.

Using analysis and feedback, Ryan can learn to improve the intonation and pacing of his voice and his inflection to control conversations and keep customers onside during calls.

What's more, human resources departments can use this insight to inform how they implement appraisals and take a more proactive approach to employee reviews, instead of scheduling them weeks in advance.

Contact centres have now moved beyond fielding calls and responding to emails to being omnichannel, which includes making use of instant messaging and social apps. As David Parry-Jones, vice president, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at cloud communications company Twilio, puts it: "Contact centres need to evolve in keeping with the way customers communicate with one another."

"Offering customers multiple channels of communication ensures agents are talking to them on the channel that works for them, regardless of the time and place. It also helps businesses to shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach to the contact centre."

According to a 2019 report from Salesforce on the state of customer service, adoption of AI in the industry is growing exponentially. Chatbots, for instance, are being implemented to deal with basic queries and to reduce the need for customer service agents to answer the same questions over and over again, which is something that can be demoralising, notes Marron.

For agents, AI's rise is redefining their role. Seventy-one per cent of agents surveyed by Salesforce said their job is more strategic than it was two years ago. Whereas they would

CUSTOMER SERVICE: MORE MEANINGFUL AND STRATEGIC

How customer service agents believe their role has changed

Salesforce 2019
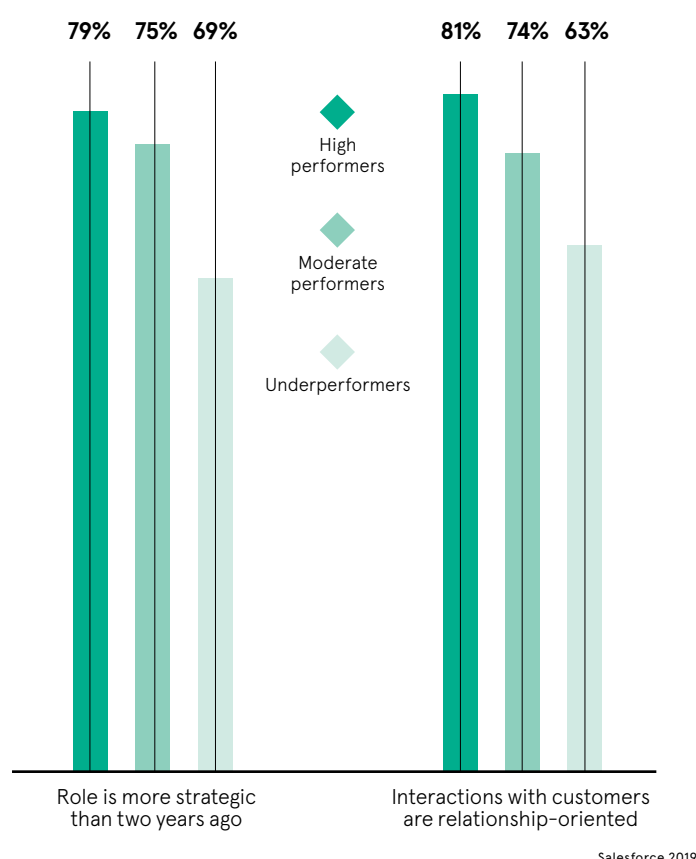
usually be pushed to close as many cases as quickly as they possibly can, they're now able to focus their efforts on ensuring each customer interaction is personalised.

To make their job easier, the latest software is providing agents with knowledge of customers' previous interactions, enabling them to react swiftly.

"Agents don't need to have a dozen or so different windows open to manage each channel. Instead they can opt for a single-window interface that gives them a clear holistic view of any customer interactions," says Parry-Jones.

> "
> ### Centres need to evolve in keeping with the way customers communicate with one another

From a customer perspective, contact centres implementing the latest software to improve the employee experience is streamlining the customer experience by eliminating the problem of having to repeat personal details and order details when their interaction is escalated up the chain. A complaint often heard from customers is that agents can take too long looking for the relevant information, leaving them on hold.

Looking to the future, advances in AI and automation are expected to continue freeing up more customer

service agents to deal with complex issues. As a result, people skills will become more relevant.

"The customers who do get through to a human are going to have more complicated issues that need resolving and will likely be more emotionally charged," argues Jill Pennington, consulting director at PSI Talent Management.

Dealing with these more complex interactions, she says, requires greater emotional intelligence (EI) and contact centres should be placing as much emphasis on EI as they are on technology.

Tools that analyse speech in real time can help agents to develop the skills needed to handle inquiries. However, their ability to handle their own emotions is just as important.

"When EI is dialled up, people are more aware of themselves and others, and feel motivated and empowered," says Pennington. "Regard for others is an essential attitude for agents to have as they need to be genuinely concerned and interested in their customers."

Agents with a high regard, she adds, are less likely to judge customers when on the receiving end of frustration or rudeness.

