



COVID-19:

**Responsive customer
service in times of change**



COVID-19 has turned into a global crisis, evolving at unprecedented speed and scale. It is creating a universal imperative for governments and organizations to take immediate action to protect their people. The virus continues to rapidly spread, to every continent, with over 60 countries impacted and more than 1,700 new cases reported daily.



The sudden emergence of COVID-19 is requiring that brands move at unprecedented speed to serve their customers with quality while caring for their employees with compassion.

Brands are required to re-evaluate how contact centers are leveraged, how contact center employees deliver quality customer experiences, where contact center employees work, and how digital channels can be used to support the increase in contact center volume.

Leaders must make swift, insight-informed decisions to support their contact center employees while maintaining and earning customer trust.

The emotional state of consumers and businesses adds to the challenge

But the combination of fear, uncertainty and frustration presents brands with both new risks and opportunities. Providing compassionate customer service will likely generate an outsized increase in positive brand perception and customer loyalty post-crisis. Conversely, inaccessible, ineffective or uncaring responses are likely to drive an equally pronounced negative reaction.

During times of crisis, contact centers are crucial. Customers prefer live interaction when they want answers to urgent and complex issues:

58%

more customers prefer to solve urgent issues by calling for support rather than use other channels.¹

57%

of customers ranked call support as their initial channel preference for flexible communication, wanting an opportunity to ask, explain, reason or negotiate with customer service.²



However, organizations are often ill-prepared to react to a significant and sudden increase in call volumes. In the context of COVID-19, that increase is combined with the risk of having to suddenly shift to remote work-from-home models and protect a workforce in a high-risk environment. It's an unprecedented challenge that will require swift action.

Within 48 hours

Assess your current state. Using a rapid technology assessment framework, analyze your current technology capabilities and what a remote contact center will require across your network, platforms and security protocols.

Within 72 hours

Identify how you can leverage your existing contact center technologies to enable new workforce needs. Work collaboratively with technology platform providers to flex licensing and take advantage of out-of-the-box platform capabilities. Establish live agent chat (if not active already) with initial AI Human Assist.

Within 5 days

Implement measures to drive digital channel adoption for your customers and scale up your existing virtual agent capability to deflect calls away from the contact center.

Within 2 weeks

Plan how you will repurpose your workforce in physical locations to maintain customer and business continuity. Scale up new virtual agent capabilities and digital channels.

Companies are urgently asking how to handle the impact on their contact centers and keep their customer service workforce safe. They want to know:

- 1) How can I reduce customer wait times and manage customer frustration?
- 2) How to deflect or redistribute contact volumes to control average wait times?
- 3) What can I quickly automate?
- 4) How should I enhance my digital channels?
- 5) How do I manage my workforce if physical work locations are no longer viable?
- 6) How can I offer the same level of customer support and workforce productivity when agents work from home?
- 7) Can I extend access to the necessary tools and secure networks for remote workers?
- 8) How can I maintain the trust of both my workforce and my customers?

These are tough questions. The risks of execution failure are higher than normal. But companies can take immediate action to create capacity in their contact center, enable consistent quality for their customers, and care for their people in the face of the crisis.

While actions should be taken at different variations based on a company's unique situation, when done correctly, they can effectively respond to the immediate needs created by COVID-19 and realize a longer-term benefit from increased customer brand perception and loyalty.

Experts don't know how long it will take to contain the virus. Leaders must prepare for the short term, while developing new capabilities and ways of working that could seamlessly enable longer-term operational changes.

To respond to the evolving circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis, we recommend contact center executives address three critical areas:

**Adopt new ways of working:
Contact centers + remote access**

Rapidly stand up the infrastructure, management systems and processes required to support an effective remote workforce.

**Improve contact center management:
Data, workflow and analytics**

Harness data and analytics to inform an agile, responsive and relevant approach to addressing customer needs and support. Reprioritize and sequence customer support so that the most critical needs are addressed first, with non-critical contacts deflected to digital.

**Augment and automate service:
Virtual agents**

Stand up or enhance virtual agent capabilities to support COVID-19 specific requests or growing BAU volume.

