Trends Driving Change in the Contact Center

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The following are excerpts from a recent webinar with ICMI clients, which featured ICMI's founding partner Brad Cleveland, and ICMI consultants Steve Campbell, Wendy Fowler, Josh Streets, and Scott Sachs. In this discussion, they identify trends and challenges in contact centers, address key questions, and provide recommendations for contact center leaders.

Key Trends

Brad Cleveland

More insights from Brad 🎥

We see this as an important season of development. Let me begin with three challenges.

The first is matching supply and demand (getting the right staff in place at the right times to handle workloads). According to a recent ICMI study, 8 out of 10 contact centers plan to grow their workforces in 2022 to meet demand. You're seeing both workloads and complexity increase.

A second challenge is hybrid work arrangements. Distributed teams and work at home will remain significant. In fact, recent ICMI research finds that 73% of contact centers plan to keep a remote or hybrid workforce going forward. But many are struggling with managing remote teams.
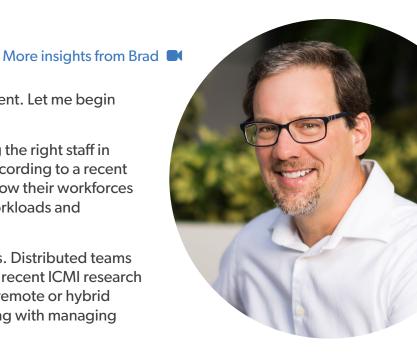
A third challenge is defining the contact center's strategic role in the months ahead. What is the contact center's place in digital transformation? In customer experience?

So let me turn to four trends we're seeing.

First, contact centers are playing an increasingly important role in customer experience. Yes, contact centers are just part of customer experience, which includes products, services, marketing, expectations—everything. But they are such a vital part.

Here's an example. We did some work with a company that provides software packages for businesses. In their support center, contact handling times varied widely from one rep to another.

It was clear they had different interpretations of what to do. We worked with them to flow chart interactions, and they uncovered all kinds of opportunities. This led to cross-department initiatives that included:

- Product innovation
- Improvements to user guides and online resources (such as "how-to" videos)
- Launching and facilitating a customer community that enabled customers to help each other
- And others

Their employees enjoyed lending a few hours each month to these working groups. One put it this way: "Now we're working on things that help all of our customers, not just those who contact us for support!"

Our sister company and research arm Omdia found that a large majority of organizations, over 70%, believe COVID-19 has made customer experience more important. The best contact centers go beyond customer service. That's just the ticket to the big game, where they are directly involved in customer experience innovation.

Second, contact centers are becoming technology proving grounds. March 2020 dramatically and forcibly accelerated this trend. As is so often the case, the challenge was heightened for contact centers. It's one thing to move the accounting or marketing department home. We're in an environment where our operations had to work in real-time. No one else has to worry about routing, transfers, escalations, supervisory assistance, queues, etc., all on-demand.

You made it work. And once again, the contact center has been the sharp end of the spear in tech innovation. To name a few areas:

- Collaboration tools
- Knowledge management
- AI
- Biometrics

Omdia found that 63% of global organizations have investments planned for AI and intelligent automaton. These developments are happening now, every day.

Third, contact center professionals are helping other functional areas solve problems. There are skills we've developed that other areas desperately need. An example is workforce management (WFM). This community has developed WFM for years. Yet even now, 62% of organizations, according to a recent ICMI survey, expect to make further investments in workforce planning capabilities.

Other functional areas have learned the hard way they need help. How do you forecast workloads? How do you determine staffing requirements? Schedules? The principles are the same. When we share that expertise, three things happen:

- It helps those areas.
- Our colleagues in other departments develop a better appreciation of our contact centers.
- It is incredibly affirming and engaging for those on our teams who are involved.

Fourth, we're seeing innovation around how to innovate. Most of the conversation around innovation is the end result—new ideas that move the ball down the field. What's less often discussed is the process for innovation. How do you get good at it?

Your employees who are helping customers have amazing insight. I've sat alongside thousands of agents over the years. Someone will say, "You know, we could cut steps out of this process if we were able to automatically pull in the information from that screen, and populate these fields." I'll ask, "Have you brought that up?" The response is, too often, "I'm new here," or "I think that would be a different team."

The next best idea can come from anyone. The best contact centers develop processes to bring ideas to light, to protect them, and shepherd them through a process where, yes, some are funded and implemented.

Now, some of you are pushing all of these areas. Others are working on the basics. Wherever you are in this journey, contact centers are more important than ever, and your leadership matters more than ever.

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Q&A

Steve Campbell

More insights from Steve 🎥

What challenges are you seeing when it comes to contact centers playing a more powerful role in customer experience? How do we better leverage that opportunity?

The image that comes to mind is a flight attendant standing there in front of the plane delivering their safety briefing. They always say, "Secure your own mask first before helping others." And there's a neat parallel here in the contact center, which is, before we can take care of our customers, we need to first take care of ourselves. And more specifically, we need to take care of our frontline agents. This is more important now than ever.

The most important thing I'm seeing, and this is where you guys come in, is that supervisors are not given the time they need to develop their staff. My observations over the past several years show that supervisors are spending 20% of their time coaching their frontline staff. This should be closer to 60% of their time. Coaching should be their #1 priority.

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In terms of recommendations, I have four that all work together:

Develop a methodology to measure employee experience on a regular basis. This can be as simple as an online survey conducted twice a year.

Develop a systematic approach to measure supervisor time allocation. Find out where your supervisors are spending their time. Is it where you want them to spend?

Carve out space for increased coaching. One of the most important contributors of employee experience is coaching and feedback.