Furthermore, agents with self-regard are more likely to be present when interacting with customers, especially over the phone, rather than listening to an inner voice telling them they can't handle the conversation.

"A typical contact centre is a high-pressure environment," says Pennington. "High self-regard means customer service agents can cope with this level of scrutiny and see it as an opportunity to learn and grow."

By getting the balance right between developing EI skills and investing in technology, contact centres can improve the employee experience for agents and deliver a better service for customers. ●

Imagining the future connected business

Walking around the office of 2030, it is fair to assume that technology will play an even bigger role, but it may not be time to write human workers off just yet

Marina Gerner

I f we could take a walk around the future workplace, what would we see? Over the last decade, globalisation and new technologies have brought tremendous change to the way we work. Without a doubt, how businesses communicate, collaborate and engage their workforce is set to evolve, if current technological progress and trends continue. What could the future connected business of 2030 look like?

Automation has been changing the way we work. So, will the future workforce still mostly be human or will it comprise robots and digital workers?

"The speed of new technology is so rapid that we often don't realise a lot of the tech we already use is 'automation' in the workplace," says Sanna Ojanperä, an Alan Turing doctoral student at Oxford University's Internet Institute. We're not aware of the extent to which automation is already central to our work.

Ojanperä says we rely on computational analysis, machinery and robotics, as well as artificial intelligence (AI), which underpins much of the hardware and software we use. "Machines have been replacing workers for centuries and robots have been replacing them for decades," she says.

Almost a century ago, British economist John Maynard Keynes made some predictions about the workplace of 2030. He argued that the ability of machines to take over human jobs outpaced the economy's ability to create new and valuable jobs for people. The upshot would be that soon we wouldn't have to worry about work at all.

Keynes thought that by the year 2030 technological progress would have freed humans from "the struggle for subsistence" and brought us to "our destination of economic bliss". Machines would be doing all the work, while we'd live in a society of abundance and enjoy our free time. But, so far, this hasn't materialised.

While machines have been replacing us, we have moved on to new jobs. It is estimated that 75 million jobs may be displaced by a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines, while 133 million new roles may emerge, according to a report by the World Economic Forum. So it's more likely that robots and people will work side by side.

Will this make our jobs better or worse? In his controversial essay *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs* and eponymous book of a similar title, anthropologist David Graeber charted the rise of so-called bullshit jobs. He defined them as "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence".

Gaeber argued that people with productive jobs, say, ambulance drivers, nurses and teachers, are increasingly overworked, while "flunkies, goons, duct-tapers, box-tickers and taskmasters" have multiplied. Will robots take up our bullshit jobs? They might, but not if humans still need to monitor and service them.

In our working lives, we have all had a meeting that could have been covered by an email. Just like the bane of presenteeism – the practice of being at a desk purely to be seen as present – lengthy meetings are increasingly frowned upon.

Will we still have long-winded, face-to-face meetings in the future workplace? Or will we interact with our colleagues and clients virtually?

> **The speed of new tech is so rapid that we often don't realise a lot of the tech we already use is 'automation' in the workplace**

The exceptional circumstances brought about by the coronavirus might be a turning point for how we communicate at work. Since the outbreak of the virus, the share price of remote conferencing platform Zoom Video Communications has gone up by 65 per cent. Even a company that has been mistaken for Zoom, because it has a similar name, has seen its share price surge multiple times.

The current demand for virtual meetings is unprecedented, but collaborative technology's long-term implications are just as powerful.

Virtual reality is already in use to train medical staff in low-frequency, high-risk situations. Expedient face-to-face meetings will always exist. But the rise of self-employment further buttresses the fact that virtual working will become commonplace.

In the UK, self-employment has increased by 11 per cent in the last five years: 8 per cent for men and 18 per cent for women, according to IPSE, the association of independent professionals and the self-employed. In the absence of well-funded parental leave or flexible work arrangements, some parents choose to set up on their own, for example.

"If the UK's self-employed continue to grow at current rates – there has been a 40 per cent increase since 2008 – there could be around seven million self-employed by 2030," says Ryan Barnett, IPSE economic policy adviser. The rise of the self-employed continues to make our work more flexible and more virtual.

There are many factors that will influence our future workplace besides technology; globalisation, for example, means our work is ever-more connected. Will we even have an office in ten years' time or will our colleagues all be working remotely, spread out across the globe?

"In our report on remote working, we found that 93 per cent of freelancers surveyed thought working away from the office improved their working experience," says IPSE's Barnett. "Working from home is getting evermore popular as people try to fit their work around their home lives more. There is perhaps a case for it being better for the environment as people will travel less too."

Rising property prices in big cities add to the attraction of remote working. Whether remote working is possible depends on the industry, of course. In the health or the care sector, it's less feasible, but even there, virtual technologies help surgeons coach each other across the globe and GPs already conduct consultations through apps.