Adopt new ways of working: Contact centers + remote access

Hundreds or even thousands of individuals work together in contact centers, often in confined spaces that make them particularly susceptible to COVID-19. Companies will soon have to enable home working for these teams. This imperative, however, comes with real challenges. It may be one of the best ways to avoid workplace transmission of COVID-19, but working from home at scale is uncharted territory.

As described in [Productivity in Uncertain Times Through the Elastic Digital Workplace](#), enabling the home-based workforce means addressing a number of key technology, process and people issues.

The cornerstone of the work-from-home model is the right secure technology. To create a consistent workforce experience, companies must (where possible) replicate the contact center technology environment at home. Demands on networking infrastructures will be unprecedented. Companies must be ready to address failures in the distributed network environment that may lead to performance issues and/or outages.



Beyond technology, companies must also address several people- and process-related issues. Getting people rapidly up to speed will require virtual training and change management programs to educate workers on the use of new technologies, processes, policies and collaboration toolsets. Leaders will then have to define new methods and rules for collaboration to maintain productivity and effectiveness in the new, distributed environment.

Caring for the workforce must be balanced with business continuity efforts and servicing customers. Leaders must realize that this is an unprecedented situation and unique considerations must be accommodated such as caring for family health and for children and managing wellness. They must also navigate the delicate balance of redeploying agents (sometimes at massive scale) while also managing significant spikes in workload.

Leaders that can make the shift to a partial or full work-from-home model will be better able to minimize business disruption and serve their customers. Additionally, they will help reduce potential revenue loss, forge new levels of trust with their workforce, and position their businesses for renewed growth once the pandemic subsides.

Improve contact centers management: Data, workflow, analytics

As COVID-19 runs its course, now is the time for companies to take full advantage of their data to predict customers' and the internal workforce's changing needs and behaviors. Combining this with a more agile approach to managing work and the workforce will enable contact centers to meet customer demand most effectively during such unprecedented volatility.

Traditional call volume forecasts should be enhanced with patterns seen in other challenging times and contextual data. Other sources of data that should also be included: customer demographic and geographic data; impact on customers from company actions; timing of communications; contact behavioral trends from COVID-19 in other geographies and crowdsourced data direct from agents and publicly-available data (e.g. changes to supply of goods, local service availability and local and national issued guidance). Using predictive analytics with this data will prepare the operations teams to best match volumes with the available workforce. For most companies, creating predictive views of demand will require new levels of organizational collaboration.

The same approach should be taken to evaluate workforce supply. Factors like workforce demographics and school/childcare closures will impact attendance. These coupled with analysis of COVID-19 intensity, estimated rate of spread and duration should all be factored into a predictive forecast to estimate deviations from planned workforce supply.



To bring together a predictive view of supply and demand with an agile approach to supporting customers, we recommend setting up a virtual command center. Its members should include data scientists and business function representation from Sales, Marketing, Customer Experience, HR, Contact Center Operations leadership, Workforce Management, Reporting/Analytics, Technology and Telephony teams. These groups should all collaborate, sharing internal data and identifying relevant external data sources. All stakeholders should share insights into upcoming company actions that will impact customers, daily customer contact trends, industry or market-relevant insights along with customer topics and sentiments trending on social media.

The command center should generate insights that will enable the organization to redefine roles and process handoffs within the organization as needed to balance supply/demand needs. It should review contact center demand and supply forecasts and align on expected and worst-case scenarios that the contact center may have to handle. These should be reviewed and updated throughout the day.

It is important to care for your people while you care for your business. And, keep in mind the impact of the crisis on your employees mentality throughout the disruption period . Some accommodations may be required to help offset the impacts on their lives to enable optimal customer service.

