



MASTERING THE ART OF
WORKFORCE AUGMENTATION
WITH INTELLIGENT AUTOMATION

Customer Service Expectations Driving Change

Digitally savvy consumers today expect intelligent, quick and highly personalized service when they contact a company, especially for any kind of customer support. On the one hand, they have become accustomed to rapid response times and sophisticated self-service options online. On the other hand, they want service tailored to their specific needs and the convenience of not repeating information multiple times during their interactions with contact center agents.

As customer expectations continue to grow, those businesses that do not keep up will experience more and more churn. A more intensely focused customer first approach is needed, which means empowering employees to deliver hyper personalized service in real time.

To that end, forward-thinking enterprises are turning in ever greater numbers to Robotic Process Automation (RPA) to improve operational efficiency and customer service.

Two distinct types of automation are being used to streamline business processes, reduce handle times, eliminate human error, and enhance the customer's experience. One is unattended automation, which is designed to completely relieve employees of certain kinds of routine tasks that don't require human input. The other is attended, in which robots interact with employees as part of a workflow that requires human decision-making or during interactions with consumers, providing company agents with real-time guidance and assistance.

In both cases, automation frees employees to focus their full attention on solving problems for customers, rather than on filling in forms and performing other admin related tasks. For the front office, this leads to more natural interactions and smoother service in many respects, improving customer satisfaction.

From Automation to Augmentation

Often, robotic automation is understood to mean taking over swathes of back-office and internal functions. Others see it as freeing employees from repetitive, boring and error-prone tasks. Both can be correct, but of course neither is the whole picture.

Robots, no matter how sophisticated, cannot replace the human touch at the heart of customer service. Code may be written to identify words, behaviors and even sentiment in interactions, but no program can fully participate in a conversation and pick up on its nuances, nor contextualize those cues for handling a customer's complaint.

Attended automation used during interactions might be more descriptively called "augmentation." That is, it essentially augments service agents in their effort to provide customers optimal service – giving them "superpowers" they didn't have before.

- Perfect recall: Never forgetting a single process, business rule or product detail.
- Instant analysis: Gathering data from an array of systems and analyzing it in real-time.
- Confident decision-making: Understanding the customer and their situation in minute detail, with the knowledge of what to do next under many different circumstances.
- Impossible multitasking: Having some tasks completed automatically in real time, exactly when they are needed to move the interaction forward. With such augmentation, employees are free to provide customers with more human empathy and attention.

The Key is Real-Time

From a service operations perspective, bringing people and robots together to achieve real-time responsiveness is the ideal solution. The additional virtual “agent” resides on each employee’s desktop and automatically jumps in to help during customer interactions.

To provide such effective augmentation, process automations must be able to respond to multiple and complex requirements. They can then provide context-specific guidance as and when needed during a live customer interaction, an after-call task or a back-office process.

The attended bot is triggered by the human employee’s desktop actions, such as predefined keyboard strokes and mouse clicks, opening an application, or reaching a particular screen in a workflow. It can then provide immediately needed assistance, such as looking up required information across multiple applications and presenting it to the user, performing calculations, providing quick links to relevant data, and more.

In addition, a robot can be programmed to provide on-screen next-best-action guidance to agents during a customer interaction. This is actually a proactive action, taken by the robot automatically in response to an agent engaging in a specific call, task or process. One very important type of guidance that attended automation can provide is prompting the employee to read specific scripts or perform specific actions necessary for purposes of staying in compliance with regulatory or operational requirements.

These augmentations might even be tweaked to provide guidance tailored to the proficiency level of the specific agent, ensuring consistent service delivery across interactions and service representatives. Employees can then be upskilled at scale in contact centers, essentially providing automated on-the-job training for new or transferred agents.

Back to the Future: Beyond Real Time

As artificial intelligence and automation technologies develop, there will be a natural shift from using automation to solve customers’ existing problems to offering solutions customers weren’t even aware they needed. Machine learning, for example, can spot patterns in a customer’s account activity that might indicate a developing problem before it becomes irreversible. A robot might then automatically alert a customer relations representative, so that they can take steps to mitigate or prevent the issue, such as proactively contacting the relevant customer.

The effect of robotic process automation in the customer service sector need not be employee displacement. Rather, taking the augmentation route, the result may be innovations and advances that exceed all current expectations.



Customer-First from Anywhere

The value of the combination of technology and people in providing customer centered service was driven home dramatically in 2020, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. With large sections of the world shut down, organizations in every industry had to scramble to deal with abrupt changes seemingly overnight. One radical change for most contact centers was having to manage employees who suddenly found themselves working from home. It meant, for example, going from a thousand-agent call center to one thousand call centers with one agent each.