"Our research has shown that 97 per cent of remote working is done from home and 87 per cent of freelancers have worked from home," says Barnett. Given the rise of remote working, we may see some firms moving towards having one smaller central office and more flexible workers, either self-employed people or employees working remotely.

Some companies have already done away with having an office. Others have set up at WeWork or other serviced offices, which might have been a story of entrepreneurial hubris, but also shows we're craving a more creative, hipster, flexible and interconnected place of work.

The downsides of remote working include a sense of loneliness and disconnect. Barnett says: "Loneliness and mental health are key issues for the self-employed, and we hope that as more people start working remotely in the coming months, the government will start giving due considerations to these questions."

One solution is for freelancers to work side by side in small groups. This is already happening at cafés, libraries, local co-working spaces and hubs for global nomads.

What's the upshot of these changes? Skills that are inherently human will gain currency. "Non-routine and more complex tasks that tend to require cognitive skills or emotional qualities are likely to be less affected by automation," says Ojanperä at Oxford University's Internet Institute.

According to a 2019 survey by CareerBuilder, 80 per cent of employers said soft skills, such as interpersonal intelligence, critical thinking and good communication, are equally or more important than hard skills when deciding whether they hire a candidate.

As a consequence of automation, sectors "with a predicted net increase of jobs could include health, professional, scientific, technical services and education, while those likely facing net job losses might include manufacturing, transport, storage and public administration", says Ojanperä.

So while the future workplace will be more technologically connected, it's crucial we strengthen and invest in the human elements of our work. ●

> **We may see some firms moving towards having one smaller central office and more flexible workers**

75m

million jobs may be displaced by shift in division of labour between humans and machines

133m

million new roles may emerge which are more adapted to new division of labour between humans and machines

World Economic Forum 2018

How to bridge the Brexit skills gap

Leaving the European Union will exacerbate the UK's skills shortage, but opportunities abound if companies can embrace connected technology and learn lessons from the coronavirus pandemic

Peter Crush

George Pachantouris/Getty Images

The last thing industries facing a skills shortage could really do with right now is anything that makes hiring people harder. But that's exactly what's happening with the introduction of the UK's post-Brexit immigration policy. By the end of this year, the immigration tap, which has seen one in seven people in the UK coming from abroad, is being turned off. In its place will be a points-based system with a salary threshold for skilled employees of £25,600.

But with some 60 per cent of all jobs paying under £30,000 and evidence from job site Indeed showing vacancies hovering around the £28,000 mark are now attracting just 7 per cent of applications from overseas, businesses are rightly worried they might not be able to maintain their activities.

This is especially so among those reliant historically on lower-paid, overseas workers. In the care sector alone, 8 per cent of staff are EU nationals. It already suffers from having 122,000 unfilled vacancies.

For what seems like years, it is technology that has been mooted as the saviour for cross-border collaboration. So, as immigration rules threaten the ability of talent to physically come to the UK, could using technology to enable more businesses to connect internationally finally move from being a nice to have to a must have?

There is evidence that this is already happening, not least because the coronavirus pandemic is also limiting people's movement. In the four weeks to March 16, one recruiter noted a 67 per cent rise in remote video interviews, with job offers made remotely tripling to 33 per cent.

Many now think it's only a small leap to hire people and have them work for you from abroad too. "This is a situation that we'll definitely see more of," says Yash Dubal, director and senior immigration caseworker at A Y & J Solicitors, a leading immigration law firm. "I can see a huge expansion of work in particular being outplaced to offshore call centres because there's no immigration matters to deal with."

Brian Kropp, Gartner's chief of human resources, adds: "When you have a tight labour market, firms will have to find people with the talent they want wherever they are. That's just common sense."

But it's not quite as simple as that. "A key question remains whether firms will seek technology to automate certain low-skilled roles out of work permanently or whether technology will instead be used to embrace and find these workers in new places," says Dubal.

Notwithstanding potential risks to customer satisfaction by placing UK call centres overseas, some sectors will of course argue it is impossible to operate with workers on the other side of the world.

Even in the UK hospitality sector, where 43 per cent of workers are foreign nationals, strides are being made to use technology. "Technology can and has already, in some cases, been used to enable businesses to do more with less staff," says Jurgen Ketel, managing director, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at loyalty card platform Givex, who takes the approach that technology can replace staff. "Kiosks, table-ordering devices and kitchen display systems will all help operations run more efficiently and with fewer staff," he says.

But what of technology that can actually avert skills shortages through greater adoption of services such as virtual assistants or medical advisers? Could this be given the boost it has needed as the ability to ship talent tightens?