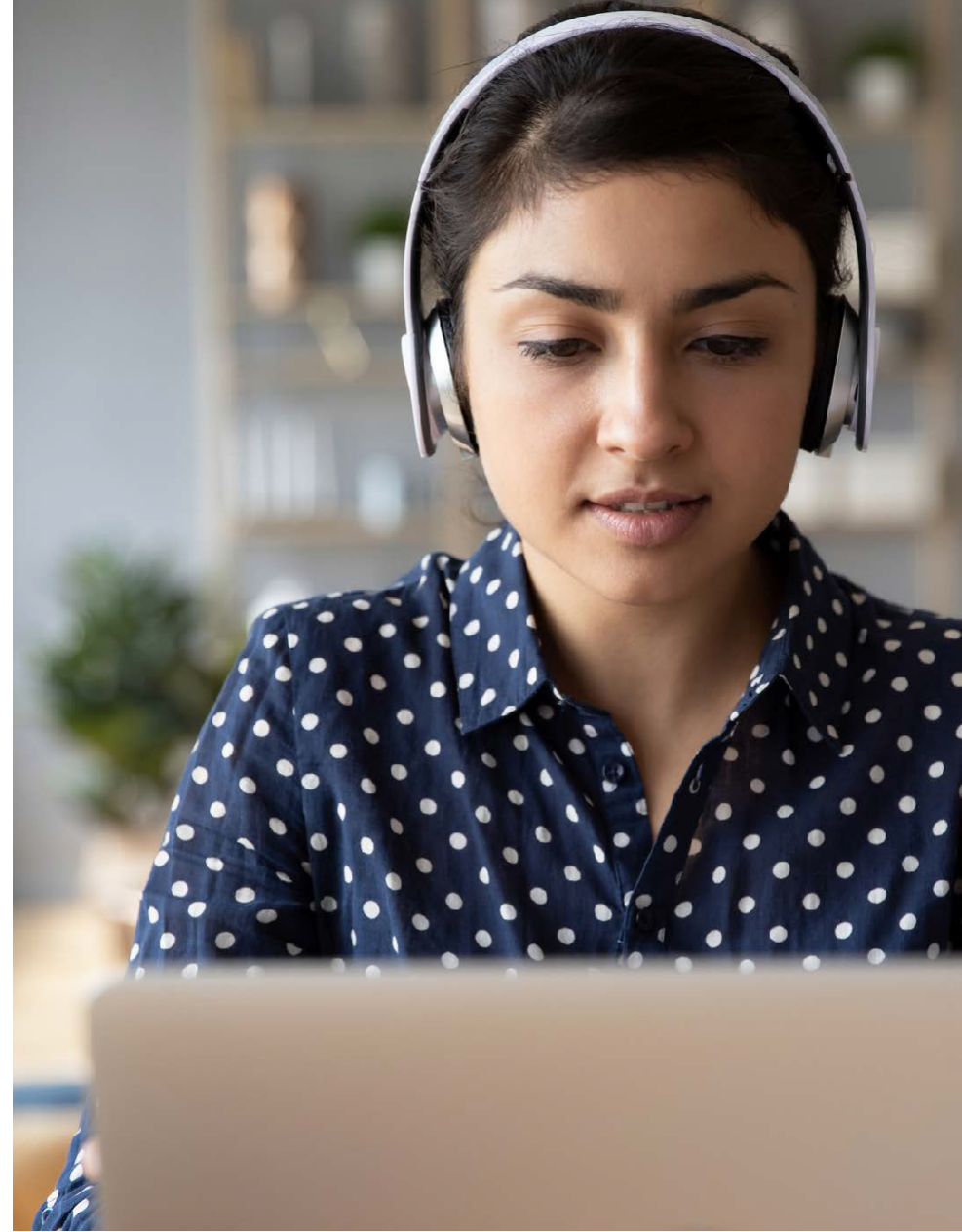
These may include enabling the workforce with the latest information, ensuring frequent communication of daily changes that have customer impacts, and making time every day to celebrate jobs well done.

Augment and automate service: Virtual agents

Before the COVID-19 crisis, the expression “The best service is no service” held true. When customers serve themselves or—better yet—have issues resolved for them, satisfaction is at its highest and operational costs are minimized.

Right now, customer contacts are at an all-time high. Some (particularly in health and public service) are specifically related to COVID-19. But volume increases are not limited to the virus alone. The continued disruption of daily life is driving spikes in other types of inquiries, such as payment extensions, travel cancellations, late fees, unemployment benefits and stock inquiries—each with varying levels of urgency.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) channels for customer service have never been so critical. But what about organizations that have yet to achieve maturity in this area? With volumes spiking and the contact center workforce being disrupted, now is the time to double-down on AI and create a multi-speed human and machine workforce. Virtual agents, built using AI technology, offer customers instant, on-demand service. They provide automated support, deliver a conversational experience, and can handle the same intents as human agents. They can both understand and satisfy individual customer needs. Regardless of their maturity, organizations can still harness virtual solutions to relieve the pressure on contact volumes.