Lastly, be very intentional about caring for your staff and increasing employee engagement.

I see organizations thoughtfully craft project plans to roll out new systems, to go through current state process mapping and future state process mapping in very rigorous and disciplined manners. I encourage you to apply that same level of rigor to increasing employee engagement.

Josh Streets

You often use the phrase "rescue and replace" when discussing technology. What do you mean by that and what are you seeing?

Right off the top I'd like to say that I cannot tell you how proud I am of the contact center leaders that I've seen step up through this pandemic. They have led efforts of moving us from a cost center to a profit center. Many of those leaders are on this call. They are not just strategic partners in their organizations anymore, but drivers of the entire business's digital innovation and customer experience strategy!

As far as rescue and replace, it's no secret a lot of teams had to react very quickly with work from home to adopting new technologies. They may have spun up cloud based UCaaS or CCaaS platforms so fast that they didn't have a chance to fully assess their requirements or build a vision into the future.

I think we have an industry situation where we've got contact center leaders shouting from the rooftops, "If you're asking me to deflect contacts, if you want me to reduce costs, AND I need to improve customer experience at the same time, I'm going to need the right investments to do it."

We're helping businesses look at all areas of technology in the contact center, from knowledge management, IVR, CRM, and beyond, just to give folks an outlook on where they need to prioritize their budgets. They want roadmaps that band together the contact center, IT, and project resources to align strategy.

That old cliche of planning your work before you work your plan, is extremely important right now. A lot of great things are happening in our industry. It's a very exciting time to be here right now and I don't see it slowing down anytime soon.

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Wendy Fowler

More insights from Wendy 🎥

One of the exciting trends we're seeing is contact center professionals helping other areas of the organization. What is your perspective, and what recommendations do you have?

I'm definitely seeing that you've got these other areas of the organization that have never really viewed themselves as contact centers before, but they're reaching across the aisle and asking for help. They are looking for how to get more visibility into the work being done in their areas, the productivity levels of their employees, and into their performance. They are in this virtual world now, so supervisors can't stand up and look over the cubicles or walk up and down the aisles and see what folks are doing.

These areas are looking for tools and processes that they can adopt that give them the real-time visibility they so desperately need. And it's not just for simple back-office areas, either. It's for some very complex, multi-step, multi-touch processes. I've worked with areas that are handling involved loan applications, refilling prescriptions, dealing with help desk support, complex case management reviews, you name it. They don't even have phones in their areas, but they do have work that is tied to response time objectives and must be handled within a certain window of time.

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My advice is to start by figuring out what all the work is, what everyone is doing today. Then conduct time studies on that work to validate what actual processing times are, what actual handle times are, and establish some effective productivity standards. A lot of the times, these are back-of-the-napkin estimates that have never been validated before.

Next, leverage the skills and expertise of the folks within the contact center that have been doing this a long time. Tap on the shoulders of workforce management, get with your IT department, and talk about how you can integrate all work into a workforce management tool. Of course, if you don't already have a tool and you're considering one, make sure you're taking the time to find an approach that supports back office. Not all tools are made equally.

The other trend I'm seeing has to do with flexibility. Because of the great resignation and the need to be so much more competitive in the market space, companies are finally realizing that they have to offer more flexibility. Employers are finally putting in the work necessary to get rid those more rigid policies. They're also looking at mobile tools they can provide to their staff that allow them to have more control over their schedules.

Scott Sachs

How do we innovate? What's most important: blocking and tackling (the basics) or some secret formula?

We have a tremendous asset in our contact centers. I consider the agents as the ambassadors of an organization. They are interacting with the customers thousands of times a month, and have first-hand knowledge of what customers are feeling and their pain points.

When we were in the office, I would walk around and observe contact center agents with two or three terminals. The ones with three monitors would be giving a thumbs up, bragging about how they got their third monitor. The agents with two monitors would be totally envious. Meanwhile, I'd be asking myself, what's wrong with this picture? Why do agents need so much real estate? The answer is that they need access to too many systems, and have too many things to toggle between. So, where there's a source of pride at the agent level, from a leadership perspective, the question is, how can I innovate the technology platforms to make it simpler for an agent to do their jobs? It has gotten much too complicated.

In another example, I remember being requested during budget season to reduce call volume by 10%. I would scratch my head—how can I do that when marketing is throwing out campaigns and not letting me know about them in advance? A large chunk of the call volume is not driven by the contact center. Encourage executives to sit with agents and really hear and see what is going on and why customers are contacting the organization. Let them listen to the interactions and see and hear first-hand why customers are contacting the organization. Some, multiple times.

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Another opportunity is leveraging agent feedback. When I hold a focus group with employees, I question from two perspectives. First, what are the customer pain points? Second, what are the employee pain points? I am not asking them to critique their supervisors. Instead, I am asking, what are those things that stopped them from attaining first contact resolution?

In addition to the insight, these discussions often lead to solutions. One agent will say, I had this problem, and another will jump in with a way they resolve it. All of a sudden, the focus group becomes a problem-solving group within itself. Innovation can sound sexy. But it's about blocking and tackling, fixing the basic stuff.

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ABOUT ICMI

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Brad Cleveland, founding partner and former CEO of ICMI, is known globally as one of the foremost experts in customer strategy and management. He has worked across 45 states and 60 countries for clients as diverse as American Express, Apple, USAA, the University of California, and the federal governments of the US, Australia, and Canada. Brad is also an author, and his recent titles include *Contact Center Management on Fast Forward* (2019) and *Leading the Customer Experience* (2021). Connect with Brad at www.bradcleveland.com.