The new, distributed working environment makes service consistency very challenging to maintain. That is where attended automation comes in, providing employees the support they need from any location – at home or in the office.

Real-time guidance takes on greater importance, as agents may have tasks they are not used to, and supervisor attention is obviously lacking. Periodic interaction with an attended assistant bot can also help mitigate work from-home employee disengagement, as they don't have the ability to seek immediate advice from peers or team leaders, as they would in the office environment. The robot becomes a virtual teammate, fulfilling requests for critical data, performing necessary steps in a workflow, and providing advice or activity prompts as needed.

Furthermore, robots can be rapidly scaled as needed in response to any sudden need, in any combination of remote and in-office distribution. If incoming call volumes increase, automations can be designed to handle routine after-call tasks, for example, allowing employees to quickly jump on the next call. They keep customer interactions efficient and employees productive.

In the long term, post-pandemic, it is clear that the move to work-from-anywhere will be a permanent feature of the customer service sector. Employee augmentation via human bot collaborations is going to be a vital part of that new world.



Best Practices: Getting the Most from Human/Bot Partnerships

As they move into a more customer centered and automation-augmented ecosystem, there are some practical steps service centers can take to ensure they get the most out of their combined human-robotic teams. The more coherent and effective their automation footprint is within the organization, the better equipped they will be to intelligently address complex, and often unpredictable, customer needs in real time.

Some organizations are already invested in robotic process automation for their routine processes but want to drive a deeper transformation that encompasses their service operations. Expanding their automation footprint to include attended automation is an important and valuable step, especially for organizations with established contact centers.

Attended or desktop robots can be installed on each employee's desktop and customized to work in coordination with existing unattended automations. Together, the frontline agents, their virtual "teammates" and fully automated backend processes provide the optimal combined support for improved customer service.

It must start with employees. By investing in employee augmentation, organizations ensure every employee has everything they need to reach their highest potential at work and adapt more easily to operational changes.

At times, there may be some pushback among employees when new automated processes are introduced. It is important that they feel supported, rather than threatened, if the automation is to serve its purpose as intended. An approach combining attended and unattended automation tends to produce the best results and aid in alleviating employee anxiety.

Traditional automation that takes over repetitive and mundane work that employees do not really like to do in any case, alongside augmentation that assists them in areas where they clearly add value, quickly makes a positive impact. Employees see for themselves how automation helps them achieve their performance goals and provide better service to customers.

To break down resistance even more, process robots can be programmed to assist employees in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. For example, an automated pop-up might be set to remind employees to take a break after a predetermined amount of actual working time. Such a feature might be especially valuable for employees working from home or other remote locations.



Managing the Evolution to an Augmented Workforce

Organizations introducing automation or scaling up to augmentation will see a profound effect and measurable benefit across the business. The change is likely to be felt in IT and process governance to people management, operations and customer experience.

Effective change management is therefore a vital component of any successful automation initiative, with buy-in from the entire organization. All stakeholders and employees - from the bottom to the top – must be inspired to become problem solvers. Everyone should have a clear understanding of what automation can do for them, as well as for the entire enterprise, so they can in turn become ambassadors for the change among their colleagues. It is very likely that they will also play a part in continuously discovering new use cases for automation as the solution rolls out.

Any such encompassing project, that addresses the needs of customers from the bottom up, must gain executive support as well. When the case is made for automation aligning with the broader company strategy of excellent customer service, the result is a powerful ally for driving adoption.

A generally valuable strategy for creating a new automation footprint is adopting a phased approach. That is, introducing simple use cases that support the agents and that can be delivered in a few days (such as quick links, dynamic call notes, a scratchpad for keeping key customer information, announcements to the team, best practice of the day popups, etc.). This is how trust and familiarity are created, opening the door to more sophisticated automations. Once a next-best action attended automation is put in place, employees are ready to interact with it and that, in turn, creates a new layer of trust.

Even with all the best practices in place, a successful and sensitive transition to extensive automation is bound to cause disruptions. Organizations should be ready to support their employees as they phase out the more mundane and repetitive work in their daily routines and reskill themselves. They will be moving beyond meeting compliance and efficiency-driven targets and learning how to focus on adding value with the help of their new “friends”.

Of course, agents who are making this effort deserve the highest praise from their supervisors. Their customers will most likely offer praise all on their own.





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