Take action: Now and Next

The impact from COVID-19 is evolving daily, and this changing landscape means that guidance, restrictions and policies are also continuously being updated or adjusted. Every deferred decision has real consequences for customers, the workforce and the business. Time is of the essence.

The following actions should be taken now in order to quickly and effectively create remote contact center operations:

1 Adopt new ways of working: Contact centers + remote access

Fully acknowledging that this process will be difficult and risky, we recommend the following priority actions to stand up a successful remote contact center model:

- Establish infrastructure including connectivity, secure laptops and software licensing to enable work-from-home models.
- Enhance management systems by optimizing contact routing configurations, extending ancillary systems to new scenarios and enabling end-to-end security with a “Zero Trust” model.
- Look after your people by conducting rapid training needs analysis, creating community and collaboration and checking in daily to calibrate on the new ways of working and care for team mindsets.
- Modify processes to implement clear policies, update internal schedules, processes and metrics and reflect changes in published customer-facing information.

2 Improve contact center management: Data, workflow, analytics

We recommend some key actions to best serve customer demand throughout the duration of COVID-19:

- Address the most critical contacts first and handle the less urgent but important contacts with tools such as callback assist. Lean on analytics to inform agile workforce planning, modify IVR menus and messaging, and adjust the prioritization and distribution logic on existing platforms.
- Activate and augment alternative support channels. Identify customer needs that can be shifted, use queue messaging to address quick FAQs and increase awareness of other options. Queue messaging can even help to move customers directly into other channels, such as digital, asynchronous messaging and virtual agents.
- Use the workforce differently. Work with your account and contract teams to see where you can make temporary changes to the operating model to support the right mix of proactive and reactive customer needs, shift agents to flexibly support inbound and outbound contacts and capture customer preferences for communications as COVID-19 progresses.
- Do the work differently by utilizing more collaboration tools, delivering field service virtually with the use of photos, chat or video chat and creating more guided help and proactive communications as policies evolve.

3 Augment and automate service: Virtual agents

For those with established virtual agent programs scaling up AI-powered support is now an imperative:

- Expand existing virtual agent environments with prioritized intents, urgency triaging and 24/7 activation. It is vital that human agents are available to focus on the most complex and valuable customer needs and that automation can handle everything else.
- Deploy COVID-19 specific virtual agents for public service use cases. Define new intents, build on existing solutions and ensure content relevancy with the rapidly evolving global situation.

For those without established virtual agent programs, all is not lost:

- Quickly stand up one-way virtual agents. To do this, focus on the volume that matters most, start simple with informational experiences and partner for success with vendors who have prebuilt environments.
- Maximize the success for new virtual agents by adopting open architecture principles, including prioritization of configuration over coding, use of a federated/broker bot model and a focus on modular design.
- Explore developing an AI Human Assist, which is another critical capability that can be implemented within days to handle demand and improve the customer experience. AI Assist creates a mechanism to convert phone traffic to chat and provides access to digital experts, building significant capacity to resolve customer inquiries. AI supported agents are empowered with up-to-date and relevant information in real time with robust conversational coverage and detection of emerging topics.

Once organizations have these capabilities in place, they should next focus on the following longer-term actions:

- Scale at pace. None of the capabilities described here are built perfectly overnight. In fact, in all cases where Accenture has implemented contact center analytics or virtual assistant capabilities, MVP solutions were put in place initially and were evolved or extended over time, based on lessons learned. Getting started is critical. Evolving is to be expected. Continuous learning is the name of the game.
- Reimagine the future. The current environment is accelerating future trends. Post-crisis, companies will need to continue to build on capabilities they have stood up in crisis mode as a sustainable and evolving part of their business. Prioritize choices that align to long-term business strategy (in addition to urgent needs) and innovate solutions that can sustain for the long-term.

The response to this crisis is likely to accelerate the future of customer experience in categories such as agent agility, channel choice, real-time workforce management and prevalence of AI virtual agents. And while experts don't know how long it will take to contain the virus, leaders must prepare for the short-term, while developing new capabilities and ways of working that could seamlessly enable longer-term operational changes.

References

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