> **It's all very well saying technology will come to our rescue, but much of what will be needed won't be in place by January 2021**

"It's probably very early days," says Roger Gherson, partner at immigration law specialists Gherson Solicitors. "Yes, virtual assistants are becoming more commonplace." Referring to NHS staffing, Dubal warns: "It's all very well saying technology will come to our rescue, but much of what will be needed won't be in place by January 2021."

In some areas though, gains are being made. Darren Atkins, chief technology officer, artificial intelligence and automation, at East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust, says: "In collaboration with robotic process automation company Blue Prism, we have recently launched the NHS Digital Exchange, an online platform designed to foster greater digital collaboration among NHS trusts across the country.

"Trusts can share automation projects, so their innovations are not siloed. In just 18 months, the platform has delivered more than 36,000 hours of human work back to the organisation, allowing for more coherent and faster patient care, more capacity and breathing space for overstretched frontline staff or reduced costs. Digital workers are already performing crucial activities."

It's worth noting there are those who believe a limit on immigration is no bad thing because it could force employers to recruit UK staff, instead of taking the easier and sometimes cheaper option.

"The main concern is not so much the end of free movement per se or the restriction on low-skilled workers from entering the UK, but the fact that UK workers simply aren't applying for the jobs being advertised. Hence the reason why there are still more than 120,000 current lower-skilled vacancies in the job market," says Kezia Daley, senior associate and immigration specialist at law firm Winckworth Sherwood.

But others argue the limitations will force businesses into taking action, if only for their very survival, and will force them to take a more proactive look at new collaborative technologies.

"I predict that in the next two years we'll start to see people equipping themselves with virtual reality (VR) headsets just as habitually as they do laptops," says Tom Symonds, chairman of the Learning and Development Institute, and chief executive of Immerse, a provider of workplace learning technologies.

"We're already seeing VR morphing away from just making learning more engaging to now being used to give remote workers a rendered workplace environment they can 'visit' from abroad and access the materials they need. This is the future of meaningful virtual experiences that workers will be able to access wherever they are in the world." ●

Sectors most reliant on talent from outside the UK's borders

Percentage of organisations from the following sectors that say they will struggle to source talent post-Brexit

80% Public Administration
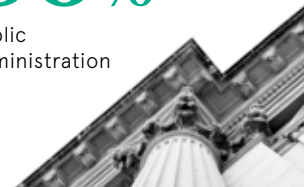
80% Agriculture

78% Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

The Open University 2018

'Distraction can limit productivity, so when you devise your UC&C strategy it needs to be done with the user in mind'

I've spoken to a lot of people recently in the unified communications and collaboration (UC&C) sector and the ongoing challenge that is top of the list is about getting people to use these systems properly. It's all well and good investing in expensive technology, but if it doesn't fulfil your needs, why do it. And what does focusing on the user really mean?

Many of the most successful companies out there focus on the customer, user or getting the product tailored exactly to people's needs. Take Google's number-one principle: "Focus on the user and all else will follow."

Companies approach UC&C with the idea of implementing significant amounts of technology as a silver bullet for lower costs and productivity growth, but really the tech needs to be implemented to solve a specific need and really driven through the organisation with senior leadership buy-in.

Think about yourself and your day-to-day work. Have you become annoyed with the amount of notifications you receive? WhatsApp, email, collaboration apps, social media; I know I have. The distraction can limit productivity, so when you devise your UC&C strategy it needs to be done very carefully with the user in mind, and fully embraced as a tool and not just another way of communicating.

Research I've done recently with a couple of hundred key buyers in UC&C has shown that user adoption, digital culture and people are the number-one challenge for businesses that are implementing these types of systems. It's funny though, as some of the vendors don't necessarily market or focus on the importance of this, but are now starting to invest more in it.

So, focusing on the user is important to solve a problem, but the next step is figuring out how to do it. I have spoken to a lot of people about this problem and the top three things that keep coming up are:

Firstly, get user feedback and conduct interviews. This is vital so you understand exactly what your users want and why, and what will really make the difference to their productivity levels.

Secondly, secure senior leadership and middle management buy-in. It's so important to get this to make sure the project flies. Who else is going to ensure their team members turn up to training sessions?

And thirdly, implement the technology to solve a specific problem or with a specific goal. What is the specific need of your users and what issues are they facing? If the technology can solve a specific goal, this will mean you have mass adoption.

It sounds simple. But there are many companies not thinking in this way and a huge amount of excited IT executives getting swept up in the technology bandwagon that everyone should have collaboration apps. I'm not saying they shouldn't, but it needs to be supported by user feedback to get long-term buy-in.

So what's next? I think the UC&C industry needs to keep the user top of mind, what their experience is and also what is potentially annoying for them. We need to discuss this and focus on it, not just on the technology. This is good for all of us as it means better adoption rates and more revenue for tech companies, increased productivity and, more importantly, happier and more loyal employees. ●

Harry Chapman,
Content Director,
UC EXPO

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